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## Practice and the professional doctorate: a diffractive re-reading

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing loosely upon strategies associated with collaborative autoethnography we conceptualise the place of practice in the professional doctorate through four distinct moves each of which compel us towards the conclusion that research, and practice are mutually entangled. In our first move 'research informs practice'. In this space practice is a neutral recipient site that accepts the determinations of research unable to self-generate meaningful worthwhile knowledge. We ultimately reject this idea as one that diminishes both research and practice. In our second move, we suggest that research runs in parallel to practice, at times casting a shadow. Research is structured, rational and orderly, practice is unable or unwilling to conform to the predictions of research, its excess creating unmanageable confusion. The parallels of research and practice compel us to consider the extent to which their relationship is best understood as a disruptive one. In our third move, research unframes practice, making it impossible. This impossibility is premised not on the knowledge that research generates as such but rather on the impact new knowledge landscapes have on the researcher-practitioner, the mechanism that ultimately mediates research and practice. In placing the researcher-practitioner as the mediating mechanism between the academy and practice, it becomes apparent that research itself and knowledge generation is both embedded in and embodied by practice. We conclude with a rejection of research in contrast to practice and instead map the effect of difference. Ultimately, we argue that changes to professional practice are an inevitable consequence.

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## Introduction

The contemporary professional can hardly avoid discourses of practice. Sometimes expressed as 'best-practice' or 'evidence-based-practice' (Lynch et al. 2016) at other times as intricately detailed specifications defining minimal standards of practice, acquaintanceship with which confers a licence to practice. The notion of practice is heavily weighted in these discourses, standing in contrast to several possible counterbalances: research and practice; theory and practice; the academy, a site of knowledge generation and the workplace, a site of practice. Encoded in these notions of practice is an always and already existing binary, in which practice is relegated as the subordinate. We understand practice and practices as the primary building blocks of the social (Boud and Lee 2009), involving actions and actors, settings mediated by tools, artefacts, rules, roles and relationships. Practice and practices are everywhere, exceeding the binary. Our social world is shared and

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constituted via manifestations of practice. Doctoral education can only be understood as an animated field of diverse and complicated, intersecting, overlapping, and constantly changing practice. In this paper we deploy collaborative autoethnography to explore the distinct ways in which concepts associated with posthumanism, such as diffraction, reconfigure our reading of the relationship between theory, practice and the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD).

## Collaborative autoethnography

Writing *together* is our mode of inquiry (Richardson 2003). In writing collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2016) we are part of the world we seek to theorise. We position ourselves (analytically and critically) as data, making use of dramatic recall, metaphors, vivid (absurd) characters, and unusual phrasing. Writing is a lonely, isolating activity. Lonely isolation is the joy of writing. Writing collaboratively is a contradiction. We worked through and with this and with several other contradictions.

We met regularly in an online space to read, write and talk about the role of practice in the EdD. The time blocked out in our diaries created space to recall what had happened to us, how we felt and what we did, our reading of the literature and our mapping of the terrain. Our initial reading/writing sessions were always and already entwined. We have had to sift and sort to trammel our attempts to develop understanding into prose, citations and data (Hepler et al. 2019). Without deliberative agreement we focused on 'professional' practice, the 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings' that defined how we experience our places of employment, and the professional doctorate. As three academics with a close connection to the EdD, we felt it was a discussion we would be well positioned to contribute something valuable towards. We embody differences along lines of culture, race, age and disciplinary backgrounds. In alignment with Braidotti's (2018) notion of *nomadic becoming*, our community is premised on social connection rather than geographic belonging. We acknowledge ourselves as an *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987): an entangled network of relationships, both singular and plural. We defend an idea of knowledge as embodied, vibrant, embedded, affective and relational, a view that challenges hierarchical and hegemonic academic power structures. *Nomadic becoming* emphasises fluidity and mobility, not as a fixed definition of the contemporary but as an attempt to operationalise intellectually mobile concepts; concepts that enable unlikely encounters, draw on unpredictable sources and foster unexpected interactions, experiences and knowledges.

