

PPE

(People's Political Economy)

2013 Inaugural Report: From Foundations to Future

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Introduction

About PPE

PPE was set up in the summer of 2012 by four individuals with backgrounds in academia and political activism who believe that *education has the power to transform individuals, communities, and whole societies* in the kind of positive ways we dream of. More specifically, we believe that only education of a *democratic and critical* nature can help to bring about the kind of democratic, just, and peaceful society we want to help build.¹

PPE (People's Political Economy) is an active response to a situation of crisis. There is no doubt that 'crisis' is a greatly overused word. Yet, there is equally no doubt that what we are collectively experiencing is, indeed, a crisis: a political crisis, an economic crisis, an ecological crisis, and, as we will explore in greater detail later in this report, a crisis of imagination – the ability even to imagine alternative ways of living. This is a *systemic* crisis – our whole social system is, we would argue, unsustainable and breaking down.

The Chinese word for 'crisis' (危機 - *wei ji*) offers an inspiring insight into our current predicament. The first character here means 'danger'. Yet, the second character means 'opportunity'. This is the thinking behind PPE. The dangers of the current moment are obvious and are, of course, already here among us, afflicting the lives of so many. Yet, as our economic and political leaders prove ever more unable and unfit to lead us away from current troubles toward a brighter future, and as more and more people become disillusioned with the current economic and political system, the greater becomes our opportunity both to articulate and, moreover, to try to create positive alternatives. We hope and believe that PPE, and democratic, critical education initiatives like PPE, can and will become a big part of these alternatives. *A truly democratic society has to be a critically and democratically educated society.*

PPE is an education initiative. We work with community groups in Oxford facing huge personal and social difficulties and challenges. We seek to help them to develop the tools they need to understand the political and economic system in which we currently live. We have begun to build, and are continuing to build, a network of *community learning groups*, whose learning is facilitated by university (mostly graduate) students using *participatory, critical teaching methods*. A critical approach to education, for us, means that all political and economic viewpoints are included and are critically scrutinised by all group participants.

About this report

This report represents the culmination of the first phase of the PPE initiative. In its first section, we tell the story of its founding, development, and current organisation. We also set out our philosophy of and approach to education. In Section Two, we offer a comprehensive description of the education project that we piloted in Oxford over the Autumn-Winter of 2012. We include both the preparation stage and, of course, the actual learning group experiences. In Section Three, we reflect on this pilot project experience and consider the main lessons learned from it. This leads us to our final section, Section Four, in which we set out our ambitious plans for a very exciting future.

¹ We offer a definition of our understanding and practice of democratic, critical education later in this report (See Section 1.2 Our philosophy of and our approach to education).

Section 1 – About PPE

Section One summary

In this section, we talk a little about ourselves, how we are organised, and present our philosophy of and approach to education.

1.1 Our organisation

Here we tell you how and why we chose the name we did, who 'we' are, how we've been run so far, and who is there to advise us.

Our name

PPE was originally founded as the Political Economic Literacy (PEL) project. We initially felt that a focus on literacy might allow us to emphasise our assertion that, in order to be an active citizen in a democracy, every single person needs to be literate, not just in the narrow sense of being able to read and write. They need to be *politically and economically literate*; that is, be able to understand the political and economic structures and institutions that regulate, shape, and all too often constrain their lives. We also chose a more technical-sounding word like 'literacy' to convey our non-partisan position. However, this name never elicited much satisfaction within us, nor was it ever warmly welcomed by participants, partners or supporters.

As such, and in consultation with those involved, we changed our name in February 2013 to 'PPE' (People's Political Economy). For us, the word 'people' speaks to the deeply democratic beliefs we hold and seek to embody. Additionally, PPE is an acronym for Oxford University's most famous course – Philosophy, Politics, and Economics - and it is this course that has produced the establishment of British politicians and world leaders. We see our parody of it as an act of reclamation, a direct, subversive challenge to the elitist model of education and associated with it at Oxford.

Our founders

PPE was founded initially by three men – Neil Howard, James Morrissey, and James Sevitt - in the Spring of 2012. A fourth, Joel Lazarus, came on board soon after. All four have extensive experience of higher education, community education and political activism. Neil, James M, and Joel all met while doing graduate studies at Oxford's Department of International Development; Neil and James S came to know each other while working to set up the Tent City University at the Occupy London site in 2011.

Throughout the Spring, Summer and early Autumn of 2012, the four of us worked to prepare the ground for the pilot education in Oxford for the Autumn-Winter period. This involved articulating a collective vision for this project, producing a core syllabus, making contact with and readying selected community groups to partner with, recruiting what we call our learning group 'facilitators', organising training for these new facilitators, and inviting a list of the great and good to serve on our Board of Advisors. Details of these activities can be found in Section Two.

Our organising committee

Our organising committee is currently made up of the four founders of PPE plus three new, extremely welcome additions – Indrajit Roy, Ioannis Katsaroumpas, and Sneha Krishnan. All three are working at Oxford University. Indrajit is a post-doctoral fellow and Ioannis and Sneha continue to slave away on their doctoral theses!

Our Board of Advisors

The following is a list of the individuals currently serving on our Advisory Board. We foresee a far greater role for them in the months and years to come. We are indebted to several Board members for helping us this far, particularly with the development of our core syllabus and the delivery of our facilitator training.

- [Aditya Chakraborty](#) – Economics journalist with The Guardian newspaper
- [Ha-Joon Chang](#) – Professor of economics at Cambridge University

- [Colin Leys](#) – Retired professor of political economy at various universities worldwide
- [Barbara Harris-White](#) - Professor of political economy at Oxford University
- [Mike Neary](#) – Dean of Teaching and Learning at Lincoln University. Also, founder of Lincoln's alternative [Social Science Centre](#)
- [James Meadway](#) – Economist at the [New Economics Foundation](#)
- [Gurnam Singh](#) – Lecturer in Social Work at Coventry University, and pioneering critical educator. [Check out his podcasts](#) for an introduction to 'critical pedagogy'!
- [Stephen Cowden](#) – Also lecturer in social work at Coventry University, and also pioneering critical educator
- [Karel Williams](#) – Professor of accounting and political economy at Manchester University
- [Matthew Watson](#) – Professor of political economy at Warwick University
- [Polly Toynbee](#) – Social campaigner and journalist at The Guardian

Our organisational practices

So far, this project has been driven by our organising committee who connect in person and also through Skype, as some of us are based in London while others are in Oxford. As PPE grows, we foresee our organisational practices developing. We expect the organising committee to expand and include representatives of the community groups with which we work, and particularly learning group participants themselves.²

1.2 Our philosophy of and our approach to education

None of us at PPE are world experts on education theory and practice. Yet, we do have a great deal of experience of learning and ever growing experience of teaching. Our philosophy of and approach to education reflects a combination of our reading about education and our own personal experiences. In what follows, we set out our understanding of and commitment to democratic, critical education.

We at PPE are committed to truly democratic forms of education. We are hugely inspired in our work by the great Brazilian educator and philosopher [Paolo Freire](#). Allow us to explain what we mean by this.

The democratic classroom

In the traditional classroom setting, the teacher supposedly has all the knowledge (and, therefore, the power) and the students have none. The teacher alone decides what is relevant/irrelevant, useful/useless knowledge. The job of the good student is to sit quietly and act like an empty vessel into which the great teacher pours his (invariably his) wisdom and knowledge. This is what Freire called the 'banking method' of education, and we believe that this is an ineffective way of learning much other than how to defer to those supposedly wiser and better than you. In short, this is an anti-democratic method of social control.

