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Accessing PR expertise: methodological considerations

Introduction

The nature of public relations expertise and knowledge has been rather under-researched. In particular practitioners' perspectives and, more to the point, their voices, have been given little attention. Consequently we have begun to redress this lack through a funded project over the course of a 12 month project¹. The study was originally designed from the perspective that academic research could identify conceptual or knowledge gaps in practice that could be filled through the transmission of useful knowledge/cognitive skills, an assumption that has dominated much of the literature. During the progress of this research we came to appreciate that a deeper and more complex challenge existed in understanding how practitioners learn. Consequently our study evolved from a fairly standard design to a series of iterative interventions and longer-term relationships with research participants that aimed to elicit practitioners' ideas about their expertise and the knowledges and accumulated learning that lay behind their daily work. As we were interested in understanding whether there were commonalities, conventions or routines in underpinning rationales for practice. .

In this article we provide a brief synopsis of relevant literature and outline the rationale and approach taken to our empirical work, foregrounding the methodological challenges entailed in accessing the ideas of practitioners about the nature of their expertise and knowledge and learning. We begin with a discussion of insights from the public relations literature and then proceed to draw on sociological, cultural studies and educational theory to indicate useful lines of analysis and future inquiry

Professionalism, occupational roles and expertise

Research in public relations in relation to knowledge and skills has largely focused on the ideal of professional status and the level at which practitioners work. Key topics have included: the role and scope of public relations and the degree to which it is constructed as a managerial function; the extent to which public relations meets the necessary conditions of professional work, particularly in relation to ethics and education, but also exploring jurisdiction and licensing in relation to regulatory issues; and evaluation, seen as a significant competence in gaining access to senior organizational levels.

Research into professional issues in the public relations literature has encompassed discussions relating to regulation, licensing and accreditation (Sha, 2011a, 2011b; Mollada & Athaydes, 2003), ethics (Fawkes, 2012a, 2012b; Bowen 2008, Kang, 2010; L'Etang, 2003) competences and standards (Gonçalves, de Carvalho Spinoia & Padamo, 2013; Sha, 2011c; Cameron, Sallot & Lariscy, 1996; Sallot, Cameron & Lariscy, 1998) education and educators' perspectives (Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011; Sallot, Cameron & Lariscy, 1997); practitioners' views about professional bodies (Venter, 2010); the impact of professional bodies (Brownell & Niebauer 1989); evaluation ((Watson, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013; Simmons & Watson, 2005; Xavier et al, 2005; Watson & Likely, 2013; Xaveri, Johnston, Patel, Watson & Simmons, 2005; Baskin, Hahn, Seaman & Reines, 2010; Puchan, Pieczka &

¹ The scope of professional influence and autonomy: enacting communication expertise through public relations practice – critical interventions. Study funded by Queen Margaret University, Scotland 2012/13.

L'Etang, 1999) and the level of seniority and roles of practitioners enacting the role of communication management (Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000; Moss & DeSanto, 2011; Grunig 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). More recently there have been international studies including those with a comparative element (Yang & Taylor, 2013; Zhang, Luo & Jiang, 2011; Wright, 2011; Li, Cropp, Sims & Jin, 2011; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Kirat, 2006; Kirat, 2005). Much research has been within the functional paradigm that dominated the field until the late 1990s, utilising the concept of profession, which was employed as an unproblematic and uncontested concept presented as a desired status and occupational goal. Some of this research has been prescriptive in nature advocating that practitioners gain access to power and influence by becoming part of the 'dominant coalition', a term that originated within the strategic management paradigm within the public relations literature equivalent to practitioners' aspirations to be on the 'Top Table' (the Boardroom) In other words PR would be located in organizations as part of the senior management team, alongside other professional managers such as accountants, legal advisers and human resource managers.

While this goal is understandable within the context of the professional project, there are interesting questions to consider in terms of the strategy and tactics. Dominant coalitions in corporate and organizational worlds may take varied forms external to the organization. A good example of this has been CIPR Scotland's collaboration with the Institute of Directors. Considerable emphasis has been put on the skills for, and implementation of, formal evaluation based on standard strategic management routines and this argument has the support of professional bodies, for example the CIPR developed a series of 'toolkits' promoted to practitioners via its professional qualifications and on its website [<http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/policy-resources/best-practice-guides-toolkits>].

