

# Research matters: framing and situating pedagogic research

DR RACHEL MASIKA AND DR ADRIAN CHOWN  
CENTRE FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

---

## Abstract

This editorial introduction frames the articles from the pedagogic research conference 2018 by highlighting the broader context in which pedagogic research operates, the opportunities, contested space and tensions as well as its multi-disciplinary nature. While pedagogic researchers use a range of theories, methods and methodologies, a common feature is the commitment to improve understanding and practices of learning and teaching. This diversity in approach is demonstrated by the different foci of the papers in this publication. The articles focus on enquiry that aims to better understand students' learning, engagement, experiences and outcomes, or considerations for the translation of these kinds of enquiry into articles in peer-reviewed journals for wider learning.

---

## Introduction

In a complex socio-political-economic academic context, pedagogic research and innovation are considered as contributing to solutions to teaching, learning and academic development challenges faced by universities. For example, Cartney (2015, p. 1,148) argues that 'pedagogic research offers opportunities to explore 'what works' in localised contexts and also to simultaneously raise issues of concern expressed by teachers and students - what doesn't work - placing all of these issues for debate within the broader academic community'. While Cartney makes the case for the opportunities pedagogic research presents for universities, she also acknowledges the contested space in which pedagogic research is undertaken and the tensions. Cartney (2015) has argued that pedagogic research exists and operates in both philosophically and economically contested spaces around what the role of universities is in contemporary times. Longer standing tensions of an unequal relationship between teaching and research and methodological/conceptual critiques of pedagogic research as a field of study are brought into sharper focus. Questions also arise about the relationship of pedagogic research and the consumerist/corporatist agendas taken on by universities. Such contextual issues warrant a brief revisiting of what pedagogic research entails in contested spaces.

Pedagogic research is sometimes referred to as 'educational enquiry', and is closely associated with *the scholarship of teaching and learning*, (Cleaver et al., 2018). Pedagogic research is not just undertaken by specialist academics and researchers in higher education departments or centres, but also encapsulates disciplinary research in education undertaken by, for example, sociologists, psychologists, doctors, engineers,

artists, architects, economists, philosophers and historians (Griffiths, 2004; Brown and Edmunds, 2011; D'Andrea and Gosling, 2003; Grove and Overton, 2013; Haigh et al., 2015; Tight, 2013). It is a multi-disciplinary endeavour in which researchers use a wide range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to understand and improve teaching and learning practices in their respective disciplines. This diversity of approach has raised questions about the distinctiveness of pedagogic research methods and methodology (Stierer and Antoniou, 2004; Tight, 2013). Stierer and Antoniou (2004, p. 275) suggest that 'the main defining feature of methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education is their diversity, and the opportunities they offer to combine conventional educational research methodologies with higher education teachers' disciplinary expertise and understandings'. Because the methods of enquiry, reporting styles and publication outlets chosen by practitioners tend to be characterised by their parent discipline they can be eclectic and pragmatic, but there is a common primary intention to improve pedagogic practice or advance pedagogic knowledge (Bassey, 1983). Pedagogic researchers see their efforts as steps towards the construction of a body of pedagogic propositions from which more effective teaching strategies can be developed (Wagner, 1990).

Contemporary pedagogic research raises three concerns: the extent to which research and teaching is integrated (Anwaruddin, 2015), the under-representation of pedagogic research in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Cotton et al., 2018) and where pedagogic research might focus to support students' education in a REF-TEF world (Kneale, 2018). Given the complex and contested spaces of higher education, pedagogic research can provide pointers, raise issues for consideration, and encourage professional reflexivity, albeit not necessarily providing all the answers (Cartney, 2015). One way of being part of this conversation is by disseminating findings of these educational enquiries for debate or considerations in improving teaching and learning practice. This requires translating research into publications and the integration of research and teaching through practice. While the translation/integration of research and teaching can provide ways of enhancing student learning experience, publicly communicating these links can be complex and challenging, given different practices of research-based education and research-informed teaching.

## The articles

Our keynote addresses the challenges faced in translating pedagogical research on practical challenges of teaching and learning into peer reviewed publications. **Dr Kathleen Quinlan** offers valuable advice and guidance regarding the ways in which pedagogical literature and theories of learning, teaching, motivation and curriculum can be used to frame local problems and questions so that they appeal to a wider audience. Drawing on her experiences as a reviewer for higher education journals and conversations with editors of two journals in the field, Quinlan presents three tips for moving from individual innovation and personal inquiry to publication.

First, it is important to frame pedagogical research problems in ways that are recognised beyond the researcher's immediate context so that innovations and lessons for teaching enhancement can be shared across the academic community. Second, the problems encountered in practice should be considered within a theoretical framework. Whether theory is regarded as interrelated concepts and assumptions or as a visual

representation that explains the key factors or variables to be studied, it plays in an important role in stimulating and guiding the further development of knowledge and in generating explanations. Third, it is helpful to think beyond evaluation designs, to enable going from the particular to allow consideration for more general mechanisms. In sum, moving from pedagogic research that focuses on one's teaching to publishing for a wide audience requires that the pedagogic research question is framed in terms that are recognisable to others.

Diagrammatic practices offer invaluable means for students in diverse disciplines to think through their own ideas and understandings, and those of others. **Paul Grivell** and **Claire Scanlon** present action research exploring the use of diagramming in higher education Art and Design. They seek to develop a praxis and present findings of their action research designed to develop productive and meaningful ways of engaging students in critical, theoretical ideas that inform and integrate with their visual practice. Some students develop a strong resistance to traditional presentations of theory, which can disengage them from some forms of learning. However, in many disciplines (for example geography, linguistics, marketing, architecture, psychology, education, economics, physics and semiotics) key processes and concepts are communicated in diagrams. Evoking the work of artists from the field of artistic research, Grivell and Scanlon describe how they creatively mix approaches adopted in diverse disciplines to develop 'indisciplined' diagrammatic forms that stimulate new insights and understanding.