In contrast, we believe that if you want to change the world, those changes start from within. Therefore, we seek to create a learning environment with the following qualities:

- where all feel entitled and able to teach – express their views, share their ideas, opinions, and experiences
- where all feel safe, respected, and supported
- where critical learning takes place – where all ideological perspectives are covered and openly critiqued; where 'received wisdoms' are held up to scrutiny and challenged

Facilitator and participant

This approach to education emphasises the way in which all knowledge is co-produced. Thus, we do not have formal teachers or students. Instead, our learning groups are spaces in which group facilitators and participants come together to co-produce knowledge through debate and discussion.

This approach does not negate the role of the teacher. It simply emphasises that our teachers' (facilitators') authority

² See Section Four: Future Plans for more on this.

comes from their greater in-depth knowledge of various political economy issues and of teaching methods, not simply from their having a few letters after their name. It must be emphasised that we call ourselves 'facilitators' because we seek to facilitate a learning experience that begins with the lived experiences of our group participants and that draws on them. However, we emphasise the need for facilitators to guide participants beyond their own individual lives and to make links with the broader, often invisible social conditions that shape and constrain us all.

Praxis: critical thinking leads to transformative action

We at PPE want the world to change in profound and fundamental ways. We all individually have strong views about this. But at the same time, we start our work from a fundamental position of humility: we do not claim to have answers to all the world's problems; we do not believe that any one individual can have those answers; and we think that if any useful answers are to be developed, then they must come through collective, critical dialogue. Thus, we seek to change the world not by telling others what to do or who to be, but by helping them to develop a deeper understanding of themselves, each other, and the world around them. In short, we argue that open, critical dialogue is foundational to any democratic – and, therefore, sustainable and legitimate – project of social transformation. Thus, while we actively avoid pushing any one single ideological position on any of our participants, the one strong view that underpins all we do is the belief that individuals must come together collectively, critically and freely to first understand the world and then act to change it.

Section One conclusion

So, we have a small group of passionate, committed, ambitious, and hard-working individuals; a board of learned and experienced advisors; a punchy name; and a clear, considered, principled approach to democratic, critical education. Read on to Section Two to see how we sought to put these assets into practice in our pilot project.

Section Two - The pilot project: October-December 2012

Section Two summary

In this section of the report, we present the details of our pilot project. We first describe the preparation stage before relating the experiences of each of the six community learning groups. We summarise the main challenges faced and main successes enjoyed by our facilitators in all six learning groups.

2.1 The preparation stage

Securing supply and demand: recruiting facilitators and community organisations

Having collectively agreed to try to pilot a community education project in Oxford in the Autumn of 2012, we turned our attention to preparing for this pilot. Our very first and, obviously, most crucial task was securing the requisite supply and demand: we needed people to facilitate our groups – the supply – and, of course, we needed community organisations willing to host learning groups – the demand.

With regard to demand, Neil Howard took the lead here and had soon established relations with a good number of organisations of various kinds across Oxford. As things developed, we came to realise that we should not try to set up too many groups for this first pilot phase. We were not sure how many facilitators we would ultimately be able to recruit, and we did not want to overstretch ourselves or let any participants down.

We ultimately came to agreements with five community organisations to set up learning groups with them over the Autumn. These five were:

- [Crisis Skylight Oxford](#) – the Oxford branch of Crisis, the leading national charity dedicated to helping homeless people
- [Restore](#) – An Oxfordshire charity, based in Cowley, East Oxford, that supports people with mental health issues
- Donnington Doorstep – A hugely popular and vitally important community family centre based in Donnington, East Oxford
- Positive Futures Programme – A programme run by Oxford City Council for disadvantaged young adults
- Cheney School – a state-run high school in Headington, East Oxford

In addition, we decided to set up a learning group for graduate students at Queen Elizabeth House (QEH), the Department of International Development, University of Oxford.

With regard to supply, again, Neil took the lead in trying to recruit facilitators for these six groups. Though we advertised throughout the University, recruitment proved to be a difficulty. Ultimately, we recruited ten facilitators. All but three of these were themselves QEH graduate students we already knew personally. Adding Neil, Joel, and James Morrissey to this number made a total of thirteen facilitators for our five community groups.

We considered it very important that our facilitators never worked alone and were always at least in pairs. This was for various reasons. First, we did not want all the burden of facilitation falling on a single person - facilitating alone would mean that the facilitator had to commit to attending, preparing for, and facilitating a whole term's worth of sessions. Second, we were aware of asking facilitators to prepare to work with group participants who would often be in very difficult, precarious personal circumstances. Therefore, we deemed it sensible for our facilitators to work as teams so as to be able to support each other.

Training for facilitators and community organisation representatives

Having found both our partner community organisations and our facilitators, we then organised two days of training in

critical education for both representatives of our partner organisations and our new facilitators.

We were fortunate enough to have two of our Advisory Board members, Gurnam Singh and Stephen Cowden, agree to deliver this training. Indeed, Gurnam and Steve were even able to find the money from their own funding to pay for this two-day event.

The two days were structured as follows. The first day was held at QEH and was a workshop just for facilitators. The training focused on critical education in both theory and practice. The second day's training was held at the West Oxford Community Centre and representatives of our partner organisations were invited to meet with and work alongside PPE organisers and facilitators in preparation for the educational experience ahead. Unfortunately, ultimately only one group representative was able to attend the second day's training. On reflection, we perhaps asked too much of our partners at this early stage, particularly as the training took place on a Saturday.³

That said, the training was largely a real success. The two days gave us all an opportunity to get to know each other, to get a good sense of which facilitators should work together with which partner organisation, and, of course, to develop our knowledge and understanding of the theory and practice of critical education.

So, facilitators were matched up and ready. They had received some training in critical education – the 'how' of facilitation. But what about the 'what'? This was a *political economy* education project, after all. Which issues and topics of political economy were they to facilitate the learning of?

Syllabus development

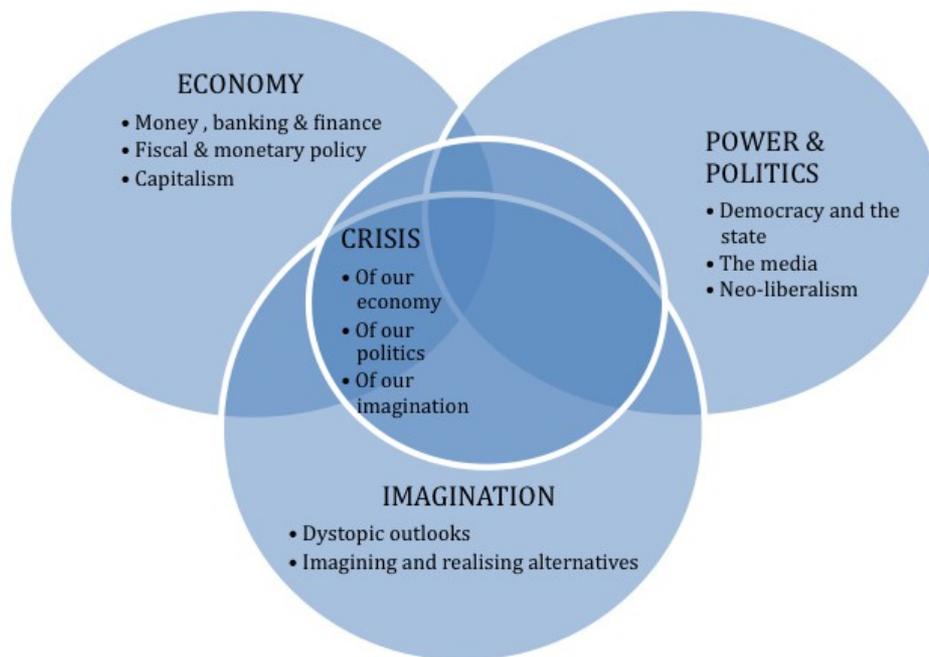
In reality, we did not wait for this late moment to consider and act on this key question. We had been reflecting on this issue from the very beginning. Our challenge, as we saw it, lay in the balancing of two potentially conflicting objectives. On the one hand, we had a non-negotiable commitment to democratic learning. We wanted to really challenge the hierarchical 'teacher-student' power relation of traditional education. Therefore, we had an instinctive aversion to overly prescriptive methods. On the other hand, we recognised the necessarily greater knowledge - in this case, of political economy - of our facilitators. We recognised too that if we wanted our group participants to truly learn about contemporary political economy, there were certain issues, certain concepts that they simply had to know about and understand. We firmly believed, therefore, that some kind of basic, brief syllabus and overarching course structure was very important indeed.