From functionalism to critique

The emphasis much academic research on issues related to professionalism public relations has been generally rather administrative and somewhat unquestioning in relation to assumptions and concepts. This approach became tempered by critical perspectives from the 1990s which led to some revisionism with regard to the way in which the subject of professionalism was handled, for example van Ruler (2005) explored the fractures between educational and practice cultures, and Pieczka (2002, 2006, 2007), Pieczka & L'Etang (2001, 2006) and L'Etang (1999, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011) explored conceptual, sociological, ethical and historical aspects of PR professionalism and professionalisation,

'The sociological literature on professionalisation emphasises the significance of education in a number of ways. Those from the trait approach identify intellectual and practical training as an important feature of the professions. Theorists identified with the power approach, who have drawn on Marx and Weber for inspiration, take for granted the importance of education as an instrument in a profession's competitive positioning. Systems theorists focus on the broader societal context, in this case, increasing educational opportunities and government pressure for vocationalisation. Finally, the notion of professional project focuses on the translation of scarce resources and specialist knowledge of skills into social and economic rewards...' (L'Etang, 2004: 186–187).

However, we would argue that there are more varied ways in which education can engage with practice in order to understand the potential range of models of professional development that could be put into place to support the learning that the practice demands. As our project progressed the ways in which practitioners talked about their thinking and their thinking about their thinking. This latter aspect became increasingly centre stage as we will shortly discuss.

The recasting of PR practitioners as technologists of discourse (Leitch and Motion 1997, Weaver et al 2006), rather than communication managers (Grunig 1992; Grunig, Grunig &

Dozier, 2002), brought with it a new impetus to consider the role and impact of PR practice in terms of how it shapes social identities and relations. In this context, understanding of the nature of knowledge routinely used in practice, as well as the question about the degree of autonomy conferred by professional expertise on the PR professional, or conversely, the malleability of PR practice to other kinds of knowledge present in institutional contexts where PR work is negotiated and delivered, take on a new meaning. Our work extends this more critical approach by asking fundamental questions of those in practice with regard to their self-perceived knowledges, expertise and learning processes. Our project has been influenced by Pieczka's (2006) exploration of expertise based on participant observation of professional training as she explained,

'By focusing on training and the transmission of expertise, this research deals largely with accounts of practice, which are possible only if they embody a certain level of reflexivity (absent from the practice itself) and a theorizing effort. The latter here means a discursive practice of translating one order of things (direct experience) into another (descriptions of the former, which may be offered in more or less theoretical, abstract terms). And this is precisely what public relations training seems to do' (Pieczka, 2006: 280).

Our project increasingly came to focus on finding space for individuals to engage in reflexive thinking about their daily work. We encouraged participants in the intervention phases to confront the challenge of self-observation and self-interrogation opening themselves to meditative exploration of tensions and alternative endings 'in the moment' (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Cunliffe, 2004; Doyle, 2013) to facilitate existential moments and critical autonomy.

In our study we asked practitioners to talk about the purpose of their practice, to consider the basis of their understandings and insights, the bases on which they made decisions to take actions, and, furthermore, and as it turned out much more challenging to spend time accessing and interrogating their thoughts at those key moments. In short, the study aimed to facilitate reflexive thinking among the study group with a view to understanding the 'logics of the practice' (Bourdieu, 1992: 52 cited in Pieczka, 2006: 280).

Conceptualising expertise: where is it and what does it look like?

Reflecting further on the 'logics of the practice' we turned to sources on professional work and lives. Goodson (2000)² also draws upon Bourdieu (1998)³ to argue that professional practices can never be fully integrated into organizational systems. Professional practice mobilizes the resources made available by the professional 'peer group' who "still retain considerable power to 'interfere' in the relationship between corporate businesses and consumers, and the State and its citizens" (p1). Goodson makes a distinction between professionalization and professionalism on the one hand, and professional standardization and professional standards on the other. This distinction is highly relevant in terms of current debates in public relations practice as well as in the academic literature particularly in relation to the role of public relations in society, its intentions, ethics, effects and impact.

However, for the purposes of this paper, it is Goodson's work on educational change that offers a way of thinking about 'expertise' both in relation to the evolution of PR as an academic subject and the point it has reached in its development as a profession.

Goodson's work on social histories of educational change and 'becoming' an academic subject (1981, 2001) drew from Bucher & Strauss' (1976) on how professions change.

