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Pioneering Pathways: Founding Editors' Perspectives on the 10th Anniversary of the Journal

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Introduction

Linda Martindale and Helen Buchanan, members of the editorial team for this Anniversary Issue of the International Journal of Practice-based Learning in Health and Social Care, undertook this interview with Lynn Clouder and Jill Thistlethwaite in May 2023. The interview was transcribed verbatim and subsequently edited for publication. In this, Lynn Clouder and Jill Thistlethwaite first reflect on the journal's origins, and the gap it filled for publications about practice-based learning across health and social care professions. They discuss how the journal has developed over time, and what their hopes are for the next 10 years as the practice-based learning space continues to evolve and innovate.

Tell us about how the journal was started and what was the motivation for setting it up in the first place?

LC: It was a conversation between myself and Professor Ann Moore, who was then at Brighton University, and was heavily involved in research in manual therapy. She was an editor of the Journal of Manual Therapy. The conversation was around how we could really do with a journal that focuses on practice-based learning. She knew that I was an advocate of practice-based learning, and at that time I was external examiner for the programme down at Brighton that all of their educators did - Masters modules to equip them with the skills to be practice educators. And as someone who always sat on the cusp between health professional education and education, it's always been difficult to find places to publish my work. I thought actually I can see there is a place for a journal that does focus on thinking about practice-based aspects of education for health and social care professionals. So the juxtaposition of all of the issues in health and the research that goes on around clinical activity, with the important aspect of learning how to be a health professional and the skills and mentoring people need to become health professionals and education per se. I met with people from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) who had a number of journals in lots of different disciplines and were interested in the idea of something looking at practice-based learning in health and social care, and they had all of the infrastructure to support a new journal. And so it was a case of thinking, can I take this on? It felt like quite a big

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commitment, but I needed other people to work with. So I think that I approached one or two people, one of whom was Jill.

JT: Well ... one of the things I really enjoyed was being involved in journals and I've been involved in a few. I think the attraction for me of this journal was first of all, it was starting, so we had a lot more of a personal interest. This was to be from our own personal backgrounds as opposed to either working with another editor or taking something that had already got a name and a background and a feel. So that was good. And I'm always very interested in the different ways that journals are presented and the infrastructure behind them, so it was good to feel we're having something to say about how this is going to work. But yeah, when you start, it's even more the case now, there's a lot of journals out there. And it's interesting, Lynn, when you say that you hadn't really got some way you could publish what you were doing. You know, there's a lot of journals out there, but there's never quite the right one. It's a bit like all these tools and instruments that keep appearing. You think there's so many of them, but it's not quite the one we want. So, it was a chance to do something new, really. And because the HEA was going to do it, it wasn't something you had to think 'We're putting money into this', and 'how do we get the money back'? So we weren't thinking about subscription costs and considerations like that. Some of that hard business part of it, we didn't have to think about in the same way.

I think that would be very difficult these days because of the money that is behind journals and having been involved in one journal for quite a while, meeting publishers, things have changed so much now. One of the great things about the practice-based learning journal was it became open access really early on. And that's something that now is spreading everywhere and there'll be very few non open access journals within the next couple of years. So the great thing is you're not worried about can I get into this? Who's got a subscription? Does our library subscribe? Can I find it somewhere or can someone send me a copy? It's really great it's open to everybody easily. That was a good one for me.

From each of your perspectives, how do you think that journal has developed and changed and grown in the past ten years?

LC: Well, the first thing was that the HEA had a big reorganization (after one year) and their funded journals were just cut. And in effect, most of those HEA funded journals I think went to the wall. But having just got ours off the ground and having worked really hard to get people interested and get publications I thought it would be such a shame for it to fold. At that time we had someone at Coventry who is a writing expert who had set up a journal on writing and had got to grips with the Open Journal system. And I was talking to her one day and she suggested thinking about the Open Journal system. And I thought, well what's that! And fortunately, she'd had the support of our IT services to download the open access software, and they'd helped her learn how to use it. And so I thought, well, it seems viable and if we've got people in IT that can help, maybe this is an option. So that is how we moved on to stand alone without the HEA. We then had to negotiate with the HEA to get the back copy of the first two issues of the journal and that was a legal process. We had to make sure that we were legally taking this copy and you will see even now that the HEA is mentioned against those two issues of the journal. I think a lot of people were very sad that the HEA were willing to let the journals go. But we decided to continue and that set us off on our own track. It felt a bit scary, but, with the help of the IT department and my colleague, we started to navigate how to actually put the journal together.

JT: I suppose my question is, how you managed the resourcing, because other journals that I've been involved with, or I'm involved with now, are not non-profit - they're making money somewhere along the line. So I just wonder if there's any vulnerability going forward in terms of resourcing and support?