Thus, what we came up with in order to negotiate this tension between being overly and insufficiently prescriptive was both a 'core syllabus' and an overarching framework for this syllabus and our political economy teaching. We depicted the contemporary crisis in terms of three spheres: (i) a crisis of the economy, (ii) a crisis of politics and (iii) a crisis of the imagination. Based on these three spheres, we developed a syllabus that facilitators could then explore for themselves and potentially with their groups. For example, if groups wanted to know about the relationship between the current crisis and the lack of jobs, we encouraged facilitators to explore this phenomenon through the three spheres of crisis, illuminating how it pertained to economic issues, but also issues of power and issues of the social imagination.

Overarching framework

Below is a Venn diagram that graphically represents this overarching framework. Central again is the underlying theme of crisis that frames our syllabus. The framework is structured around three overlapping grand themes of crisis: of economy, of power and politics, and of imagination. Each of these three themes are subsequently divided into sub-themes.

3 Please see Section Three: Reflections – Lessons Learned for more on this point.



Taking this framework as our starting point, we collectively sought to come up with a core syllabus that reflected the following two aims:

- 1) To ensure that all the facilitators have the knowledge necessary to engage with their learning group participants, with the aim of developing a tailored curriculum for, and in participation with, the members of each group.
- 2) To promote *critical* political economic learning and understanding by offering a diverse range of opinions and ideologies in order to help facilitators expose learning group participants to the whole range of opinion. This would best allow them to come to their own opinions and to determine what is most relevant to the pressing needs in their own lives;

In this way, we sought to reconcile our insistence for a degree of prescription with our deep commitment to participatory learning. With these two aims and principles in mind, we came up with the following core syllabus:

PPE Core Syllabus, 2012-3

Critical Pedagogy⁴

- Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*
- Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*
- Trapese Collective, *Do it yourself: A handbook for changing the world*

The Economy

- **Capitalism**
 - Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Dont Tell You About Capitalism*
 - Barbara Harriss-White, *Capitalism and Poverty*
 - Leo Panitch and Sam Gandin, *Global Capitalism and American Empire*
 - [Crisis Summaries](#), from [Michael Roberts' Blog](#) - 10 short pieces explaining the crisis, from a number of different radical economists
- **Consumerism**
 - Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption*
 - Colin Leys, *Market-Driven Politics*
- **Money, banking and the financial system**
 - Peter Gowan, *Crisis in the Heartland*
 - Ben Fine, Alfred Saad-Filho and Marco Boffo, *The Elgar Companion to Marxist Economics* (A great collection of short articles)
 - [Crisis Summaries](#), from [Michael Roberts' Blog](#) - 10 short pieces explaining the crisis, from a number of different radical economists

Power and Politics

- **Democracy and the state**
 - Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*
- **The media**
 - Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*
 - Time for Media Reform, *Proposals for a Free and Accountable Media*
- **Neoliberalism**
 - David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*
 - Alfred Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*

Imagination: making changes and possible futures

- **Dystopic outlooks**
 - Newell, P. 2008. 'The political economy of global environmental governance'. *Review of International Studies*, 34. 507 – 529.
 - Paterson, M., 2001. *Understanding Global Environmental Politics*
 - Fieldman, G. 2011. 'Neoliberalism, the production of vulnerability and the hobbled state: Systemic barriers to climate adaptation'. *Climate and Development* 3:2 pp. 159-174
- **Models of transformation**
 - Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*
 - Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*
 - Archon Fung, *Deepening Democracy*

As you can see, the above syllabus is also structured according to our three key themes. The first text in bold under each of the three headings is the core text. The other subsequent texts below are additional, supplementary readings. To be clear, we did not create this syllabus in order to impose it either on facilitators or group participants alike. We would never dream of setting such compulsory 'homework'. We created this core syllabus in order to help our

4 By 'critical pedagogy', we refer to a tradition of thinking about and practising alternative, democratic forms of teaching and learning that seek to produce transformative outcomes for participating individuals and communities.

facilitators to develop their own political economy knowledge and to help them, in turn, to facilitate their group participants' own learning.

In parallel with this core syllabus, we also began to build additional repositories of resources. The first was a repository of additional academic and journalistic literature. The second was a repository of wider teaching resources – both pedagogical and political-economic – to be used by facilitators as stimulating and thought-provoking tools to cultivate learning and debate in their groups. Here, we began to collect such things as graphics, music, video, and podcasts. The building of these repositories are ongoing projects (see Section Four for more details).

The reality of the core syllabus approach

In reality, we believe that the core syllabus and the additional repositories were hardly used by our facilitators. Instead, they were creatively self-reliant, developing their own lesson plans and materials. Thus, we ultimately took down the two additional repositories from our site and replaced it instead with a ['teaching materials' page](#) which is populated with teaching material resources developed by our facilitators for their learning groups in this pilot phase of our project. After just one pilot phase, they remain a bit sparse. Yet, we are sure this resource will grow as PPE grows. We also plan to relaunch our additional repositories of academic and journalistic literature and alternative educational media resources in the near future.

This completes the description of the preparation stage of our pilot project. In the second half of this section, we relate the actual experiences of our various learning groups.

2.2 The group experiences

What follows is a description of the experiences of each of our six learning groups. As you will see, a huge variety of experiences characterises the overall pilot project – from unqualified successes to major challenges.

Crisis Skylight Oxford

The learning group at Crisis was one of our most successful. It was facilitated by Neil Howard, Paladia Ziss, and Narae Choi. The group ran for six sessions with an average of six participants at each one. Crisis as an institution was hugely supportive of our endeavour and offered a learning space and a staff member to encourage our 'class' every week. The course ran for 7 weeks, focussing on issues from 'what is capitalism', to the role of the media, to the nature of current and ideal government.

The Crisis Skylight group was one of our most successful. Crisis is a charitable organisation that works with the unemployed, the precariously employed, those dealing with mental health or social protection difficulties. It also engages regularly in education initiatives, running courses on IT, creative arts and photography. It was therefore the perfect place for a political education project focussed on emancipating the most vulnerable segments of society to better understand the structural forces shaping their lives.

In practice, the Crisis group ran for a full term of seven weekly sessions. All 'classes' were facilitated by at least two facilitators and attended by group of four to nine individuals, from a variety of backgrounds. We first introduced what we were attempting to do and then, collectively, developed a 'class plan' outlining what our participants wanted to discuss and learn about over the course of the term. Using a mixture of our own teaching materials, newspaper articles, videos and role play, we went over issues ranging from the nature of the economy, to politics and the media. Our participants were highly engaged, highly critical and very deep-thinking.