² Goodson, I (2000) The Principled Professional in *Prospects*, vol XXX, no 2, June 2000

³ Bourdieu, P (1998) In *Television and Journalism*. London, Pluto Press.

)⁴ considered a model of educational change that examined both its 'internal affairs' set against 'external relations'. He developed a stage theory of change as an example of internally generated change typical of a particular historical period. Goodson's model identified four evolutionary phases: invention, promotion, legislation and mythologization. In the invention phase, emergent discourses identify a gap and focus on the 'needs' a new subject will address. The promotion phase can include the formation of a subject association and political lobbying whilst the legislation phase is symbolized by the development of an infrastructure that might include curriculum and examination syllabi. The change cycle is completed in the mythologization phase when the subject becomes an unquestioned entity, its fixing in public discourse as societal good and its place in education secured thus or institutionalisation?. Subsequent models of change identified a 'crisis of positionality' and noted the increasing difficulty of internal change agents to initiate change. They were, instead, only able to respond to them. Goodson argues that it is important to develop a more contextually sensitive theory of change that combines historical and ethnographic methods. In short, a theory of change that "arbitrates between the changing balance of external relations and internal affairs in different historical circumstances".

In British public relations academization processes began in the practice almost as soon as the Institute of Public Relations was formed in 1948. For example in 1949 Sir Stephen Tallents argued in his presidential address that members 'first function was to educate themselves' (Public relations 2(2) 1949: 3) and in the same year the IPR Council decided that an exam 'or test of ability' was needed to establish 'public relations as a recognized profession' and the first examination was launched in 1956 (L'Etang, 2004: 189–191). By the late 1950s there was a clear aspiration among IPR members for university level education and an understanding that communication theory might be useful (L'Etang, 2004: 196). IPR courses started in 1956 and in 1961 President Alan Eden-Green reported with some disappointment that 'We are still a long way from convincing the authorities responsible for advanced education that there is an urgent need for full-time comprehensive training in public relations – probably at the post-graduate level' (cited in L'Etang, 2004: 203). There was speculation about Glasgow School of Management Studies and the Department of Business Administration at LSE but when nothing transpired the IPR developed a collaboration with International Correspondence Schools to develop home-study courses and in the 1970s with The Communication, Advertising and Marketing Education Foundation, expressing ambition in 1976 to establish 'a Chair of Communication at a University' (L'Etang, 2004: 214). Yet despite this long gestation academization (Goodson, 2000) remained in the imaginary zone for more than another decade when a postgraduate degree was established at the University of Stirling in 1988. (A discussion of the academization of public relations focused on those within the academy is outwith the scope of this paper since our project is firmly focused on practice and practice perspectives).

Conceptualizing 'expertise', therefore, is dependent upon two overlapping and interdependent projects: academicization and professionalization. If the concept is not fixed and is subject to change, how is it to be recognized and where might it be located? Goodson's work is a provocation in broader terms than 'expertise', however, and relates to the efficacy of the concepts underpinning PR as an academic discipline and as a professional project. What knowledges and experiences do PR practitioners in general and 'expert' PR practitioners in particular draw upon in practice and what then, is the relationship between

⁴ Goodson, I (1981) Becoming an Academic Subject: patterns of explanation and evolution in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol 2 no 2, pp163-180

the more abstract or 'scientific' (Vygotsky, 1978)⁵ higher order concepts and the substantive everyday?

The professional 'peer group' has an important role to play in supporting the development of professional practice and scaffolding learning from 'novice' to 'expert' practitioner. The scaffolding metaphor refers to the Vygotskian idea of learning as a supported movement through each individual's 'zone of proximal development'. The process of mentoring might usefully be thought of in this way. Webster-Wright (2010) argues for a model of *authentic* professional development that supports self-directed learning predicated on questions of ontology and professional identity, one that listens to the experiences of practices (p11), rather than a content laden transmission model (Pieczka, above?) predicated on professional deficit. This is not to say, however, that such learning is disconnected from context (see discussion on community or practice below). In Edwards' (2010) work on developing expert professional practitioners, she draws attention to the trajectory identified by Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) on which 'competency' is but the midway point and in the final three stages there is a qualitative change in the relationship between individual and system (p25). Whilst indicative, a trajectory is suggestive of a linear progression but for the purposes of mapping the development of 'expertise' it may be more useful to conceptualise a more rhizomatic (Deleuze, ? or 'mycorrhizae'?) structure. In particular the career development of some practitioners may take them beyond the communications specialism to executive director or CEO roles, and the significant role of reflexive capacities in elite business success has already been highlighted (Maclean et al, 2012).

