

Editorial

The purpose and power of vocational research

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Abstract

As the second editorial in the inaugural issue of the Journal of Vocational Research and Practice (JVRP), this article explores two central commitments shaping the journal's identity: challenging disciplinary boundaries and fostering radical inclusivity. It critiques the dominance of academic singulars and the exclusion of applied, work-based, and practitioner knowledge, positioning Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as legitimate, interdisciplinary fields. Drawing on Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, the piece exposes the structural barriers that marginalise non-traditional voices and epistemologies. It advocates for a publishing space where pracademics, early career researchers, and professionals outside the academy can share critical, contextual insights without compromising rigour. Indigenous Knowledge and bricolage, as concepts, are highlighted as examples of alternative, valid epistemologies often excluded from dominant academic discourse. This editorial invites readers and contributors to help reframe knowledge legitimacy and embrace a more porous, practitioner-informed research landscape.

Keywords

Work-based learning, pracademia, interdisciplinarity, radical inclusivity, epistemic diversity.

Introduction

Why a journal on vocational, Work-Based Learning (WBL), and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)? We acknowledge that we are not alone within this field. We acknowledge that there are many particularly good journals out there that cater for this field, within the UK and internationally. Many of us as editors have published within these journals. We do not aim to compete with them. From our perspective, they are mostly engaged with academics involved in vocational, WBL and WIL fields in academic institutions related to specific academic disciplines. Many of these are associated with the Research Excellence Framework and research funded projects, aiming to complete in bibliometrics research and publication.

We aim to offer a space for practitioners, especially those who would not consider themselves academic, to disseminate their projects, views, insights, and ideas to a more non-academic world. This does not mean we compromise on rigour, quality, and criticality. In this editorial article, we explain two core functions of the journal, namely, to challenge academic disciplinary boundaries and be radically inclusive to allow a new demographic of contributions.

Challenging boundaries

Traditional academic research is disciplinary focused. Traditional academic practices, although there are exceptions, emphasise knowledge organised within the confines of subject disciplines (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023; Loughran, 2009; Talbot, 2019). These boundaries do not draw on other disciplines to pursue or define their own subject matter and methods. They look to their own accumulated works to define themselves and to guide scholars in the doing of the discipline (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023). This is often referred to as Mode 1 knowledge. In contrast, Mode 2 knowledge is produced and valued outside the university and is not discipline specific or based (Costley et al., 2010). This can create tension, discord and a kind of epistemological snobbery which aims to adjudicate rather than illuminate (Gerhardt, 2015).

In contrast to these pure knowledge disciplines, there are those that produce applied knowledge such as Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), which focus primarily on the practical issues that arise from specific contexts (Costley et al., 2010; Loughran, 2009). The aim of WBL is not to establish general patterns, but to solve particular problems. WBL is a specific mode or form of teaching, within WIL more broadly, where the student as learner is in full time employment as part of their course and as such is involved in WBL projects that produce insightful outputs (Cooper et al., 2010; Gerhardt & Kelly, 2024). Contentiously referred to as a 'pracademic' (Gerhardt & Kelly, 2024) WBL represents people at the nexus of the academy (involved in academic study) and the professional world of practice (Campbell, 2022), people who engage in forms of education and professional learning (Campbell, 2022; Hollweck et al., 2022). This creates an enduring tension between the worlds of practice and research and scholarship, with certain adjudicating academics not always fully valuing (or understanding) the knowledge and work of practitioners (Campbell, 2022). A key rationale for this article and the journal.

Bernstein described the social organisation and status hierarchies of academic disciplines using the concepts of classifications and framing. (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023). Classification is the boundary within and between academic disciplines. Framing is the locus of control over pedagogic communications and its context. Pedagogic communications are the new forms, or developing of existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice, and criteria specific to a discipline. Bernstein applied these tools to academic disciplines from the 19th century onwards and their organisation into self-regulating communities, which he called singulars, meaning a strong boundary maintenance (classification), supported culturally (e.g., associations, publishing), and psychologically (e.g., students, teachers, researchers) (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023; Hordern, 2017). Adjudicating powerful academic practitioners maintain border control by identifying the core concerns that the discipline ought to address. These boundaries were framed by three interrelated rules, namely, distributive rules - whose or what research is deemed acceptable, valued, legitimate within that discipline

(adjudicating singular); recontextualising rules - regulations on how teachers/lecturers enact the accepted research (textbooks, syllabi etc.); and evaluative rules - the production of what counts as legitimate, often produced in disciplinary peer reviewed journals (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023; Hordern, 2017). Unfortunately, these interrelated rules excludes 'other voices,' especially within epistemological narrowmindedness.