We faced challenges dealing with the differing information levels and engagement on the part of our group members, some of whom were among the most vulnerable individuals in society. Our participants were highly appreciative of the course itself though, and the culmination of the pilot term saw two members draw on what they had learned to write an article in the organisational newsletter focussing on matters of political economy.

Main challenges:

- The main challenge our group faced was maintaining harmony and focus in light of the different learning levels of our participants
- We also found it difficult to expand the group beyond the central group of core participants

Key successes:

- We set up a learning group for vulnerable people – people really suffering at the front line of austerity.
- The group was at times very well attended and group discussion was vibrant.
- Participants enjoyed the learning experience and many described feeling emboldened by it.
- Certain of our participants were inspired to social or political action, writing articles, and clamouring for future classes

Restore

The learning group at Restore was facilitated by James Morrissey, Abby Hardgrove, and Sara Nawaz. The group ran for a total of five sessions and was very well attended until the Christmas break and snow disrupted the course. The course run at Restore was broken down into the following sessions: The origins of the crisis (what happened and why?); How the cuts will affect me?; The role of the media in politics and economics; Different models of governance (socialism vs. capitalism vs. etc); and a discussion group around the question: 'where to from here?'

The commencement of the Restore learning group was delayed by around a month due primarily to organisational issues. We at first lacked the support from within Restore's management needed to publicise and support the course. This was certainly not down to any lack of willingness and enthusiasm, but was instead due to the overwhelming workload that one staff member within Restore faced. Things were rapidly transformed when we began working with another staff member.

Faced with this late start and the time limitations of participants, we were able to squeeze in just three sessions before Christmas. Nonetheless, these three sessions were very well attended with about 15 regular participants, most of whom were engaged and contributed much to discussion.

After Christmas, we ran two further sessions in January. Unfortunately, a combination of the disruption and bad weather meant that these final two sessions were far less well attended.

Overall, we felt very encouraged by this pilot experience. Restore want us to repeat the learning group and many participants also wanted us to continue. We feel that we have built the foundations for a fruitful relationship in the future.

Main challenges:

- The commencement of the group was delayed by a lack of management support, but, equally, when the support came it was strong and enabled the group to get going.
- Facilitators found working at Restore challenging for the following reasons:
- a very broad demographic and social spectrum
- certain participants had challenging mental health issues that were not conducive to maintaining a discussion focused on the issue at hand
- it was hard to get certain participants to commit to attending the group regularly

Key successes:

- We set up a learning group for vulnerable people – people really suffering at the front line of austerity.
- The group was initially very well attended and group discussion was vibrant.
- Participants greatly enjoyed the learning experience.

- Both Restore and participants want to continue the learning group in the future.

Donnington Doorstep

Despite their best efforts, PPE facilitators, Joel Lazarus and Asha Amirali, were ultimately unable to establish a learning group at 'Doorstep'. Nonetheless, this experience generated invaluable lessons learned for PPE organisers. These lessons are shared with the reader in Section Three of this report. Here, we describe our experience at Doorstep.

Joel brought his baby son along to Doorstep each Wednesday for seven weeks. Asha also took her young son along to Doorstep on several occasions throughout this period. We cultivated some good relationships with some parents, volunteers, and staff. In particular, Joel developed good relations with Doorstep's manager and deputy manager.

We tried hard to set up a group. In October, we designed a poster and placed that poster alongside a sign-up sheet on the noticeboard at Doorstep. The poster invited people to come to an introductory meeting in late October. Unfortunately, no one signed up. This may be because there was something problematic about the poster itself. However, it may also simply have been because few people actually read the posters on the notice board. There are very many competing for people's attention.

Another central problem was the lack of time that the centre's manager gave to promoting our initiative. The manager was extremely supportive of our goals. However, she herself was simply swamped by her workload - a workload ironically hugely increased by the desperate need to source and apply for funding in the face of government cuts! After the initial poster failed, the manager took time to talk with Joel and reiterated her commitment to our project. It was agreed that Joel should revise the poster by cutting down the amount of text and that the manager, for her part, would send out the poster by email to her large email group. Again, the goal was to hold an introductory meeting in mid-November. Unfortunately, though we promptly revised the poster and sent it to the manager, to the best of our knowledge, the poster was not sent out. The date of the introductory meeting came and went again. We do not blame the centre's manager for this. We were very aware of how overworked she was.

In sum, therefore, we did not succeed in establishing a learning group at Donnington Doorstep. That said, we individually had countless positive conversations with parents and volunteers at Doorstep about politics, economics, and crisis, about the need for political education and action, and about the possibility of running a learning group. Ultimately, there were major institutional and social obstacles that made establishing a learning group at Doorstep beyond our capabilities. But, the Doorstep experience has generated hugely important lessons to learn and incorporate into our future plans.

Main challenges:

- We were unable to establish a learning group for these main reasons:
- lack of support from an enthusiastic, yet hugely overworked management
- lack of time to commit from tired, busy parents of young children

Key successes:

- We developed strong, positive relationships with Doorstep's management team, volunteers, and service users
- We found that there was, in theory at least, appetite for the kind of learning experience we proposed to offer.
- We learned many important lessons for the future of this project.⁵

Cheney School

Trevor Griffith and Bethan Tichbourne were the facilitators for this small but vibrant group of Cheney School

⁵ See Sections Three and Four for analysis of this.

students.

The Cheney School group was indeed a small group with only two regular, and one occasional, participants. This was primarily a consequence of institutional problems. The School was not willing or able to formally associate itself with our project. This meant that the School would not publicise it. The School was not willing or perhaps able to offer us a space to host our group sessions. Working with young people on its premises required our facilitators to go through the long bureaucratic process of a state security check. This could have been circumvented if a member of staff had been willing to be present at group sessions. Unfortunately, no staff member was willing to do so. Consequently, group sessions were held away from the School's premises.

Prior to Christmas, the Cheney group ran for a total of seven sessions. The facilitators' approach was to choose the next week's topic together with the participants at the end of every week. In the seven sessions they covered topics as varied as education, austerity, class, and power.

The learning group continues to meet each week. The two participants enjoyed the PPE learning experience so much that they now intend to facilitate their own critical political economy learning group within Cheney School and with younger groups of students from next academic year. We intend to give them the support and training they need to do this.

Main challenges:

- Our learning group was attended by only two regular participants
- This was because we were unable to secure any support from within the School

Key successes:

- We ran a regular critical political economy learning group for engaged young women and we continue to run this group.
- The young women enjoyed the experience immensely and plan to facilitate their own learning group in the Autumn.

'Positive Futures' youth group

Greer Feick and Laurie Laybourn were the facilitators for what was clearly the outstanding group of the pilot phase. The group began in the early Autumn and continues to run! Each Sunday afternoon, Laurie and Greer meet with around six regular participants. Many sessions run for several hours. Throughout all our sessions, they put particular emphasis on the necessity of objectivity and critical thinking. The participants have, in their own words, greatly enjoyed, learned much from, and felt empowered by this learning experience.

We ran eight sessions prior to the Christmas break. We began the first few sessions with some quasi-lectures whereby we provided attendees with information on the basic concepts in politics, economics and sociology, with particular emphasis on capitalism - what it is, how it is, and why it is. We then moved on to discussion-based sessions covering how attendees could make their voice heard and reflecting on current societal developments.

