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**The Nature of Practitioner Research:  
Critical distance, power and ethics**

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**Abstract**

Researching within one's place of practice allows the researcher to have the unique position of knowing the participants and the research context. The relationship the participants have with the researcher will impact upon the disclosure of information differently than research conducted by someone outside the area of practice. This can be a benefit and a drawback for the participants, the area of practice and the researcher. However, as is demonstrated within this paper, the role the researcher adopts throughout the process of gathering information is not always clear. As a student on the Doctorate of Education programme myself, the nature of practitioner research and the complexities of this type of research is of great interest to me. Beginning to develop my own research project through this taught programme has allowed an opportunity to think through these challenges and wrestle with the complexity and contradiction, dilemma and incongruity which emerges from being a researching practitioner. Within this piece it is suggested that these quandaries can be considered from the perspective of critical distance, relationships and power and ethical considerations. The idea of considering these conflicts reflexively will be explored here. Although this discussion was not based on empirical research findings as such, it is anticipated that this piece will further the understanding of practitioner research in higher education from the position of being a student and through scholastic analysis of the Ed D programme providing a particular perspective on the nature of research.

**Keywords**

Research; practitioner; ethics; practice; positionality; reflexivity, power.

**Introduction**

*The Nature of Practitioner Research*

Practitioner research can be defined as research that is carried out by someone who has expertise and insight into the people and the settings being researched. The practitioner researcher has deep and intimate information and insight into the stakeholders, context and practices of a community where the research is being undertaken (Drake and Heath, 2011). The researcher often develops a research interest from a personal perspective as well as from professional insights into the field. Practitioner researchers are also referred to as insider researchers, researching practitioners or action researchers; however, the term practitioner researcher will be used for the purposes of this discussion. Professional practice takes place in settings

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which allow practitioners to apply knowledge and generate it in several instances. Practitioner researchers cannot only apply the results of academic research in practice but also can start to define the kinds of knowledge which are already embedded in competent practice (Schön, 1995). The position of the practitioner researcher is laden with complexity and contradiction, dilemma and incongruity and can be considered from the perspective of critical distance, creation of new knowledge, relationships and ethics. The complexity and the critical position of this role as well as how to consider these conflicts reflexively will be explored here.

Often researchers participating in the taught doctoral programmes have to contend with the issues present in this paper. The aim of undertaking research as part of a Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) degree is to answer personally relevant and context specific research questions through the support and guidance of undertaking modules at doctoral level with the ultimate goal of initiating change in practice (Lester, 2004). Thus begins the dilemma between the relevancy and reliability of knowledge gained by the practitioner through experience and the knowledge gained from the institution of the university. The understanding and knowledge gained from the postgraduate modules inform and influence the research on practice. As part of the doctoral process embedded within university structures and practices, it is essential for practitioner researchers to contribute to the body of knowledge in the researcher's area of expertise by creating 'new' knowledge to meet the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks for doctoral work (QAA, 2011).

### **Critical distance**

Practitioner researchers have often been criticised for a lack of critical distance from their work often leading to conclusions which can be, in the field of objective research, critiqued for a lack of creditability and validity (Saunders, 2007). Also inherent in this type of research is the fact that the types of practitioners who come to this kind of research often have been thinking about the research topic for several years bringing with them a host of assumptions and ideas of what they want to find out and usually already having a theoretical stance for the project (Drake and Heath, 2011; Wellington and Sikes, 2006). Therefore, one of the greatest challenges practitioner researchers face is bridging the gap and integrating the knowledge between what they know to be true in their own practice and what they have learned as result of study at the highest academic level at university.

A reason why practitioner researchers may find it difficult to stay objective throughout the research project is because of the nature of learning at work. Learning in the workplace can be considered 'situated learning' as it is not only about acquiring the skills needed to be successful but acquiring skills for work which are inextricably woven into the social and cultural context of the workplace (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, all learning which occurs at work is constructed because of social interactions and the culture of workplace rooted deeply within it. By participating in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) practitioners can learn what is necessary and they start to internalise a shared history and culture of the workplace. Communities of practice are always in flux as new people join and others leave and where more experienced practitioners help

with the acquisition of new knowledge and practice stimulating change and development for members. Professional doctoral researchers are learning in at least two different communities of practice- one within their workplace and one within the institution of the university, both of which value different types of knowledge. This difference of values could be a source of contradiction and dilemma requiring thought and diplomatic navigation for the researcher. Therefore, the very essence of a practitioner, their values and beliefs on a deep level have been shaped and moulded by the environments within which they have worked and learned, so much so that even they may not be aware of how their experiences have shaped their own attitudes. Optimistically, however, practitioner researchers have the advantage of carrying out research in a familiar setting meaning that advanced levels of communication can be reached and depth of research can be obtained (Hockey, 1994). The level of advantage or disadvantage to the research is highly individualised based on perspective, the research topic, the setting and the researcher's relationship to the participants.