Interdisciplinary and/or applied fields are called regions – the recontextualising and/or the expanding of singulars (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023; Hordern, 2017). WBL and WIL correlate with regions rather than singulars. Regions are more reflexive and porous i.e. inclusive. These represent interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary research more inclusive of learning that takes place in, during, from, and for work (Gerhardt & Annon, 2023). However, it is self-evident how these challenge and are resisted by singulars. As such, a journal that represents this more fluid pracademic world is required.

Radically inclusive

Research can provide the foundation for reports about and representations of 'the Other' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p.1). The 'other' could be the world of work as a non-represented space, it could be the silent non-represented voice who does not fit or confine to the academic discipline persona (singular) or it could be the voice marginalised and silenced because its ways of knowing are not represented by modernistic scientific ways of knowing (classifications and the singular). To achieve radical inclusivity and representation of the 'other,' Kincheloe and Berry (2004, pp. X-Xi) for example suggest we "escape from the implosion of disciplinarity" by allowing the "construction of new multilogical and emancipatory forms of epistemology and ontology", thus avoiding reductionism and classifications. Bricolage, as an example of such a research methodology, is not about subverting the production of empirical knowledge, "but rather to encourage the production of a richer, thicker and more rigorous form of it" (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p.35). This also prevents the constant drive and expectation of publications for academic reputation in an ever pursuit of higher stated journals at the expense of useful contextual insights (Gerhardt & Karsan, 2022). There is a common complaint amongst academics particularly of the pressure to publish in the "right" journals to have any chance of making it in the fierce competitive academic job market, i.e. bibliometrics. Peer-review assessment disadvantage early career researchers, pracademics and WBL practitioners and has drawbacks based on age, gender, and ethnicity (Gerhardt & Karsan, 2022). A key aim and purpose of this journal is to create a space for the 'other' to be represented.

For example, consider Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as a case in point. For Indigenous peoples, education is a solid agent of Western thought and Western ways of thinking, an instrument of colonisation (Mika and Stewart, 2017). Education, derived from the West, is tied up with modernity (reductionism, classifications etc.) and became a process contributing to the invisibility of minority groups, who had languages and cultures different from the one considered dominant, a system in the form of cognitive imperialism (Mika and Stewart, 2017; Silva et al., 2024). IK sees the universe as mysterious while modern science sees it as being knowable; IK values coexistence with the mystery of nature and celebrates this mystery, while science attempts to eradicate mystery via description and explanation; IK content validity is evidenced by tens of thousands of years of survival based on using the knowledge while science's

predictive validity forms a cornerstone of the discipline (Silva et al., 2024). Overall, it is the ontological and epistemological base in different cultures that separates the forms of knowledge, namely, that of myth and mysticism versus knowable physical causality, specificity versus generalisation, ownership versus sharing, and so on. These differences have been seen in other fields such as theology (Gerhardt, 2015), education (such as the debate about learning styles), sociology (such as generational studies) and business (such as the use of personality indicators). Rather than opening up the space to explore and discuss, these ideas are silenced for not meeting modernistic criteria, a reductionistic binarism Cartesian-Newtonian epistemological foundationalism which includes ethnocentrism (Gerhardt, 2015; Semali and Kincheloe, 1999). Macedo in Semali and Kincheloe (1999) explores these ideas by asking what it means to come to subjectivity in the margins and they too aim to challenge the academy and its 'normal science'.

Conclusion

Many WBL students produce excellent WBL projects which may reach the ears of their manager and perhaps even disseminated to managers (plural). However, rarely is this contextual insight found beyond these confines. This journal aims to provide an opportunity for WBL practitioners to disseminate their projects, ideas, views, and insights to a readership which are in the world of work. The readership is not primarily academic, academics and educational institutions. It is our aim that the readership are managers, leaders, shop floor assistants, HRM officers and so on. Practitioners in charitable, public, private and government organisations. Practitioners in start-ups, SMEs, charities, NGOs, multinationals and so on. Practitioners who do, write policies, start companies, grow companies and so on. A radically inclusive boundary crossing and challenging reader and contributor.

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