Since Christmas, we have run sessions on the following topics and issues:

- identifying "logical fallacies" in news reporting. In this section, we watched American campaign ads to pick out logical fallacies, and had a broader discussion about the role of the media in political reporting
- A lecture on the causes of the financial crisis, focusing on the US. Laurie explained the concepts of bubbles, CDOs, Insurance risks etc.
- A lecture on the history of "social welfare" in Britain, focusing on a nuanced understanding of the pluses and minuses of certain welfare policies
- A lecture on the history of feminism in the US and Britain, focusing on the areas where there are still profound inequalities.

- A discussion on media representations and biases in reporting on "Thatcher's legacy" (contrasting articles by Glenn Greenwald and Bush's economic policy advisors)
- A discussion on planned austerity cuts in Britain, how they've been politicized, and their likely effects.

Finally, in conjunction with the City Council, we organised a debate on education with senior Labour and Liberal Democrat city councillors. All our group participants engaged fabulously and very often outmanoeuvred the councillors with their sober, logical, well informed arguments.

We have been getting feedback from the young people we've been working with throughout this process. They have told us they have no suggestions on how to improve the teaching itself, and have thoroughly enjoyed our sessions because they mix approachable teaching methods with knowledge that they really feel is useful to them. They've mentioned that they have particularly enjoyed discussions that involve graphs and data, and that the reason they come each week is to have "gaps in their knowledge filled." Here are two quotes from participants when we asked them to document their thoughts about their experiences of being part of this learning group...

Participant 1:

"Knowledge is power. But power is nothing without ACTION. so with this being said, take ACTION to provide KNOWLEDGE and EMPOWER others to do the same."

I like the group for:

- free flowing discussions that allow different opinions to be heard
- a way to find out FACTS and STATISTICS
- food for thought

It opened my mind to the world around me. It allowed me to meet MPs and discuss different issues. I met new people with different ideas and opinions. It is ALWAYS interesting and fun.

Participant 2:

"This programme has really empowered me, in the sense that when I'm looking at information I can dissect it using logical fallacies. It has also helped me understand the importance of using graphs, charts and statistics to support a statement or argument. It helped me look at the role the government plays in our society and whether their output is optimal or sub-optimal (an example being given tax cuts for the rich). I have a thorough understanding of how the banking system works and how banks operate (an example being the recent recession that took place leading to the collapse of some banks.)"

Going forward, The City Council and, of course, the group participants are extremely enthusiastic about continuing this initiative. Some group participants are already keen to set up and facilitate their own learning groups. They expressed a desire to standardize a "guidebook" to share with their friends and other communities on the issues we covered, so that they can make a larger impact themselves. We plan to work alongside them to give them the support and training they will need for this.

Main challenges:

- Of course, the demands in terms of preparing and delivering great, informative sessions each week are very significant.

Key successes:

- Where to start!?
- Working closely with a group of young people, helping them to develop their political economy knowledge, their critical analytical skills, and their sense of confidence and empowerment
- Developing close relations with Oxford City Council that we hope will lead to greater things in the future

QEH

Ioannis Katsaroumpas facilitated a group of graduate students that, due to work commitments, found it impossible to sustain the obvious excitement and thirst for critical education that PPE offered.

The QEH experience differed significantly from the other community groups. Because the group was made up of graduate students, the group took a more established academic approach to its studies with academic readings being set for each week. The weeks covered such topics as narratives of the crisis and neoliberalism, the role of the state, Marx's theory of economic crisis and the base and the superstructure, and issues of praxis: reform or revolution and activist academia.

For the first few weeks of term, between fifteen and twenty students were attending. For the last of the eight sessions, only four or five students remained. This attrition can be attributed primarily to the very high workloads of the graduate students. Nonetheless, the group reported a high level of interest, enthusiasm, and appreciation from the participants.

Main challenges:

- Due to the workload of the graduate students, it was not possible to sustain the initial enthusiasm and excitement of the group's many participants.

Key successes:

- The large numbers of participants that attended the first half of this course attests to the huge reservoir of excitement and hunger for critical political-economic knowledge and understanding among QEH students, but also, we believe, among the wider student population.
- The QEH experience has strengthened our belief that the student community, particularly the graduate student community, can be a major source of PPE organisers and facilitators in the future.

Section Two conclusion

As we have seen, our pilot learning groups produced a wide variety of experiences. Some, most notably Positive Futures and, to a lesser but still significant extent, QEH, Cheney, Crisis and Restore, generated exciting outcomes. Other groups produced small, but still important successes. At one partner organisation, Donnington Doorstep, we failed to get a learning group established.

We feel that, overall, our pilot project achieved a great deal and, moreover, has shown us that so much more can be achieved. In the next section, Section Three of this report, we reflect in greater detail on the lessons learned from this pilot project.

Section Three - Reflections: challenges, successes, lessons learned

Section Three summary

In Section Two, we listed what we deemed to be the main challenges faced and key successes enjoyed by our facilitators in each of our community learning groups. In Section Three, we first list and analyse these challenges and successes. We then set out what we consider to be the key 'lessons learned' from this pilot phase. These lessons include the importance of training for our facilitators; the need to secure the support of a key figure within a partner community organisation; the advisability of focusing on certain demographic groups, namely the young and the unemployed; and the importance of how we use language to depict ourselves, define our objectives, and attract prospective participants.

3.1 – The pilot project: challenges and successes

Here we describe what we see as the main challenges and successes experienced by our facilitators in our pilot project.

Main challenges

Before describing what we see as our three main challenges faced, allow us to justify our choice of the word 'challenge' here over perhaps the more obvious antonym to success - 'failure'. We avoid the word 'failure' here for various reasons. First, we managed to overcome many of these initial failures. Second, even where we did not, we managed to derive as much, if not more, learning from these supposed failures as from our brightest successes. Finally, while 'failure' connotes finality and closure of a pessimistic and negative nature, 'challenge' conveys a sense of difficulty, but also of hope and potential that can as yet be fulfilled with the application of intelligence and hard work.

We can cover what we see as our main challenges quite quickly. First, we struggled - and, in one instance, yes, failed - to establish a learning group wherever we struggled to get strong support from a key figure within the management team of our partner community organisation. Conversely, we thrived when we were able to secure such support. Second, in certain groups, we found it difficult - and, in one instance, impossible - to get participants to commit regularly to attending our sessions. This was sometimes due to the large amounts of other commitments they faced - students with large workloads, parents with young children. In other groups, it was due to the precarious and insecure nature of participants' lives. This leads us on to a third main challenge: in certain groups, we found working with certain participants challenging in terms of facilitating a coherent, focused learning experience. This is primarily due to working with individuals living in very precarious and troubling circumstances.

We consider the lessons learned from these challenges later in this Section.

Main successes

Before we list what we consider to be our successes, we need to define 'success' in this context. Of course, to try to *measure* the outcomes of our learning groups - to try to measure the kind of personal individual and communal experiences that took place within them - in any meaningful way is often to seek to quantify the unquantifiable and, in the process, to do real damage to these experiences. Therefore, we are not seeking to uncover or to make crude claims about cause and effect here. Working with individuals and groups and helping them to develop the ways they think and act in positive ways is what we are about, and we make no apologies for not seeking to measure such developments. Thus, our definition of success is much simpler and more practical. We consider ourselves to have been successful, particularly at this early stage, if:

- we were able to establish and run a critical political economy learning group with our partner community organisation
- the group was well and/or regularly attended

- the participants demonstrated an appetite for both the content covered and, equally importantly, the nature of the learning experience itself
- the partner organisation and group participants want to continue the learning group

These are perhaps modest criteria for success, but we had initial modest ambitions. We wanted to see if we were right in our beliefs that we could set up democratic, participatory learning groups in critical political economy in our community. Put another way, we wanted see whether there was an appetite for both learning about the political economy of crisis and for learning in a democratic, participatory, critical fashion. Put even more simply, all we wanted to do was to give people information and the critical skills to understand and analyse this information.

