

Editorial

Writing from practice: turning degree apprenticeship experience into publishable research

Dr. Rebecca Quew-Jones

University of Portsmouth

Article History

Received 18 May 2025

Revised 22 May 2025

Accepted 31 May 2025

Abstract

This editorial advocates for recognising and publishing the rich insights generated through Degree Apprenticeships. Positioned within a wider special issue on vocational research, it explores how apprentices' lived, work-integrated learning experiences yield practical and theoretical value. Degree Apprentices create actionable knowledge by integrating academic theory with workplace practice, solving real problems and fostering professional growth. Yet these valuable insights often remain unshared. This editorial calls on educators and employers to support apprentices in capturing and communicating these experiences through accounts of practice. Such accounts, though not traditional research papers, offer reflective, meaningful narratives grounded in real-world contexts. They can take the form of case studies, project evaluations, or critical reflections. The article outlines accessible frameworks to support apprentices in writing for publication and encourages a culture of reflective inquiry. Ultimately, it champions practitioner-led knowledge creation that enriches vocational pedagogy and contributes to a growing body of work-based learning literature.

Keywords

Degree apprenticeships, work-integrated learning, practice-based research, reflective practice, vocational education.

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships are uniquely positioned for learning through action from the context of academic study with real-world practice. Apprentices engage in live assessment in their own workplace while learning and developing theoretical knowledge through application. This generates valuable learning for the individual and positive outcomes for employers, additionally the potential for meaningful, publishable research, for the Journal of Vocational Research.

This editorial calls to action from those providing degree apprenticeship programmes to support apprentices to recognise the value and impact of their practice and to realise the wider contribution made to further knowledge in their vocation through their action. The aim for the apprentice is to write an account of practice of their lived experience through a lens of inquiry, reflection, and learning.

Value of practice-based research

On a degree apprenticeship course, the learning is live, situated, and adaptive through the apprentice acting as practitioner. From this learning experience, actionable knowledge (Argyris, 2024) is created by applying existing tacit knowledge and learnt academic theory guided by the lever of assessment. Apprentice insights resolve real work problems and or improve practice at ground level in unpredictable and ever-changing workplaces. At an individual level, graduate skills are acquired and developed such as critical thinking, ethical and professional decision-making, and additionally degree apprenticeship identity. Through their insights and inquiry, they have the ability to theorise (Coghlan and Rigg, 2021), valuable to others within their professional practice. The outcome for employers or line managers, if apprentices are provided with an authentic opportunity and guidance through this vocational education can contribute directly to employer department and organisation strategy providing real practical value such as a new approach to training, revised project management processes, and marketing strategies. Currently, there is little opportunity to share insights and new knowledge created within the wider community. Capturing these rich experiences as accounts of practice is valuable for other apprentices, practitioners and educators to help learning, prompt discussion, and contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the value of work integrated learning, vocational pedagogy, and applied professional development.

Context of an ‘account of practice’

A publishable account of practice is not a traditional research paper detached from the real world. It is an opportunity for the author to tell a story about their authentic experience and share thoughts of the practice (Rigg and Coghlan, 2010). It can take the form of a case study, a critical reflection, a narrative inquiry or more commonly in Degree Apprenticeships, a structured work-based project evaluation.

For example, within the work-based project, with an expectation of work-integrated learning, the learning is grounded within the workplace the context that needs to be explained as well as outlining the problem to resolve. Throughout the project it is encouraged to reflect and sense-make (Weick, 1995); overcoming challenges, gaining greater understanding of human perspectives and behaviours, innovating new processes, and providing solutions. By analysing thoughts further, new knowledge creation starts as themes which are drawn out often helped through peer group and line manager’s of fresh questioning (Revan,) and discussion. Engaging with the theory provides deeper understanding to disclose what is happening and why. It is these deeper insights that can be useful to others to apply in their own practice. Therefore, to write an account of practice there is no need to be an expert researcher, more curious, honest and thoughtful about what happened and why it matters.

From experience, when my colleague suggested we capture our experience of embedding action learning to develop and educate undergraduate management degree apprentices (Quew-Jones & Brook, 2019) as an account of practice it felt academically unworthy and potentially indulgent. On reflection, it was likely due to our positioning within the account with roles as both facilitator and researcher. We needed to be aware of our own personal bias, highly supportive of action learning as vehicle for discovering new knowledge and yet remain confident that viewing through our lens, supporting early experience of degree apprenticeships, provided context, new knowledge, and subsequently worthy for others. As this was an account of real practice it was disordered, a messy problem (Fergusson, 2019) requiring time to unpick and write in a more linear way, it helped through comparing our own learning experiences and perspectives.

As outlined in the work-based learning example above it is important to provide context and describe what was happening; the real interest was through my colleague and I questioning why this was happening, making sense of why action learning worked so well in this context. It is deeper thinking that was more relatable and impactful to others by sharing how we approached and overcame the challenges.

Writing an account of practice

Writing an account of practice for a publication need not be challenging as perhaps first thought. It begins with the story that has been personally experienced, the reality of daily work of how a process has been improved or a new way of approaching an issue. It is not the length of the story that counts, short stories can often be more progressive in practice, especially in ever-changing environments. The structure suggested is a reflection framework such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, or Kolb's Experiential Learning. It follows the lines of what happened, why it was significant, what was learnt and how this could help others in similar roles to improve their practice.

As Degree Apprenticeships are underpinned by work-integrated learning, the context is provided and learning from further reflection realised during individual and peer reflection, resulting in theorising in practice that requires appropriate communication. To support, it is helpful if employers and universities support this inquiry by including "writing for publication" and encouraging reflective accounts within the curriculum, apprentice led exchange platforms within the workplace and offering mentoring for developing publishable accounts of practice.

Conclusion

Accounts of Practice starts in the workplace. When apprentices solve problems, make ethical decisions, collaborate under pressure, or grow into professionals, they generate knowledge valuable to others. Capturing this by writing an account of that practice is a powerful way to reflect, learn, and contribute and showcasing the value of practice whilst providing learning to the wider field.

Reference List

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Addison-Wesley.

Coghlan, D. (2019). *Doing action research in your own organization* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Quew-Jones, R., & Brook, C. (2019). Account of practice: Using action learning to develop and educate undergraduate management degree apprentices. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 16(3), 295–303.

Revans, R. (1982). *The origins and growth of action learning*. Chartwell-Bratt.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. SAGE Publications.