We are deliberately disruptive (Brown, Carducci, and Kuby 2014) in how we engage with knowledge generation: a disruptive otherness which prefigures the disruptive otherness of our authoring. We have cultivated a disruptive difference along several axial flows – by positioning ourselves as research subject and research object, working within non-hierarchical approaches to power dynamics. Our approach to analysing data, a stance reminiscent of an analytical daydream (Dennis and Clifton 2019) is driven by a yearning for insight that values expansive ways of knowing. Our use of 'we' as singular is written to and from a shifting location. We write from 'Not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3). This has shaped our preference for narrative fragments that are numbered but not named.

Animated by a preference for fragments, to resist the smoothing out of difference, we started by discussing why and how the Doctorate in Education (EdD) was important to us. In these introductory fragments, we make ourselves known (while remaining unnamed). We wanted to work as creatively as we could with the posthuman, and this required decentering the fantasy of the individuated 'I' around which narratives revolve. This is not an attempt to separate narrative from narrator, but rather an aspiration to highlight knowledge production as nonlinear, relational and fluid. The unnamed 'I' in these narrative fragments is one of many human and nonhuman components through which knowledge is produced. Coming to know from this stance is grounded in dialogue rather than in 'True Method'. We have not followed prescribed procedures indexed in a rule book.

Through ongoing engagement with each other, research, colleagues, the virtuality and the physicality of our meeting, thinking and writing spaces, what in summary might be called a continuous and nonlinear assemblage of human and non-human elements, something new is produced (Strom, Mills, and Ovens 2018).

We are very much alive, as authors, to what can be gained from other-centred narrative. While 'I' remains a necessary linguistic device, it structures each story, we privilege 'absence over presence, pattern over detail' (Tomasula 2014) and welcome the narrative 'I/other' binary as yet another permeability. Our first set of narratives disrupt the idea that the EdD is premised on the desire to improve practice, career or professional standing.

### ***Narrative one: a daughter's longing***

I wanted to be a doctor, a medical doctor, my father was a doctor. I adored my father. He adored me, but I ended up studying modern foreign languages and literature, I didn't become a doctor. My father persuaded me not to do it, that it was a long, challenging and difficult profession and I would end up studying for many many years. I am still struggling with this concept, accepting the idea that although he believed in me and in my intellectual capacities and supported me in many ways, he discouraged me to study medicine. And here I am, still struggling with this, still studying after many many years, finally pursuing my dream of becoming a doctor, although a different kind of doctor. The EdD journey has been transformational at a deep personal and professional level; a challenge that goes back to my childhood, to unresolved discourses, an act of self-esteem. It is not just practice.

### ***Narrative two: a failing professional***

I was working in a Further Education College and failed – the department I managed – failed an OfSTED inspection (twice). I felt that failure ... like facial scarring. I started my EdD with the hope of developing an in-depth understanding of quality. I assumed it would help me to become a more efficient and effective manager. I realised quite quickly that this would not be the case, but I carried on anyway. The college I worked for accused me of wasting my time, of dissipating energies that ought to be spent on improving my OfSTED grading. I was not capable, they said, of completing a doctorate. The EdD was in so many ways a life-saving act of self-defence and defiance.

### ***Narrative three: a serendipitous EdD***

I did not choose the EdD. This route chose me. Accessing the learning to underpin my practice has always been important to me. I started my academic journey in the late 80s, studying for the Bachelor of Nursing Degree at a time when few nurses were expected to be graduates. In the late 90s, after a period of working in community development, I completed a master's degree in development management. I never thought that I would be able to afford the fees or the time to study at doctoral level, but at a staff development session for university tutors, a colleague mentioned having completed an EdD, their fees having been paid by our employer. I then set about studying the second master's degree in education I required to be eligible to apply.