We feel confident that the outcomes of our pilot project has allowed us to confirm that our primary belief in and objectives for piloting this project were legitimate. This leads us to state with confidence the following:

PPE works and can grow....

Many people want to learn about the political economy of this crisis – the political economy of their lives - and many people were attracted by our democratic, critical approach to learning.

Our learning groups engaged over fifty people – young and old, employed and unemployed, highly educated and with low levels of education. The enthusiasm and passion of our participants for both the content and the nature of our learning groups have convinced us that there is a great demand for PPE and initiatives like it. The pilot project has reinforced our commitment to this initiative.

A second, less formal, but naturally important interest for us concerns the effect of our learning groups on our participants' lives. After all, we spoke earlier in this report about our belief in the transformative potential of democratic, critical education.

We shy away from any bold causal claims. That said, so many of the experiences generated within or by our learning groups fill us with a great sense of pride and hope for the future. At Restore, Positive Futures, and Crisis, our facilitators derived great pride and hope from participants expressing a sense of comfort and safety within the learning space and of coming to feel that they too had a right to participate in any debate about issues concerning political economy. At Crisis, two group participants produced an article on political economy and their learning group experience for the Crisis newsletter. At Restore, one participant told how, after a session on the origins of the financial crisis the week before, he had gone to a family dinner at which he had had a debate with his brother, who was a banker, about the origins of the financial crisis. He had never previously been able to have this conversation and felt proud at his new-found abilities and confidence. As one Restore facilitator put it:

'What I thought was so profound about this was that our participant had felt entitled to have a conversation about the financial crisis with his brother, the banker. For me this crystallised a lot of what we were trying to do with this project: expand the boundaries of the conversation and generate public discussion about the political and economic system in which we live. To me a public conversation about our economic system has to take place at the dinner table as much as it does in parliament and on the radio.'

At Positive Futures, we heard how our group participants have grown in their feelings of self-confidence and empowerment. Such changes were strongly affirmed by Adam French, the head of Positive Futures. By way of example, Adam highlighted the experience of one particular participant. This young man had joined the Positive Futures programme after mental health problems had forced him to quit university in his first year. A lack of self-confidence had prevented this young man from doing the community volunteer work that Adam had been encouraged him to take on. Yet, after just three weeks of participating in the PPE learning group, the young man contacted Adam and asked him to arrange voluntary work for him. Adam attributed this change of heart and, crucially, the growth in self-confidence that triggered it directly to the PPE learning group. The quotes from Positive Future group members above also attest to similar responses.

We make no claim about having changed lives through our pilot project. Yet, such anecdotal experiences are, we insist, powerful ones. We would argue that positive social transformations can and will occur not just when democratic, critical debates begin to take place and grow both in our public spaces and in our private conversations. We believe that initiatives like PPE can make a direct contribution to these much needed social developments.

2.2 Lessons to learn

Reflecting on both these main challenges and successes, we have come up with the following list of key lessons to learn. We intend to factor these into our future plans, which are set out in Section Four of this report. Moreover, we also hope that these lessons are helpful to others involved in similar education initiatives.

Lesson No.1 – The Advisory Board should be involved more

While several Advisory Board members provided some input and support, this level of involvement was much less than we would have liked, and there is much scope to involve members in all aspects of developing PPE. We are already in conversations with several members about how their specific skills, experiences and interests can make the best contribution, and will also be looking to bring other people onto the Board of Advisors.

Lesson No.2 - The importance of training for facilitators

We recognised the obvious need for our facilitators to undergo some initial training prior to them beginning their learning group facilitation. The training we put on was focused on the theory and practice of critical teaching. We left the issue of content – knowledge of contemporary political economy – somewhat aside. We hoped that this would be mitigated by a) selecting facilitators with evidence of a good working knowledge of political economy and b) encouraging facilitators to read at least some of our core syllabus.

We also recognised a need for facilitators to get to know and work alongside partner community organisation representatives prior to the learning groups commencing. This is why we invited partner organisation representatives to the second day of our training workshop. Unfortunately, all but one representative failed to attend.

Based on our pilot phase experiences, we have learned, and intend to implement, the following lessons about training:

- Training in critical pedagogy is essential and future training should have a particular emphasis on practical methods;
- Training in political economy is also important. We should provide facilitators with training workshops on political economy prior to facilitation. We cannot expect busy facilitators to cover our core syllabus. Instead, we hope to help their preparation through a combination of training and access to our growing repositories of educational resources and teaching materials.
- Training from (or at least in-depth discussions with) partner community organisation representatives is crucial in order to alert facilitators to and prepare them for potential challenges that their learning group may pose. We will need to work more closely with our partner organisations in this area.
- Training facilitators in where they can access teaching materials, if not from within our own emerging information portal, is crucial.

Lesson No.3 – Recruiting facilitators takes effort

One of our major lessons in the process of recruitment is that who you know matters. Our advertising strategy of putting out online and in print advertisements through various university formal and informal channels did not work well. Most of our facilitators were students we knew, had taught, or were already working with. This tells us that, in order to expand beyond individual networks, we will need to rethink our facilitator recruitment strategy.

Lesson No.4 – Support within the management teams of partner community organisations is vital

One key lesson to learn from our pilot project in terms of successfully establishing learning groups is that it seems vital

to have not just the verbal commitment of a senior figure in the partner organisation, but that this commitment has to be translated into action.

Managers' strong commitment to our initiative was instrumental in our successes at Positive Futures, Crisis and Restore. In contrast, such commitment was totally absent at Cheney School. At Doorstep, the centre manager was the individual, probably the only individual, who could have made our learning group work. Unfortunately, she was just so overworked that she was unable to turn her words into actions on our behalf.

Going forward, we will need to ensure that at least one key member of our partner organisations' management teams is fully committed to helping us set up and run our learning groups.

Lesson No.5 – Building relationships with partners can take time

At some partner organisations, for example, Crisis and Positive Futures, we were quickly able to develop close, trusting relationships with key individuals within our partner organisations. At other organisations, for example, at Restore, this took a far greater amount of time and commitment.

The managers of community organisations are extremely busy. Many will need to see evidence of our commitment to our claims and promises before they begin to trust us and agree to work with us. We will need to patiently demonstrate this commitment before we can hope to cultivate good, productive, trusting working relations.

Another relationship problem that we encountered occurred closer to home. We found it very difficult to cultivate the kind of vibrant, collaborative, mutually supportive atmosphere between our facilitators that we wanted to see. Perhaps it was simply that, as graduate students, our facilitators were just too busy to subscribe to this even if they wanted to. Perhaps this can come from above and from the start if we inculcate this strongly within our training programme and organise positive social events at the start of the new term.

Lesson No.6 – Demographics matter

Another key element of this pilot experience to consider is the demographic groups that we choose to target. The outcomes of our pilot schemes are quite unambiguous here. Young people have more time, are used to taking courses of study, and many have an insatiable appetite for new, often radical ideas. Unemployed or underemployed people also have time and are also used to taking courses of study. In stark contrast, the demographic group targeted at Doorstep - parents of young children - has neither time nor recent experience of group learning. Parents of young children have possibly the least free time of all groups in society. That may make it that much harder to attract them into participating in a learning group. Therefore, we will need to consider which demographic groups we decide to focus on in the future.