**Dr Harry Witchel et al.**, explore the measurement of student engagement in the context of human-computer interaction through the level of fidgeting that occurs. The study provides a description and analysis of student engagement in relation to instrumental and non-instrumental inhibition. Movement is proposed as a proxy for engagement and data are presented to illustrate that 'students engage in different ways' which 'often do not match the narrow vision of engagement held by classroom teachers and espoused in existing research literature'. For example, proximity (mean distance to screen) has often been regarded as a measure of engagement. However, the study suggests that non-instrumental movement inhibition, embodied in fidgeting, is associated with engagement and not proximity. This has implications for understanding engagement in order to inform pedagogic theory and practice.

The learning experiences of first year, direct-entry undergraduate Physical Education students are the focus of **Dr Gillian Teideman's** study. Reflecting the complexities of the transition, her research illustrates the interconnected cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning. The mediational influences of perceptions of self are considered in relation to decision-making, orientation towards or away from opportunities, and the regulation of emotions and action. Different ways of 'becoming' or going about learning are presented that involve learning to control and manipulate the environment. Insights into the dynamic positionings of students as they develop understanding and become increasingly involved as members of a community of practice are elucidated with an argument that belonging needs to be regarded as a continuum that also considers not belonging. The interdependence of motivation and effect are also considered. Teideman also presents examples of good practice that include practical pedagogies adapted for use in a lecture theatre, opportunities for collaboration, time to practise, embed and apply knowledge alongside timely and meaningful feedback.

**Dr Hazel Horobin** and **Sue Wheatley** argue that interprofessional learning events can help students to better understand the need for professional collaboration in contemporary working practices, and to practise their own collaborative abilities. In their evaluation of an interprofessional learning event involving occupational therapists and physiotherapists, they consider the planning, implementation and structure of the sessions as well as staff and student evaluative feedback. The ability of students to work in teams and across professional boundaries is a central theme and it is emphasised that students need to be made aware of this at an early stage of their learning. This evaluative enquiry suggests that interprofessional learning events can foster links between lecturers and students from different professions, promoting their ability to work in multi-professional teams and across professional boundaries.

## Conclusion

The articles presented reflect pedagogic researchers' primary aim of improving practice and advancing pedagogic knowledge (Bassey, 1983), making visible some of the challenges of teaching and learning, and the opportunities for enhancement. The diversity of the issues to which they attend exemplify the richness of pedagogic research conducted within the contested spaces of higher education. While they do not provide all the answers to the challenges to which pedagogic research attends and tensions inherent in the context in which it operates, each in their own way advances the conversation about particular aspects of learning and teaching and share thoughts for enhancements to improve students' experiences.

## Bibliography

- Anwaruddin, S.M. (2015) Teachers' Engagement with Educational Research: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Locally-Based Interpretive Communities. *Education policy analysis archives*, vol. 23, no. 40.
- Bassey, M. (1983) 'Pedagogic Research into Singularities: case-studies, probes and curriculum innovations'. *Oxford Review of Education* 9, pp. 109–121.
- Brown, G., Edmunds, S. (2011) *Doing pedagogical research in engineering*. Loughborough: Engineering Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.
- Cartney, P. (2015) 'Researching pedagogy in a contested space'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45, pp. 1137–1154.
- Cleaver, E., Lintern, M. and McLinden, M. (2018) *Teaching and learning in higher education: Disciplinary approaches to educational enquiry*. Sage.
- Cotton, D., Miller, W. and Kneale, P. (2018) 'The Cinderella of academia: Is higher education pedagogic research undervalued in UK research assessment?' *Studies in Higher Education*, 43, 1625–1636.
- D'Andrea, V.-M., Gosling, D. (2003) Promoting research in teaching and learning in higher education: two case studies of multi-disciplinary pedagogic research.
- Griffiths, R. (2004) 'Knowledge production and the research-teaching nexus: The case of the built environment disciplines'. *Studies in Higher education*, 29, pp. 709–726.
- Grove, M. and Overton, T. (2013) *Getting Started in Pedagogic Research within the STEM Disciplines*. University of Birmingham.

- Haigh, M., Cotton, D. and Hall, T. (2015) 'Pedagogic research in geography higher education'. *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 39, no. 3. pp 299-312.
- Kneale, P. E. (2018) 'Where might pedagogic research focus to support students' education in a REF-TEF world'. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, pp. 1-11.
- Stierer, B. and Antoniou, M. (2004) 'Are there distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education?' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9, pp. 275-285.
- Tight, M. (2013) 'Discipline and methodology in higher education research. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32, pp. 136-151.
- Wagner, J. (1990) 'Bricolage and Teachers' Theorizing'. *Anthropology and education quarterly* 21, pp. 78-81.

### Biographies

**Dr Rachel Masika** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre of Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton. She co-chairs the organising committee of the annual pedagogic research conference, 'Enhancing Higher Education Through Research' and co-edits *Research Matters*. Her main research interests relate to equity and inclusivity in higher education. She is currently researching rural students' transitions into and through higher education in South Africa, and is involved in an institutional project evaluating process and experiences related to curriculum design initiatives.

**Dr Adrian Chown** at the time of writing was a Senior Lecturer in educational and professional development at the Centre of Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton and co-chair of the annual pedagogic research conference. He also co-edited *Research Matters*. His main research interest is the work and learning of academic staff, and the development of socio-cultural perspectives on professional learning.

---