

# From intuition to evidence

The value of practitioner researchers in higher education

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The quality of the student experience can bestow significant economic value on a higher education institution (HEI). With the recognition that ‘teaching is the most impactful thing we do as academics’ (Hornsby, 2017) it is unsurprising that academics are required to gather data, reflect on impact and consider the actions and outcomes associated with teaching. While many academics engage in evaluative processes and some colleagues additionally engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning, not all will launch pedagogic research projects or disseminate their new knowledge. This is despite routinely triangulating data and potentially engaging in hypothesis testing regarding the efficacy of their pedagogic practices, as part of what some believe to be a ‘fundamental and ethical motivation for understanding what works well and what doesn’t’ (Austin & Jones Devitt, 2020).

Those moving into HE from practice-based disciplines may perceive themselves as having less research experience. However, Morris et al. (2023) report that over 80 per cent of respondents to their education researcher workforce survey had previous careers in teaching, and so many will be well-versed in drawing on evidence to engage in professionally focused reflective practice and will have had to demonstrate engagement with research as a core competency of registration. This cohort can make a valuable contribution to research and hold expert knowledge about practice. Practitioners recognise that research-focused colleagues hold expert knowledge about research and that research can make a valuable contribution to practice. The two approaches can readily co-exist but aside from mutual appreciation of the strengths of each, the value of the work needs

to be given equal recognition, noting that both groups are generating an evidence base with the shared goal of improving practice.

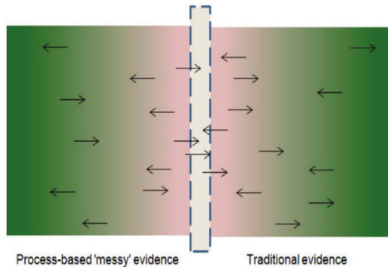
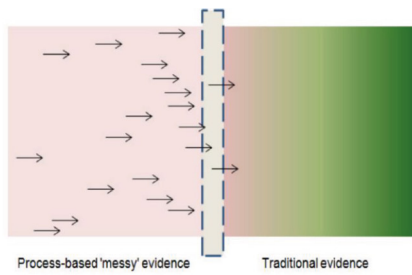
Schön (1987) suggested an analogy to describe the challenge of linking traditional educational research design to practice, with research-based knowledge perceived as occupying a high hill overlooking real-life problems of the practice-based swampy marshlands. Many more colleagues now view themselves as practitioner researchers and so in academia there is a need to recognise a third space: one located neither on the hill nor in the swamp but a space which allows flexible approaches to co-constructed research, and which relays an understanding that the methodologies that suit the swampy marshlands are deserving of place on the hill.

More recently, recognition of the often messy approach to practitioner research which draws on a wider variety of data sources is becoming supported and valued. As the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland’s guidance suggests, methodological choices for practice-focused educational researchers may not align with ‘the dominance of numerical measurement data (which is too often read in isolation from other kinds of evidence..)’ but instead support the osmosis analogy (figure 1) now in play between traditional and messy approaches to evidence (Austin & Jones Devitt, 2020, p. 2).

HEIs should be fostering opportunities for practitioner research focused on a range of pedagogies and methodologies to interact with more traditional research and messy approaches, allowing colleagues to

### The Norm

- Limited routes for 'messy' evidence
- Minimal absorption into traditional approaches and practices
- No permeability of the traditional within process-based forms of evidence
- Minimal changes to saturation density, i.e. nothing changes



### The Future?

- Fusion of process-based and traditional evidence approaches
- Possible absorption and valuing of lots of approaches
- Fully permeable
- Equalising of saturation density resulting in much learning and progress.

Figure 1: From Austin & Jones Devitt (2020, p. 20)

collaborate and co-create to produce high impact output; investment is also required to help with adjusting the focus on both research and practice to inform pedagogy (Evans et al., 2021). The Research Excellence Framework REF2021 report (REF, 2022) demonstrated that there was no strong association between particular empirical or more traditional methods or approaches with research excellence, or evidence of impact. Practitioner researchers, those that move between hill and swamp with grace, deserve to see the merit of their work being acknowledged, for example during promotion processes and through professional development and institutional support. The desire to improve the perceived value of evidence-informed practice aligns with Fung and Gordon's (2016, p. 8) recommendation that 'research-intensive institutions articulate the value of the contribution made by education-focused scholarship to the institution's evidence-base for developing practice'.

The advent of exercises like the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) coupled with league table positions driven by National Student Survey metrics means that increasingly academics are expected to evidence the impact of their teaching activities. But we must ask how practitioner researchers are valued – not just associating value with the act of engaging in teaching activities, but how close-to-practice research output is identified and pointed to by an institution as an example of research excellence. Evans et al. (2021) propose an impact framework that could go some way to support practitioner researchers to identify the excellence of their work. It highlights pragmatism and rigour as essential to quality and suggests that practitioner researchers, or integrated academics, should engage in professional development which requires bridging of research methods and pedagogical training. There is also space for collaboration between people with

different kinds of expertise in research and/or practice which could be more systematically developed through a 'careful construction of a clear and shared research agenda' (Kelchtermans, 2021, p. 4). Practitioner researchers link the teaching and learning space more clearly with research agendas, adding significant impact and value. One institution noted that small pots of internal funding to support pedagogic research projects quadrupled dissemination activity in a five-year period and provided case studies for TEF and other quality exercises (Cameron et al., 2020). If, as practitioners, teaching is the most impactful thing we do in an HEI then might practitioner research be the most impactful research we do?

If you are a practitioner researcher you may like to consider joining BERA's Practitioner Research special interest group: [www.bera.ac.uk/community/practitioner-research](http://www.bera.ac.uk/community/practitioner-research)

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