Closer to home, we are acutely aware of not being very well representative of a broad cross-section of society ourselves. After all, our initial four founders are all white, heterosexual, middle class men! Our Organising Committee has already diversified since and we are currently in the process of recruiting new members too. Ultimately, we also wish to break down the organiser/participant divide further by bringing group participants into the Organising Committee.

Lesson No.7 - Language and image matter greatly

Self-identity has been something that we at PPE have been concerned about from an early stage. Central to this is, of course, how we define and depict ourselves in language and image. We struggled with our name for quite a while.⁶ Though we are now happy with our PPE name and are committed to being upfront about being in the game of *political* and *economic* education, this is a challenging commitment in a social environment characterised all too often by deep popular cynicism and antipathy toward politics. Consider the following remarks from one PPE facilitator:

'When I began to talk with people in Oxford, including prospective partners and group participants, about our project, I soon realised that the mere mention of the 'P' word was a huge silencer. I felt an awkward silence as soon as I mentioned the word 'politics', and 'economics' fared little better! I began to wonder whether we should steer clear of the 'P' and 'E' words altogether. However, I soon subsequently reasserted PEL [as it was then] because I felt that if one doesn't name the beast then one cannot begin to overcome one's fear and tame it. We want participants to be politicised. How can we do that without

6 See Section 1.1 for more on naming.

mentioning and being upfront about our 'political' objectives?'

The problem, as we see it now, lies in the difference between 'politics' and 'the political'. We're interested in a political project that involves a critique of, but also seeks very much to transcend, politics - defined as the Westminster bubble that increasing numbers of people regard with mistrust and even cynicism.

The use of the 'P' word is just one example of the way in which language can either unite or divide, repel or attract, empower or disempower. We have been acutely aware of this at PPE, particularly after some initial forays into our community led to quite humbling rebuffs. We have learned gradually to simplify our language and then simplify it even more. Indeed, we have tried to make this report itself as accessible as possible. This is not to patronise or belittle our community partners. It is merely a recognition of four fundamental principles concerning language and our use of it:

- 1) That complex language can breed feelings of alienation and disempowerment and that it is, indeed, often consciously used in such ways; but,
- 2) that sometimes we have to talk and think about complex concepts and practices and, therefore, such language is sometimes needed; however,
- 3) whenever we need to use complex language we absolutely must and can explain this complex language in clear and simple terms and explain why we are using this language.
- 4) These three principles reflect our final belief: that everyone can understand and use the language of political economy, and that to learn to do so is a seriously empowering experience.

Some of us also struggled with the issue of language in another way. Most notably, some facilitators found it hard to describe ourselves in ways that attracted prospective participants without making potentially unachievable claims. This difficulty was particularly significant at Doorstep where facilitators were left mostly to their own devices to attract support for a learning group. Here one Doorstep facilitator reflect on his experiences:

'I was often asked the very challenging question: 'So what will I actually get out of your course?' This I found, and continue to find, very difficult to answer. I could say that I believe that this learning experience could transform your life, not, of course, in terms of removing the social structures that constrain and impede your freedoms and ambitions, but in terms of the way in which you understand yourself and your position in society and the more critical, effective methods you will be able to use to take key decisions in your life. However, I couldn't honestly say to someone that 'this course will transform your life' without sounding like a snake-oil salesman, and I, quite rightly, was not in the game of making potentially dangerous promises.

Alternatively, the ultimate safe response I considered was something like: 'Well, the mere fact of us all coming together to form a strong group of solidarity will itself be really positive and strengthening' – the 'a problem shared is a problem halved' response. This I do believe. However, for a parent of young children with hardly any time to themselves anyway, this was not enough.

In reality, I usually rambled on about the group solidarity thing, the transformative potential thing, and I also developed an argument based on what I call the 'mental' or 'intellectual' self-defence. 'When someone tries to punch you', I say, 'you know you're being attacked. But when your benefits are cut, your education or employment opportunities are taken away, your local childrens' centre threatened with closure...All these things are attacks, but do you know that you are being attacked? Do you know by whom and why?' The danger here is that I begin to sound like a ranter or a moaner. Most people think that the idea of them being attacked by another social group sounds somewhat deranged and conspiratorial. I'm far more interested in winning people over through Socratic dialogues. However, when they have one or more children running about whilst they snatch a conversation with me, a Socratic dialogue is not an easy strategy. You begin to see the particular challenging social context of Doorstep.'

This experience may be particularly relevant to Doorstep, yet other facilitators experienced similar conversations and similar difficulties at other, very different group locations.

Therefore, one key lesson from this pilot experience is that language remains a really important issue. We have decided to assert our *political* (as opposed to 'politics') name and intentions. Perhaps one key approach to conquering the cynicism we encounter is to clearly distinguish between politics and the political in our discussions. In terms of attracting prospective participants, it may well be a case of tailoring responses to the 'what will I get out of it?' question, depending on whom we are engaging with.

Lesson No.8 – Trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity must guide all our actions

How to engage with and seek to attract prospective participants in a respectful and honest manner leads us on to our final main lesson: trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity must guide all our actions. We are proud to say that, so far, we feel that it has. We were keen to emphasise right from the start and particularly in our training for facilitators that we have the honour of working with a wide variety of people in our community, including many vulnerable people who have been let down many times in their lives. Our first duty must always be to them and to ensure that they can rely on us no matter what. We have taken a similar approach to cultivating good relations with all our partner organisations.

If we want to help to build a better society, we must seek to embody the values we wish to spread at all times. We are in danger here of sounding like a corporate social responsibility pitch, but, in stark contrast to such pitches, we mean what we say. The lesson from our pilot experience here is that our successful results have much to do with the trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity of the approach of our organisers and facilitators. We must continue to emphasise this consistently in the future.

Section Three conclusion

Reflecting on this Section Three, we feel that our pilot phase has, overall, really achieved what a pilot phase is supposed to achieve. It has generated the kind of successes that have reinforced the core beliefs that led us to set up PPE in the first place, namely that people want to learn about the political economy of their lives and that they want to learn about them and learn best through democratic, critical forms of education. It has thrown up some significant challenges to address and some crucial lessons to learn from as we embark on setting out our future plans. Please read on to our final section, Section Four, to learn about these exciting and ambitious plans.

Section Four - Future plans

Section Four summary

In this section, we set out our plans for PPE's development based firmly on the 'lessons learned' covered in the previous section. Our development plan is divided into three elements: (1) Grow, (2) Institutionalise, and (3) Replicate.

4.1 Grow

Having carried out a small pilot scheme with really encouraging results, we are now well positioned to grow our project in the most obvious, direct way – by establishing relationships with and setting learning groups up in new community organisations, whilst, of course, continuing to run learning groups in our already established partner organisations. Yet, this will require the recruitment of many more facilitators. Here are our plans for growth.

Growing 'supply and demand'

Though the 'supply-demand' analogy is clearly taken from economic theory, here we can categorically state that we need to prioritise supply! Our golden rule is and must always be that we never let down our community partners – the demand side. Therefore, our priority will be on recruiting facilitators. Indeed, the demand side does not present us with great difficulties. All our current partner organisations are keen for us to run new learning groups. Furthermore, our new relationship with [OxHub](#) has furnished us with access to seven local secondary schools. OxHub describes itself as 'the go-to place for students interested in social and environmental issues'. It is a hub for all 'student-run community volunteering' projects.⁷ New connections have also opened up clear possibilities to run learning groups in homeless shelters, youth groups, and prisons.