Given the importance that 'creativity' (connoting flexibility and divergence) plays in the discourse of public relations practice and the flux and transformation in converged media and networked societies (Castells, 2009a, 2009b) it seems likely that the acquisition of public relations knowledges and expertise is a dispersed activity and temporally fragmentary and occasional. Knowledges may include selectively acquired or inherited expertise acquired by those from advantaged backgrounds – cultural capital (Bourdieu..) but also modes of thinking, for example reflexiveness was found to be a significant feature of elite business leaders, particularly those from non-privileged backgrounds (Maclean et al, 2012). Such findings point to the importance of understanding practitioners' thought processes and career insights. Clearly, there is a compelling case for professional bodies to develop processes to work to support learning beyond competence. There is also a compelling case for the development of 'knotworked' (Engestrom ?) inter-professional scaffolds to give better shape to the development of 'expertise' than is currently available within the boundaries of any one provider. A holistic understanding of the multiple components of knowledges and expertise is needed in order to develop professional and educational provisions that go beyond the entry level.

Goodson concluded that the balance between internal affairs, external relations and practitioner's personal perspectives requires to be restored.

A sociocultural approach to supporting professional learning: communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991⁶ & 1998⁷) made a significant intervention in learning theory when they re-framed learning as a social process requiring participation, initially peripheral but

⁵ Vygotsky, L (1978) *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press

⁶ Lave, J & Wenger, E (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

becoming increasingly and complexly engaged in communities of practice. Importantly, Lave and Wenger shift the emphasis away from the transmission of facts and information towards a focus on the interrelatedness and inextricability of practice, person and social world. For these scholars, the focus for learning became the communities of practice individuals form in shared enterprise over time. In other words, in the case of public relations it becomes important to understand the dynamics and priorities of practice understandings and definitions of 'best practice', expert knowledge, expertise and the way in which hierarchies develop within the community based on acknowledgement of superior performance. Furthermore, the way in which learning, particularly complex thinking, is transmitted across the field and over generations explains something significant about the practice and its operation with regard, for example, towards notions of apprenticeship, the novitiate, competence, expert, supremo.

Provocatively, Lave (ref?) later argued that there is no such thing as 'learning theory', only changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life. It is the act of participation in everyday life that may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice and closer to what we mean by 'learning'. Cultural historical activity theorists (Vygotsky, Engestrom) have worked on intervention projects with a range of professional practitioners in the workplace, including health, environmental sciences and education. Engestrom's explication of 'knotworking' supercedes horizontal and vertical organisational structures. He describes the zone of proximal development (above) not as a vertical step leading to a higher stage or level but more "a terrain of activity to be dwelled in and explored" rather than a space to be crossed. Engestrom conceives of intervention as a formative rather than a linear process. In the case of the latter, the contents and goals of the intervention are known ahead of time by the researchers. In the case of the former, the subjects construct a novel solution or novel concept, the contents of which are not known ahead of time to the researchers. The aim is to generate intermediate concepts and solutions that can be used in other settings as tools in the design on locally appropriate new solutions.

Where are the communities of practice senior public relations professionals participate in and learn from? More importantly, what are the conditions and tools that scaffold the qualitative change required for the shift from competent to expert practice?

Beyond Schon: making the case for *reflexivity* about and in practice

The tradition of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983) gained currency in the 1980s but research suggested the gap between theory and practice was not easily overcome. Practitioners drew on the personal and the general as the basis for professional judgment rather than specialist theoretical knowledge. If professional judgment is defined as "those expert guesses which result from combining experience with specialist theoretical knowledge", (Tripp)⁸ it is important to understand how those two domains, practice and theory, articulate with each other and are developed.

Education, learning and professional contexts

The relationship between education and the occupation is central to the professional project since on a traditional paradigm of content dissemination/transfer (see above),

'Education has the potential to provide the cognitive core to the occupation and thus define the field of jurisdiction, to develop the body of knowledge via research, to gain elite status, to help legitimate the practice, and to perform a gatekeeping function in terms of entry to the occupation, thus assisting closure. In Bourdieu's terms, education is the way to acquire

⁷ Wenger, E (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

⁸ Tripp, D (1993) *Critical incidents in teaching*. London, Routledge

symbolic capital and thus would distinguish public relations from other communications occupations' (L'Etang, 2004: 187-189).