LC: The National Association of Educators in Practice were very generous. I think they started off giving us something like 1,000 pounds a year to help with some of the costs and that went up slightly over time. So we were getting seed corn money, running it on a shoestring really. But the university, well, these costs are hidden, aren't they? Interestingly, the university has now got its own publishing house; it's decided that actually this is a good thing to do, and maybe we should be encouraging students to write more and publish more. And the journal now is seen as something that's ahead of the others, including those that were there originally. We got to the stage where we eventually got Scopus recognition and we have a sustained record, so now the journal's actually quite well-known in the university.

JT: It's interesting, the open access and the person who suggested considering open access because for most journals, the open access model is based on the pay to publish paradigm. Given the university has got a publishing house now, is there a possibility that [this] might become some way that the journal is funded?

LC: I don't think there's any intention to charge. You'd be amazed at the number of emails I get asking, 'I'm interested in your journal, how much will it cost me to publish?' And I always say 'it's free to read, free to publish'. Obviously there are costs - we've got a publication team. We've got two colleagues who work with us from the library. We had a technical editor who was paid as an independent consultant, and then she came to work in the university in the Centre for Global Education. She was covering that editorial work within her role. But now the library are actually covering proofing and copy editing and allocating DOIs. So there are costs involved but it's seen as something that the university should be doing. So I don't think there's any sense in which we'll charge. We have had lots of approaches from publishers saying we note that your journal is publishing well and is a regular item and are you interested in coming into our suite of journals? We quite regularly get approached - I would say probably six or seven times a year I'll get emails from different sets of publishing houses.

JT: That could be expensive.

LC: Yeah, exactly. At the minute, the ethos of the journal is very much about trying to get people published, supporting people who perhaps otherwise wouldn't get published. And I don't think that would be acceptable to some of the mainstream publishers.

What do you think the key developments have been in practice-based learning since the journal began and how has that been reflected in the journal?

LC: I think the journal provided an outlet for professions that really hadn't been able to share their approaches to practice-based learning. So I'm thinking about professions such as speech and language therapy. They'd never ever written about practice-based learning and suddenly there was an outlet for them. I don't know how their practice has developed because it's only more recently that they've been publishing. I wonder whether there are certain areas of practice-based learning that I don't think have moved on. And I think I've written about this in editorials in the past, thinking, is it the same old, same old? We've gone through the different models of clinical education; we've gone through the ideas about remote placements and alternative placements. A lot of that is from occupational therapy I have to say; we can always trust OTs to think of it laterally. There's been various different moves over time, but a lot of it is very much an apprenticeship model, a one-to-one relationship of mentorship. COVID obviously threw things up in the air. So we've really seen potential changes, but there's always that sense that people want to go back to what was, isn't there? And I really wonder whether, given that placements are always difficult to find, and I'm sure that they are equally as difficult to find now as they were ten years ago, what sorts of experiences are people really having and are they really learning as best as they can? Simulation has come along - that's been a big change I think, and the extent to which people can learn from simulation as opposed to working with real life patients. I think that probably today's students have to get more au fait with dealing with complexity because I think that generally people needing care, particularly in the acute sector, are more sick. So whereas you could choose a patient for a student with one kind of problem, you're probably sending students in now to deal with much more complex problems. And how you prepare them for that is an interesting challenge.

JT: It's very interesting when you look back so soon - it's only ten years, so some things have got better, some things have got worse. There's a lot more students now and there's almost competition for that one-to-oneness, particularly in medical education, which is what I know most about - medical education and interprofessional education. So there's a pressure in the system at a time when the system itself is under pressure. And I'm talking about Australia and the UK, and other countries I'm sure as well. But we know what's happening to the NHS and in Australia, when a system is under pressure one of the things that gets pressed most is education because people don't have the same time to give the learners and so sometimes their learning experiences aren't as good as you'd like. Even though there are payments for students to go into various places, a lot of the system still has a lot of practice-based learning based around altruism and people giving their time, which isn't necessarily protected. This is the same in many countries - Canada, Australia, the UK, English speaking countries that I know most about. So I think that the systems pressures are really part of the problem.

And I think in terms of writing and research and evaluation in this area, I think we're still mainly stuck in the system where we're doing short-term one institution projects which are vulnerable to changes of leadership and changes of funding, rather than those bigger picture activities where we're really grappling with, how can we make this better? And if I look at interprofessional education, it's always come and gone. It's always the best thing ever until it's no longer there. I think that slowly, very slowly it's becoming more a part of the landscape and more accreditation is looking at interprofessional education and saying it has to happen. So I think we have advanced in ten years, but probably not as far as we should have. And I'd also be interested in learning what you think because in Australia we usually talk about work-integrated learning, and how you see the fit with practice-based learning would be interesting. So we have professors of work-integrated learning around the place now.