Thus, the onus is on us to find and train new facilitators. We are approaching this in several ways. First and foremost, we have made new, positive connections with numerous individuals and groups not just within Oxford University, but also at Oxford Brookes and Ruskin College. We are confident that we can recruit many new facilitators from these new connections. Second, we have identified a small number of individuals who participated in pilot learning groups and have expressed an interest in setting up their own learning groups. We plan to help them become facilitators and set up their learning groups by giving them the training and support they need. Third, we hope to recruit many new facilitators at stalls at Freshers Fairs at Oxford and Brookes Universities and Ruskin College in October.

We, the Organising Committee, have agreed on a rough target of 15-20 new facilitators. This would allow us to run 7 to 10 new groups from the Autumn. We insist that facilitators need to work at least in pairs to ensure continuity and mutual support in their facilitation. We are confident of achieving this target.

4.2 Institutionalise

Let's be frank. The words 'institution' and 'institutionalise' don't have particularly positive connotations. They too often connote a sense of rigid conservatism. But, we really do want and need to institutionalise PPE.

The problem with the vast majority of alternative projects is their firework-like existence: they burn bright, soar high, but then very soon fizzle out and die. We won't let this happen to PPE. We want to build on the strong foundations we have already put in place. We need to. All four of our founders have left or are planning to leave the UK this year!

By 'institutionalising' PPE, we mean getting PPE to a stage where its continued existence and development is not dependent on the efforts of a small group of people. A central element of any process of institutionalisation is establishing key rules, principles, values, and practices that continue to guide the organisation's actions and development. The plans for achieving this are described here.

⁷ More on OxHub below in our 'Institutionalise' section.

Initiating PPE's annual cycle

We believe that the best way to institutionalise PPE is to get it running according to a clear annual cycle of events and stages. We have designed this annual cycle to correspond to the university three-term calendar in the following way:

- ***Winter Term (October-December)***
 - Recruitment of new facilitators at Oxford, Brookes, and Ruskin at the start of the new academic year
 - New facilitators receive training in critical pedagogy, facilitation, and contemporary political economy (see below).
 - New facilitators work alongside an experienced facilitator in a learning group.
- ***Spring Term (January-March)***
 - New facilitators become fully fledged facilitators running a learning group.
- ***Summer Term (April-June)***
 - New facilitators complete their experience by feeding back by:
 - producing a (collaboratively produced) report of the learning group experience;
 - contributing any teaching materials generated to our repository (see below).

We plan to initiate this cycle this coming Autumn.

Partnering with OxHub

Another crucial element of our institutionalisation efforts is our new partnership with OxHub. OxHub has a truly impressive institutional framework: a great, central office space; links to myriad community organisations; and many varied student projects under its umbrella. Our partnership with OxHub will allow us to reach and attract the wider Oxford University student community. In return, we hope to provide political economy and pedagogy training for those involved in other initiatives within the Hub.

Developing a study materials repository

Perhaps the greatest worry of facilitators new and old is the most practical: 'What am I going to actually *do* in my learning group sessions?!' This worry is also, of course, the source of the greatest amount of work that facilitators have to undertake. Yet, every time a facilitator prepares for, delivers, and evaluates a learning group session, they produce knowledge that is too valuable not to share.

Therefore, we have begun to compile two distinct repositories of study materials for our facilitators and participants – and anyone else interested – to use in preparing and delivering their learning sessions. The first repository of teaching materials is focused on teaching/learning itself. This will help our facilitators in a practical way to find ideas for learning sessions plans. The second repository is for political economy-related materials. These are articles, but also graphics, music, video, and podcasts – anything that can engage participants and bring the issues that we are studying to life.

Thus, one way in which PPE will grow and institutionalise is through the expansion of these teaching material repositories. As an increasing number of facilitators and participants engage in PPE learning experiences and generate output, so these repositories will grow.

Growing our Organising Committee

We are currently in the process of recruiting new people to our Organising Committee. We hope that this leaves our Committee stronger, ready for the work ahead, and, crucially, far more representative of our society. This will be our guiding principle as we evolve. We hope to bring learning group participants into our Organising Committee. This will be a crucial element of ensuring that PPE evolves as a truly democratic organisation.

Developing our in-house training

With regard to institutionalising our founding values, principles, and practical approaches to education, the development

of an in-house training programme for all new facilitators and organisers is of paramount importance. This summer, we are busy attending workshops on economics/political economy and inviting leading practitioners of critical pedagogy to come and train us. We plan to take the best of what we learn from this experience and develop our own training programme that we will deliver to all new organisers and facilitators in the Autumn. We hope to ensure that all our facilitators begin their facilitation experience with a good working knowledge of political economy, of critical pedagogy, and of some of the specific challenges that might arise from working with their particular learning group.

Developing the PPE community

Another essential element of institutionalising PPE will be the development of a PPE community of organisers, facilitators, and participants. Learning from our lessons so far, we plan to hit the ground running in the new academic year. Alongside our new extended training workshops, we will organise social events for new facilitators to attend and get to know each other. We will set up an online forum for facilitators to share experiences, concerns, and ideas. We will also have regular monthly social events for everyone linked to PPE. These will include talks and debates. This is our strategy for developing a thriving and supportive PPE community around our learning groups.

Funding

To date, we have run the pilot and all other aspects of PPE virtually entirely voluntarily. There is no doubt that the power of such a grassroots projects rests in the commitment of people – organisers, facilitators, participants, organisational employees, advisors and others – to do this work in a voluntary capacity. Having said this, as the project grows, and running costs (travel, food, training, rental of space, etc) and organisational capacity increases, we recognise that we may well need to raise funds. The question of whether PPE will need and would run more efficiently with paid is one we have discussed a few times and will continue to consider and discuss as we move into this next phase. The key issue here for us is maintaining our independence and autonomy. This is vital for maintaining, in turn, our guiding values and principles.

These are the main ways in which we are now engaged in institutionalising PPE. Central to everything we do are our founding principles and values articulated earlier in Section One of this report, particularly in the 'philosophy of and approach to education'. We believe that these can and will be institutionalised within PPE through our in-house training and the growth of a PPE community. Our annual cycle design, growing study material repositories, and our partnership with OxHub constitute the more practical side of our institutionalisation strategy.

4.3 Replicate

We believe that PPE can work not just in Oxford but all around the UK. We are really keen to tell others involved as students and academics in other higher education institutions about our experiences with a view to replicating the basics of the PPE model elsewhere. This is no franchise! We fully expect different groups to take on different forms and practices in different contexts. Yet, we also believe that our experiences and the knowledge and understanding we have acquired can be of great use to others.

One particular obvious way to pursue replication here is to do it through the various other hubs that exist at many different universities in the southern half of England. We have had only tentative conversations so far with two London-based hubs (Imperial and SOAS), but plan to contact the other existing hubs to see if they would be interested in replicating what we have done in their locality.

Section Four conclusion

To grow, to institutionalise, to replicate – that is our development plan. Our growth plan is centred around the recruitment of new organisers and facilitators and the establishment of learning groups at new community organisations. Our institutionalisation plan involves the institutionalisation of both our principles and values and our practices. Finally, we are beginning to try to make contact with others around the country to see if there is an appetite for replicating PPE in other locations.

In Closing

So, there you have it. That's the story so far and what we are planning for our future.

We are very optimistic for the future of PPE and many other similar initiatives that have emerged and flourished in recent years in the UK and beyond.

If our report has sparked an interest, a question of any kind, please don't hesitate to contact us.

You can email us at info@ppeuk.org.

You can 'like' us at www.facebook.com/peoplespoliticeconomy and you can join our discussion at www.facebook.com/groups/323285954454962/.

With thanks,

The PPE team