Education has remained on the research agenda (evidenced by a Special Issue in *Public relations review* in September 2013) much of the research has been quantitative surveys of practitioners or academics (Welch, 2013; Shen & Toth, 2013), or even experimental (Fishcer, 1998). Others focus on prescriptions and frameworks of professional or educational bodies (such as the Commission on Public Relations Education's 'Professional Bond framework'; the EduProject developed by EUPRERA; the Global Education Project sponsored by Global Alliance; and the ECOPSI report (Cotton et al, 2009; Tench & Deflage, 2008; Toth & Aldoory, 2010 all cited in Gonçalves et al, 2013: 612). However, there is room for much closer investigation of terminology and assumptions employed in such studies, for example reference is often made to 'public relations principles' without these being interrogated for their status, articulation or justification an historical pattern,

'As late as 1964, the final examination paper included the following compulsory question: "(1) What do you consider to be the most important principles involved in the practice of public relations? Illustrate your answer with examples taken from your own experience (which will be treated in strict confidence) or from your own imagination" (*Public relations* 9 April 1964). This suggests that theory was supposed to evolve out of practice either intuitively or from specific critical incidents in practice' (L'Etang, 2004: 198).

Our project has sought to re-tread this ground accessing the deep recesses of practitioners' thinking.

Of relevance to our study was Benecke and Bezuidenhout's exploratory study on experiential learning in South African public relations education. Their study, ambitiously described as grounded theory but lacking multiple iterations, entailed interviews with 15 higher education providers and a single focus group with 'senior practitioners with an average of 18 years experience in public relations' (61). In this they explored 'the introduction of learners to the world of work' (2011: 55) basing their approach on the work of the educational psychologist Kolb (1984). Their study aimed to determine what educators understood by experiential learning, to explore experiential learning activities and methods, and to develop a framework for the conceptualisation and implementation of experiential learning. As clear advocates of experiential learning, however, Benecke and Bezuidenhout did not examine the nature of experience or learning in the field. In short they focused on the importance of real-life experience but as they did not examine practitioner learning experiences, they were unable to articulate what experiences were valuable and why in terms of learning public relations expertise in practice situations. In this sense their study had a missing link. Real-world experiential learning was not unpacked but seen as motivational for students. In fact the study remains firmly entrenched in the transmission model of education, 'Learners must therefore be educated as competent strategists, proficient communicators, decision-makers and counselors' (59). In fact a major focus appeared to be socialisation and institutionalisation of students, basically promoting conformist behaviours, highlighting a functional if unelaborated focus,

'Experiential learning is regarded as contributing to the development of skills such as goal setting, reflective learning and effective observation, and therefore has an important role to play in public relations education. Other benefits of experiential learning on the higher education level include the developing of learners to be competent employees, boundary spanners and good citizens. Such a development is of particular importance in a career such as public relations as public relations practitioners need to understand the social context in order to achieve their communication objectives' (62).

In short, the study promoted the value of experiential learning from a theoretical perspective but did not tackle the guts of the problem ie exactly what it is that students may or may not learn in the practice field when they are on placement. Activities and examples are listed such as internships and ‘cooperative education programmes’ (sandwich education) but the content or learning experiences are not.

This study endeavours to start filling that gap.

Methodological choices and challenges: project focus and design

The project was exploratory and designed to investigate practitioner understandings of knowledge in practice specifically in relation to processes of evaluation and the conceptualization of value. However, the technical aspects of data collection proved rather challenging. First of all, delineating a sample was problematic in an occupation where despite the fact that vocational degrees and qualifications being available in the UK since 1988 most practitioners do not possess them and they are not required for membership of professional bodies. Furthermore, many people practising public relations are not members of any professional body. It was important for our study to involve participants with experience and especially those held in high regard by their peers. We conceptualized our project as being focused on ‘senior’ practitioners – the term ‘senior’ being deployed commonly in the practice community although it is not clearly defined and therefore intrinsically problematic from a realist perspective (but see Sha, 2011). We decided to employ the term in seeking our sample because the term ‘senior’ has been employed within the occupation for decades so it clearly connoted a value/marker and/or status that was important to explore and understand. Consequently, the term ‘senior’ formed the basis for discussion with research participants on practitioner conceptualizations of expertise.