I have worked in higher education for four years and as part of my role look after a specific population of students. The learning that happens for these students formulates my topic of consideration for research on the Ed.D. with the aim of being able to initiate changes to enhance their experiences based on my findings. Because I am part of the management team at my place of work, my concern is to maintain the critical distance necessary to remain detached and objective in the research process. I clearly believe strongly in the purpose of my role within my workplace or I would not have sought my position and would not be working so hard to support the students with whom I work. All of these values and beliefs will penetrate my research and will be difficult to separate from the questions I ask my participants and the way that I interpret the data I gather. I can anticipate it may be challenging to remain completely objective in my interpretation of the data; so critical distance or a lack thereof is a factor of which I will have to be aware in designing and carrying out this piece of research.

### **Creation of new knowledge**

Research is mainly concerned with knowledge construction. The researcher in conjunction with the participants is engaged in producing knowledge. This process requires scrutiny of the data as well as reflection of the researcher, the researched and the context in which they inhabit (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 2003). The philosophical debate of 'what is knowledge' and can it ever be 'new' is one with which practitioner researchers must grapple (Smith, 2009). The idea of what constitutes 'new' knowledge can be questioned and open to interpretation and provides yet another dilemma for practitioner researchers to consider when designing methodologies. Traditionally, the PhD was intended to generate what can be considered as Mode One knowledge which can be defined as academic knowledge used by academics within academia. This was called vertical knowledge by Bernstein (1999). Gibbons *et al.*, (1994) extend this idea further by stating that Mode One knowledge is produced and tested by researchers to substantiate and support the work and writing of academics. Contrastingly, the purpose of the professional doctorate is to combine Mode One knowledge with Mode Two knowledge which is created and tested by practitioners for use outside of the academic realm. This knowledge is applied in specific contexts for a

specific purpose and can be gained through action or research in practice and can also be called horizontal knowledge (Bernstein, 1999).

Gibbons *et al.* (1994) and the theory of the two modes of knowledge can be challenged by considering the fact that the knowledge generated by completing the Ed.D. is multi-disciplinary combining the knowledge originating in the institution of the university and is based in research which takes place and is applied in practice. Through my own thinking as part of my study on an Ed.D. programme, I strongly question if these modes are truly separate entities. As a doctoral researcher, I acknowledge that my research setting is the place for critical reflection and questioning of the status quo, the basis for academic research and where construction of new knowledge and my own theories can occur. By allowing professional knowledge to be considered as a basis for Mode One knowledge as part of the Ed.D., the power structures of the university and who is able to participate in academia is challenged an idea explored further when discussing power in practitioner research. My ideas are substantiated by the work of Maxwell and Shanahan in 1997.

Scott, *et al.* (2004) suggest that by integrating academic and professional knowledge, the practitioner researcher can use practice for a place of critical reflection. Theorising is mainly the aim in academia as opposed to the application of knowledge in practice which may lead to disharmony between practice and academia for the researcher. In an effort to avoid this disjointed feeling, Scott (1995) propose a further two modes of knowledge, Mode Three and Mode Four, whereby Mode Three is the combination of Gibbons *et al.*'s (1994) Mode One and Mode Two knowledge designed to bridge the gap between academic and professional bodies of knowledge. Barnett (2000) can be considered as a way to challenge these modes of knowledge even further by saying that classifying knowledge in any way is highly contested and not useful considering how complicated knowledge is. From a more feminist perspective, David (2002) alludes to the idea that research should focus on the narratives of individual's lives and, therefore, the classification of any knowledge is neglected. The ideas presented by Gibbons *et al.* (1994) can be used as a general framework for thinking about different types of knowledge.

New knowledge is constructed from the intimate understanding the researcher has of a certain context in conjunction with work at a Higher Education (HE) level. It can be argued that these two arenas in concurrence with the researcher's reflexive, self-referenced, self-reflective stance is the point where new knowledge is constructed. However, because the research questions and contexts for practitioner researchers tend to be narrow and unique, the findings cannot be widely generalised. This narrow scope in a specific context can be justification for generation of original knowledge creation. In fact, it can be said that new knowledge is constructed in every step of the process from conception of the research idea to the methodological design in response to the researcher's own position within the context (Drake and Heath, 2011).