LC: We do talk about integrated care and I've written about integrated care. But it's interesting because having had two elderly parents who have now sadly passed on, and experiencing it as an advocate for them, we're a long way away from providing integrated care. And educating people for integrated care is tricky when actually integrated care seems to be an ideal, but not actually necessarily working as well as it might.

JT: Well it seems that no one can agree what it means, can they? I've just written something about this ... it can just mean anything to anyone really.

LC: I think nobody can disagree with the idea. It's really important to understand what other professions do, what their roles are, how you're going to work with them, whether you call it inter-professional working or integrated care - nobody can argue against that. But it's so difficult to achieve, isn't it? It just feels like it's so difficult because people want to be ... you know 'I want to be a doctor', 'I want to be a nurse' And actually that was something that you really brought to the journal, Jill, you really emphasized the interprofessional aspects of it. I don't think we've had so many articles more recently that have focused on interprofessional aspects. They do tend to be more profession specific.

JT: I don't know if that's because of your readership or because there are slightly more journals which accept interprofessional education now, including the uni-professional ones. You see interprofessional papers in the nursing journals and medical education journals and so on. So it's hard to know that whole thing about where do you choose to publish? And what are you actually looking for? Are you looking for the high impact factor journals? Or are you actually looking at something that nurtures you and is open access really. So that's quite interesting.

There are so many academic journals out there, so what makes the International Journal of Practice-based Learning special, and what does it bring that's different to other journals in this area?

LC: We wanted the journal to be international. I think it's fair to say that we've had authors predominantly from the UK, Australia, one or two from Canada, one or two from America, but more recently we have had a greater spread. So the word is actually getting out there. I think that we now are truly international. Part of that is actually being open to articles that aren't written in perfect English, where English isn't the authors first language. Sometimes you think 'well this is going to need an awful lot of work', but we haven't rejected them on that basis. I think one of the special things about the journal is we are friendly. We try to provide very constructive feedback. And I know that's not just us, other journals do the same, but we do try to encourage people who are perhaps first-time publishers to improve their articles. However sometimes you've just got to be frank and say 'this isn't going to hit the mark'. Generally, we really try with people down to the point where you're actually rewording things for somebody who really can't. It's tricky really, and obviously we want to appeal to practice. We don't want to just appeal to people who are interested in theorizing practice-based learning; we want people to share their ideas from practice and students to share their ideas from practice. And we recently had a student article published. Very first time they've published anything and they were very excited about it. It's really nice to think that you've actually helped people who potentially might be really well-known authors of the future. So, we might not be the journal that people are going to seek if they want to be REF-able [submitted to the UK's Research Excellence Framework] and world-leading but I think we are fulfilling a niche from that point of view and that we are actually doing something for people who are interested in what happens on the ground and want to write from a grass-roots perspective.

JT: I'd say that's how I would see the journal. And I agree with you, Lynn, because I've just caught up with a few issues to get ready for his interview and there's certainly less interprofessional, I did notice that, but there is quite a spread of things. I suppose, because it's a kind of theme within journals at the moment, there are first-time authors and there are people from other countries or non-English speaking backgrounds, so I'm just wondering what the diversity agenda is. There's that push around editorial boards for authors who come from those harder to reach communities, and sometimes it's hard looking at authors and so on to know about that. I was just wondering if that's something you're concerned about or if it's going okay.

LC: I think in terms of ethnicity and country spread, I think it's really pleasing. In terms of gender I suppose a lot of the professions are predominantly female. We try and yeah, the word gets out, doesn't it. It's really difficult to know how to promote the journal. We all have networks; we all try to promote it. It gets promoted through the National Association of Educators in Practice. We've had a few articles from medicine where the authors tend to be male. Also social work. Any suggestions about how we improve diversity will be very welcome.

JT: I was thinking of the editorial board and special issues. When I was editor of *The Clinical Teacher* we had a special issue on diversity, inclusion and equity. So not only did we get a more diverse authorship, but we actually got articles about that as well, which might be quite interesting in the practice arena around diversity as well. And I know you've had special issues at the moment on COVID, but that might be a thought to specifically ask people to write in those areas.

Do you have a favourite or memorable article from the journal that's been a stand-out contribution to the evidence base? What makes it special?

LC: I had to go through some of the issues and I thought, well actually I'd have to think about an issue. And the issue that stands out for me is the threshold concepts issue - which Linda and colleagues edited - because threshold concepts has been an interest of mine for a long while. It just felt like there was a real call to bring together articles around this, because we had a special interest group in threshold concepts in health and there were lots of people really interested in it. It felt like it was a good opportunity to lift the conversation to a theoretical level. Threshold concepts is so accessible. People understand them, which is why they grasp on to them because they feel so sensible. And that issue stands out for me. To identify one paper would be really tricky, but that issue certainly was quite a landmark issue.