The slipperiness of terminology employed in the practice was a challenge and we learnt that context influenced interpretation of ‘expertise’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘standards’. We encouraged participants to confront these challenges and to reflect on past experience and, through the use of private journals to develop reflexive thinking with regard to their experiences.

Acknowledging our difficulties in identifying the population proved valuable in helping us to appreciate that our work was not solely about knowledge and expertise, but about public relations identities and identification processes within public relations occupational culture. We made a formal call for participants through professional bodies employing the term ‘senior’ and inviting practitioners with 10–15 years’ experience to participate.

The project began with ten unstructured conversations with a random selection of practitioners. The purpose of these conversations was to explore ideas with practitioners the possible role that academia might have in practice outwith the provision of vocational degrees. It was put to this group that the relationship between academia and practice largely involved conversations in relation to: the provision of placements and visiting speakers on degree courses; and on the structure and content of degree courses; yet it appeared that there was little discussion about other ways in which academic could contribute. In short, the focus of the relationship between academia and practice had become the entry-level qualifications, but there did not seem to be a space for informed debates about the issues facing the practice and its expert practitioners. These early conversations shaped the development of semi-structured focus groups (three) and interviews (25/30). In the focus groups and interviews we sought to avoid imposing educational agendas in our questioning but simply to probe practitioners’ learning histories (including critical incidents) and to understand better their moments and zones of proximal development (ADD REF) in order that we could identify ways in which we could provide support for their development.

The interviews were followed up with three iterative individual interventions. Our approach was influenced by reflexive intervention approaches in sociology (Touraine, Bourdieu,

Melucci) where, in contrast to the consensual approach in focus groups (Hamal, 2001) researchers tease out differences in the group. The intervention method may be seen as a critical form of action research, its purpose being self-realization of group's capacities,

'To create understanding among collective actors of their potential for and role in social change' (Brincker & Gundelach, 2005: 368).

Nevertheless, our research cannot be described as fully interventionist since we employed several methods (critical/interventionist focus groups, individual interviews, individual follow-up interventions) whereas interventionist research properly constructed is limited to multiple interventionist focus groups.

Our research participants were drawn from professional bodies (who sent out calls for participation) in Central Scotland and the Highlands. The project involved liaison with professional bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and Public Relations Consultants' Association (PRCA) in Scotland and the use of CIPR databases within Scotland. CIPR publicised the study and helped to recruit participants, incentivising this by offering CPD points for participation in all stages.

Biographical data provided insights into career trajectories and progression, personal development opportunities, and promotion and conceptualizations of senior status within the occupation. Understanding the attitudes, behaviours and specific practices of PR practitioners in relation to research-based practice, including the evaluation of PR impacts, was important. The investigation sought to delineate how practitioners understand the connection between certain types of knowledge and expertise in relation to their linguistic and symbolic work and its societal impacts. The ways in which practitioners translate knowledge capital into discourse and influence was explored and the implications of this for professional standing and society more widely taken into consideration. Relationships among practitioners, specifically the nature of the community of practice and ideas about professionalism, professionalisation, the role of professional bodies and the notion of professional practice, were examined. Taking into consideration responses from initial informal conversations and more formal interviews and focus groups, the project made further critical interventions in the population with a small study sample, offering free choices about the form of intervention. These included personal journals, prescribed reading around identified issues, analytical exercises, and in all cases, reflective discussion. The overwhelming preference was for one-to-one follow-up tailored to needs identified by practitioners but contextualized conceptually by the research team to include key areas such as evaluation, creativity, and reflexive and critical thinking.

Insights and implications

As can be seen in the description and discussion of this project, the methodological implementation of our initial aims were challenging but facilitated new understandings of the research problem; led to revised understanding of research focus; and revision of ideas about what might happen in interventions, originally conceived as technical workshops, but realised as individual personal development through self-realization. Throughout the research process new and important questions emerged and came to dominate the project: where are the communities of practice senior PR practitioners participate in and learn with? What are the meta-level concepts and substantive concepts that inform the discipline? Where and what is the role of specialist knowledge? What models of professional development need to be put in place to be able to develop and support the learning that PR practice demands?

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