For practitioner researchers this creation of knowledge is not necessarily restricted to a certain research domain, although it can be. More often knowledge is created as a

result of the integration and analysis of specific and specialized knowledge held about the profession and setting in which practitioners are employed, the learning and knowledge gained from courses in higher education and their own reflexive analysis between those two arenas (QAA, 2011). Critical to the production of new knowledge is the awareness of the researcher of their own unique bias and constructs which are central to the development of the researcher's knowledge and these constructs will inevitably influence the interpretation of the data. In recognising their own biases in terms of meaning construction from the world around them, or reflexivity, the researcher can start to design objective methodologies and address ethical issues that will present themselves during the research. Some of my own biases I have begun to examine earlier in this discussion.

### **Relationships, power and trust**

It can be argued that the institution of the university has kept the privileged of society in power and the deprived in a subordinate, compliant state by using knowledge as a gate keeping device (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Taysum, 2007). Bourdieu (1988) argues that there is a greater representation and acceptance of the dominant culture embraced by schools and this exclusion of the culture of the minority leads to reproduction of a similar construction in future generations. In this sense, the institution of the university values academic knowledge and preserves this knowledge through the processes, procedures and discourses which are considered appropriate within the institution itself (Taysum, 2007). Knowledge which is being generated outside the institution allows power to be taken out of the hands of the historically privileged few academics and grants it to a greater mass of the population which is essence is what the Doctorate of Education does by placing an emphasis on the creation of knowledge through practice. Therefore, the very nature of practitioner research challenges current societal power structures which is one reason why it may sometime be seen as a 'lesser' PhD (Drake and Heath, 2011).

Work in and around education is a highly political arena. Beliefs, principles and philosophies held by those in power allow for little opposition. This creates power differentials between people in an organisation or practice. It is very difficult for those working within an organisation to disregard these dominant practices. Most of those working in a particular setting have internalised these practices on a subconscious level (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and accept them which leads to acting as Foucault (1977) called 'docile subjects'. The behaviours of the 'docile subjects' act in a way which reinforces and supports the interests of those who have the most power within the structure or setting. It can be said that this occurs because of a lack of higher knowledge and a lack of critical engagement with policies and practices handed down without much thought or questioning on the part of the receiver.

According to Foucault (1977) power differentials become more evident when one person has information about what another does, thinks and believes. Ultimately, those with the most knowledge will assert the most power in social situations. The objective of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees is to teach, model and enable critical thinking skills. Students engaging in a Doctorate of Education degree will be looking at

practice potentially within their own workplace with a critical eye and questioning what happens and why it is so. This knowledge and criticality puts the researcher in a position of power over his or her colleagues who may have previously held a similar level of authority (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Those in power have the ability to persuade, coax and influence those with lesser power, potentially the participants in the study. This is because there is a level of trust which is built up over time between colleagues in the workplace. This trust originates from a shared experience and from facing similar problems which arise in the same place of work. This level of trust combined with the power which the researcher potentially has over the participant raises questions of an ethical and moral nature regarding the disclosure of information, putting both the participant and the researcher at risk of the consequences of information sharing.

When considering relationships, power and trust in my own research project, I need to deconstruct my placement within my workplace structure. My role means I have considerable responsibility for a large number of students. Inherent in this relationship is a level of trust that the students have within me to help them and to guide them in completing their degree. It is feasible to believe that if my potential participants trust me, they may feel more able to share a greater depth of information with me during the research process. This is a positive point from the perspective of gathering rich, qualitative data, but it could raise issues if the students disclose fairly negative information about my area of research. They could disclose information that may put my role in jeopardy. I, then, as the researcher, have the dilemma of what to do with this information. I can question how I present it and process it in a way which does not put my own employment and reputation at risk.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The insider knowledge which is an element of practitioner research puts them in a different ethical position than researchers who are considered to be outsiders to the context of their study (Costley and Gibbs, 2006). Ethics committees and consequently ethical approval of the research is an essential requirement in the present climate to protect people who are vulnerable either by virtue of age or disclosure of information during the research process. Another aim of ethics committees is to protect all who carry out and participate in the research from any health and safety risk which if not avoided could involve, especially financially, the university sponsoring the researcher in the form of litigation (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007).

