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Editorial

A recent report commissioned by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) focuses on ‘close to practice’ research and this is the kind of action and practitioner research championed by the Practitioner Research in Higher Education journal (Wise, Brown, Oliver & Pobletta, 2018). The recommendations included two that are particularly significant for university-based educational practitioner researchers:

- Articulate strategies and career development opportunities for close-to-practice researchers in universities that are likely to support the development of their methodological knowledge.
- Engage with senior figures in universities to raise awareness of high-quality CtP research and its potential in REF-related university processes.

The PRHE journal was founded with the intention of supporting development of practitioner researchers across the higher education sector and so we would strongly support the report’s recommendations in relation to persuading senior leadership teams in universities to recognise and support practitioner research activity and ensure that it is valued within institutional pathways for workload, recognition and promotion. The PRHE journal contributes to practitioner research capacity development by publishing research but also professional inquiry papers that report more pragmatic evaluation of innovative practice based on and positioned within underpinning research (Boyd & White, 2017).

The BERA report focused in particular on action research and identified the characteristics of some of the action research papers considered to be ‘weaker’ as:

- findings that were too descriptive
- research that was under-theorised
- small-scale of the study not offset by depth of analysis and/or theorisation
- lack of detail in the description of the methodology and methods of the study

These pointers are helpful and we would advocate them to authors and reviewers of PRHE journal papers. The call to encourage development of methodological knowledge and a wider range of research methods seems helpful and the explicit focus of the report on research quality is useful. However, by strongly referencing the Research Excellence Framework (REF) as a guide to quality (the REF is the UK research audit for the higher education sector) the report creates the impression that the field we are concerned with is ‘educational research’ whereas the relevant field for our close to practice research is ‘teaching’. The report does discuss the value placed on practitioner and action research within the research audit as a key issue. Such close to practice research may include a significant effort to involve practitioners as co-researchers rather than merely participants. It is particularly significant when such co-researchers contribute to collaborative data analysis in attempts to co-create knowledge and develop socially and contextually robust ‘mode 2’ knowledge (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). Perhaps more attention within the BERA report to the ‘research impact’ element of the REF research audit criteria would have been useful in this regard.

This issue of PRHE presents six papers. Four of the studies involve students in professional fields, three of the studies make innovative use of technology to support learning, and all of the papers are connected to aspects of assessment and feedback.

In the first paper, JT Torres uses Bakhtin's thinking on identity formation through dialogue to ask how student teachers engage with feedback to shape their identities as school teachers. The analysis shows how student teachers 'borrow' the language of tutors to author themselves in the world as school teachers. The implications include that tutors need to be sensitive to context and discourse in considering how their feedback influence identity formation by students.

In the second paper, David Lawson evaluates the use of a research questionnaire as a diagnostic development tool with undergraduate students in a professional field. 'Re-purposing' of a research instrument is not always straightforward or appropriate, but in this evaluation it is argued that the activity helped students to self-assess their needs and identify goals while tutors were able to signpost them to relevant sources of learning support.

In the third paper Anna Maria Ducasse and Kathryn Hill evaluate an attempt to enhance engagement by undergraduate students with tutor feedback. Using e-portfolio and mobile digital recording technology the project attempts to create a 'reflective feedback conversation' around tutor feedback on student writing. Students are required to self-assess and to respond to subsequent tutor feedback and then negotiate with tutors concerning their goal setting informed by feedback. The analysis provides some evidence of progress in developing students as self-regulated learners.

In the fourth paper, Rachel Simpson and Catherine Reading use action research to investigate how first year undergraduate student teachers develop skills of evaluative judgment and of giving feedback to peers in an authentic professional assessment activity based on microteaching. The study considered the development of 'graduate attributes' which seem sometimes to be overlooked on professional education programmes.

In the fifth paper, Constantinos Demonacos, Steven Ellis and Jill Barber, investigate the use of adaptive comparative judgment for peer assessment and feedback by final year undergraduate pharmacy students. Software to support judgment was made the project feasible for a large body of student work. The study highlights the significance of developing assessment criteria and shared understanding by tutors and students, even when using adaptive comparative judgment.

In the final paper, Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi and Eszter Tarsoly provide a thought-provoking and careful analysis of their use of 'Google Translate™' with language students. The study distinguishes between using a translation tool to 'get the job done' or to support language learning. As well as developing their language skills the students became more critical users of translation tools.

References

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