What are your hopes for the next ten years of the journal?

LC: I might be retiring from some of my commitments, so I'll be looking for someone else to take over the journal. That's my plan for the next ten years - ten years is a long time actually.

JT: It's all about succession planning and having some time to work together, like deputy editor or editor in waiting, so that they understand what it is about the journal, that you want to keep but also bring their own personality to it.

LC: I'd really like things to be a bit more innovative, but that's not about the journal, that's about practice. It would be lovely to be publishing articles that were really doing some sound research on some really good innovative practices that have the potential to change things. In fact someone, a few weeks ago was asking about the focus for a doctorate and where did I think there were gaps? I suggested a need for some solid work on cost-benefit. It would be really hard to do, I know it would, the idea of cost-benefit analysis of practice-based learning. I think there was some work done in the UK years and years ago, it might have been in physio and OT, but I'm not aware of much since, that really looks at the hard cost benefits. Because there's always this thing about practice-based learning, we're always on the back foot and begging for placements and it can feel like an imposition on practitioners who are busy and tired and stressed and all the rest of it. So I think some cost-benefit analysis work would be really good to publish. But also, broadening the scope so that you've got perspectives from various different countries around the world. So much must be going on in the ASEAN area, for instance. We don't always have the best practice in the UK or Australia or what have you. And it would be really good to hear about different practices and how things work. So, I think there's lots more work to do.

JT: I think that what students are allowed to do in different countries while they're learners in practice, is quite fascinating. In the US, you have student-run clinics in communities where people don't have insurance and the students are basically running these clinics. There aren't the issues around insurance; there's always someone qualified around, but you can't do that in Australia, and it would be very difficult to do it in the UK. In medicine, I was allowed to do a lot more as a student than students are now. So there's that very difficult thing about how to prepare people for practice.

So we put all this practice-based learning in and yet on the first day as a qualified professional, they're still, 'oh my God'. And I think that varies across the professions, which is another interesting thing. How you actually prepare someone for that first day of practice is still unknown really. What do other countries do? I just think that they give people more responsibility more quickly. But there's all sorts of caveats behind that as well.

I think the cost thing is very interesting because there have been a few papers which have looked at how much some things cost. But then return on investment from the cost is harder to measure. You think, well if you didn't have practice-based learning because it was too expensive, how could you actually train your health professionals? Is it all going to be in simulation lab, which is probably more expensive. So, there's that pragmatic part about how we have to put people in the workplace, otherwise they're just going to be less ready to cope when they qualify. This is now becoming an issue because of the COVID generation who've had much less real patient contact. And they're now either just starting work or in their last clinical years. And they're really struggling in some ways to be able to manage what they're supposed to do.

With that whole thing about looking in the future, we tend to think there'll be more of the same, but as members of health care teams we've got the use of artificial intelligence and robots and things like that; how do we assimilate these? As a publisher, chatbots, ChatGPT, all of them, plagiarism scanning, who's writing what, how do you identify that, is it as good, does it matter? And educators are grappling with that with student work as well. Practice-based assessment is harder to hide behind for AI, but written assignments we've got a lot to grapple with. And that's only going to get worse.

Is there anything else that we've missed or you'd like to tell us about?

LC: I suppose just to say that we are heavily reliant on some wonderful people who are willing to act as reviewers for the journal. And sometimes you go back to the ones who you know you can rely on again and again because it's getting harder and harder to get people to commit to reviewing because everybody is so busy. Things have speeded up somehow, certainly post COVID. The people who are willing to review, we're deeply indebted to them because we couldn't do it without them.

JT: I'm glad you brought that up because that's a major issue. There's more journals, there's more papers, there's lower quality. I think editors need to triage their papers better rather than sending out some articles to reviewers. The reviewer workforce is an unpaid altruistic group of people. I don't think it's sustainable and I turn a lot down now, just because I get asked to do so many. You get reviewer burnout.

I also think we should get rid of blinding, I really do. I think that's happening gradually. And getting students and younger colleagues to become reviewers means you can have a less experienced reviewer and a more experienced and then they can learn from each other's reviews. I think it's a really good model.

Final thoughts

The International Journal of Practice-based Learning in Health and Social Care emerged from serendipitous conversations, along with fortuitous funding support and sheer grit and determination. Over the past decade, the journal has developed into a truly international platform for authors to share their insights and experiences on practice-based learning. Our reviewers have played a pivotal role in the development of the journal and sustaining its quality. The next decade holds promise for showcasing innovative, ground-breaking practices that could revolutionise the landscape of practice-based learning.

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