Time is usually short when carrying out research and ethical approval from the university involves a process of consent which does take time. This extra time needs to be added into the time management of the research process. Guidelines that ethics committees follow can tend to be bureaucratic and have significant impact on the research in decision making often not considering the specific conditions and special circumstances of the research and neglecting to consider the emotional connection to project of the researcher and those involved in it (Drake and Heath, 2011; Gibbs and Costley, 2006). Because the researcher has to anticipate potential ethical concerns, the system of ethics committees often fails to recognise that by definition and intention

research is unpredictable. Certain situations may arise in carrying out the research after the approval of the ethical committee which demand action and that action may not have gained ethical approval in the first instance. The necessity of anticipation of ethical concerns and the unpredictability of working with participants (Lester, 2004) places the practitioner researcher in a vulnerable place within the research and one which requires awareness and planning.

When considering the ethical implications of practitioners carrying out research in their area of work it is important to note that the work place is inevitably imbedded with a system of sometimes unspoken values and codes. Practitioner researchers are faced with potentially conflicting system of values, those of the workplace and those of the higher education institution expecting critical analysis of practices to construct new knowledge (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007). The values of the workplace are often in direct conflict with the values of the institution of the university and aims of the research. The researcher is then forced to adopt at least two, potentially conflicting, ethical stances- that of the university and that of the workplace. Thus, navigating and negotiating between two codes of practice trying to balance and protect the interests of two separate parties makes for a challenging prospect indeed.

The issue of disclosure can be a challenge as practitioner researchers could either intentionally or inadvertently be given information about relationships between colleagues, professional practices in the workplace or unethical working approaches (Costley and Gibbs, 2006). Research on Doctorate of Education programmes tends to be rather small scale, qualitative research which captures the voices, opinions and practices of the participants. In such small-scale projects where the participants and those in managerial positions will be reading the final edited work, the nature of confidentiality and certainly anonymity can be questioned (Gibbs and Costley, 2006). The researcher is then tasked to address these issues either through the research or in addition to it. Participants may be promised confidentiality as part of the consent process without realising the size of the sample and could by virtue of their trust and level of comfort with the researcher (who is a familiar colleague) disclose information which could put their position within the workplace in a vulnerable position upon publication. The answer to this ethical dilemma has to be taken into account when the practitioner researcher is designing the methodology of the research to ensure protection of the participants. Being ethically reflexive and at every stage negotiating and re-negotiating with the participants and being aware of power relations, professional practice and institutional policies is essential for practitioner researchers.

I will be assembling data in my place of work which I am beginning to realise is laden with challenges of a moral and ethical nature. It is possible in my research that I uncover that some aspect of practice is not effective. My livelihood is invested in this area of higher education and it could be difficult for me to continue in this role if this is a finding in my research. This may be information that is considered by some in a higher level of authority as being 'too' critical of an element of practice and the idea of publishing this research in a wider realm could be controversial. On the other hand, my colleagues could be very supportive of the outcomes of this research and see the data gathered as



a springboard and a rationale for change, if appropriate. I will try to anticipate where I can the potential outcomes in an effort to protect my participants and myself.

Qualitative methodology often results in acts of seduction (Newkirk,1996) which could end in betrayal of trust between colleagues. It is possible that friendly conversations with the research participant in focus groups where there is an already established high level of trust can result in a letting down of guard where the participant discloses information disclosure of information to a researcher critically analysing the discourse and practices of provision (Costley and Gibbs, 2006). The researcher who has been tasked to construct new knowledge and to be highly critical of their topic using input from participants to construct what has been said and represent it in the final publication. This representation of the participant is based on how the researcher interprets the data and may not actually represent the sense that the participant has of themselves and could potentially challenge how the participant is viewed by other colleagues. This could lead to conflict in the workplace and put the researcher in a vulnerable position professionally (Newkirk, 1996).

### **Reflexivity**

The answer to most of the challenges faced by researching in the workplace is reflexivity and the need for 'subjective objectivity' (Donsbach and Klett, 1993). Reflexivity can be defined as the examination of the filters and lenses through which we construct meaning of our world. Reflexivity can be considered as the researcher's awareness of and analytic focus on his or her relationship to the field of study. Being reflexive entails a level of critical reflection which helps the researcher to explore and understand what they bring to the research and how their views will influence the methodology and the interpretation of the data. Mason (1996) stated that reflexive research means that the researcher should be aware of their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data. Not only can being reflexive increase the reliability of the data interpretation but it can be the key to solving ethical dilemmas within research as well.

Researchers researching their setting can be seen as an 'insider'. Those researching a setting where they do not work can be considered an 'outsider'. When considering power differentials at play with construction of new knowledge and with the inevitable fact that situations and people will change over the six year time period of the study the researcher will become both 'insider and outsider' throughout the project. Humphrey (2007) asserts the key to reflexivity is to 'inhabit the hyphen' and to adopt many different perspectives on the research and a range of positions as the research is carried out over time. In order for the researcher to manage these different positions, the researcher must be able to exercise reflexivity in a continual critical reflection process.

Bourdieu (1988) argued that the researcher is inherently laden with biases, and only by becoming reflexively aware of those biases can researchers free themselves from them and aspire to the practice of an objective science, if that exists. Bourdieu insists on the importance of reflexive sociology in which sociologists must at all times conduct their research with conscious attention to the effects of their own position, their own set of

internalized structures, and how these are likely to distort or prejudice their objectivity. For Bourdieu, therefore, reflexivity is part of the solution, not the problem. This is accomplished by remaining flexible and adopting a range of flexible positions to the research. This requires assuming multiple approaches to the research which can presumably be a confusing process.

Harding in 1987 wrote that, as researchers, our views and beliefs as people affect our research. The research question that we construct is highly personal and it reveals something about who we are. The methodological design, the choice of literature we choose to examine and the theoretical frameworks we use for analysis are governed by our values and, reciprocally, help to shape these values. Also, our motivation for deciding to carry out a research project and the participants we choose to include and exclude reveals something about us as people (Wellington and Sikes, 2006). Reflexivity in research is, therefore, a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated. This level of analysis on the part of the researcher improves the quality and validity of the research and allows the researcher to recognize the limitations of the knowledge that is produced throughout the process leading to more a rigorous study (Smith, 2009).

Reflexivity can also address some of the ethical dilemmas practitioner researchers face when doing research in their setting. In being reflexive, researchers both reflect about how their research intervention might affect the research participants before any actual research is conducted and consider how they would respond as a researcher in the sorts of situations that they can envisage. This can also be considered from a more feminist perspective as an 'ethic of care' (Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Reflexivity encourages researchers to develop the skills to respond appropriately. In the actual conduct of research, the reflexive researcher will be better placed to be aware of ethically important situations as they arise and will have a basis for responding in a way that is likely to be ethically appropriate, even with unforeseeable situations. The notion of reflexivity urges researchers to deconstruct the interpersonal and ethical aspects of research practice as well as the epistemological aspects of the research.

Undertaking the professional Doctorate of Education poses considerable challenges to those who engage in it with regard to objectivity, creation of new knowledge, power dynamics and ethics. It is critical, then, that the practitioner researcher meets the standards necessary to be considered rigorous and as unbiased as it can be. This can be done by remaining fluid in position and reflexive in the analysis of not only the data but the entire creation of the research project from start to finish. Practitioner researcher's personal experiences and subjectivity is what drives them to begin the research in the first place but this subjectivity must be recognised and addressed in the methodological design of the research. Nevertheless, upon completion of the Ed.D. degree practitioners can investigate issues that are personally important to them with the aim of ensuring quality and one day enabling change within their practice.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Through my own instruction as a student on a taught doctoral programme and through the research of literature exploring the nature of practitioner research it is clear to me that being a practitioner researcher has its benefits and limitations. The expertise and insight of a particular area of practice allow for easy access to the field of research and a chance to investigate questions practitioners are already asking and upon which they are already hypothesising. However, the role that power plays in relationships is an important and often an unspoken one.

Power differentials between the researcher and participants could mean that participants withhold information considered valuable to the researcher because of a sense of insecurity on the part of the participant perhaps not enrolled in postgraduate study. It could also mean that the participant has a deep sense of trust in the researcher and volunteers deep and rich data. From a doctoral perspective, this kind of data is needed to evidence creation of new knowledge. The unveiling of this new information could have significant consequences for the researcher who is also potentially employed by the institution where the research is taking place. Management and other leadership bodies may not welcome critical and seemingly confrontational 'new knowledge'. Because of the power that those in managerial positions hold, it could mean the implications of the research for the researcher could vary from subtle ignoring of the data finds to termination of employment of the practitioner researcher.

The researcher may struggle internally in the planning of methodologies to avoid difficult situations but strive to demonstrate contribution to a wider body of knowledge. Considering these complications and dilemmas is imperative for the researcher to plan a study seeing all potential eventualities. Although an all encompassing assessment of eventualities is impossible, the ability to adopt a critical distance from the practical context and to exercise reflexivity will aid in generating findings which will hopefully inform and impact practice in a positive way, which is the aim of study on taught doctoral programmes.

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