We have in common a meeting place, the EdD where we are variously positioned as student, as alumni and as programme lead. Another point of contact is The Digital University (Goodfellow and Lea 2013): an institution with a long tradition of offering distance, blended and online learning, where two of us are in the final stages of our EdD and two of us are employed. We have in common a marginality lived through our bodies, encoded through our experiences within and outside the academy.

We are enmeshed by a series of spatial negotiations (Pratt et al. 2015) between the university, the personal, and the professional, which includes the wider professional body as well as the intimate space of professional practice. There are overlaps between these different spaces. As researching-

practitioners we transgress the space between professional domain and academic landscapes, criss-crossing between practitioner knowing and academic knowledge. In theorising the role of practice in the professional doctorate, our authorial narratives suggested four movements around which the paper is organised: practice is informed by research, practice runs parallel to research, practice is unframed by research, and finally, a diffractive reading of the practice/research nexus. In closing the paper on a diffractive reading, we deliberately avoid the persona of the 'reflective/reflexive practitioner'. Our diffractive reading disrupts reflective/reflexivity by paying close attention to relations of difference and how they matter, preferring this to the reproduction of fixity and sameness found in reflection. Barad (2007, 71) defines diffraction as '[...] a useful counterpoint to reflection: both are optical phenomena, but whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference'. Embedded in each move are illustrative narrative fragments. We are ultimately drawn towards a diffractive view of practice and research. This is a view that accepts them as thoroughly entangled within each other, mutually embodied, embedded and implicated.

### **First move: practice is informed by research**

Our first move considers the linearity of research informing practice. The researcher, positioned in the academy, is imagined as 'expert', the peer reviewed holder of knowledge published in digestible form for the practitioner. Once this knowledge is disseminated, it becomes the responsibility of the practitioner to translate it into practice. Practice is legitimated by research. The role of practice is to participate in a linear cause-effect relationship amenable to the configurations desired by research. Practice provides a site of enactment that allows research to establish its worth, its capacity for impact.

This view of practice as informed by research defines the purpose of the EdD, which has been founded on a range of statements relating to its capacity to 'impact professional practice' (Burgess and Wellington 2010; Evans 2002) or its aim to produce 'reflective practitioners' (Burgess, Weller, and Wellington 2013; Fenge 2010) where reflection is understood as the mechanism through which research is translated into practice.

Narrative four, Evidence-based Nursing, illustrates the pervasive grip of the idea that professional practice should be aligned to the best available evidence. It becomes apparent that nursing has continually sought to emulate the scientific, rational, positivist approach to healthcare taken by medical colleagues. Evidence based practice is a requirement in the codes of practice that nurses work to, included in the NMC Code in the UK (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2018). This is consistent with trends in other closely aligned professions: education, psychology and social work. However, it is most heavily accented in nursing as a cursory review of the literature on 'evidence-based practice' demonstrates. The largest search returns are in the domain of nursing. Evidence-based practice has its limitations, however. Just as Hammersley (2009) has questioned the elevated status of scientific evidence within education generally, arguing that there must always be some interpretation and application of tacit knowledge, similar issues have been raised within nursing and nurse education. There have long been challenges to the assumption that scientific findings can easily be transferred from one situation to another (Nolan and Bradley 2008); after all, care should take account of the recipient's preferences and experiences, as well as allowing professionals to make use of their experience to take account of what type of care or learning experience might be most effective for an individual. Research may inform practice, but it is mediated by the practitioner, which becomes possible only after it has been filtered by their personal and professional values and their capacity to build positive relationships with recipients.

### ***Narrative four: evidence-based nursing***

I was introduced to a world where research was expected to inform practice as an undergraduate nurse. Evidence-based practice was emphasised in teaching of both theory and practice. We were

constantly being asked to explain why we did everything. I have a memory of being asked by a practice tutor, 'Why would you clean the underneath of the dressing trolley shelf each time you do a dressing? What evidence do you have that microorganisms can travel?' In a department that was buried at the back of the medical building, there was a sense of having to prove ourselves as deserving of a place within the medical community but also of needing to demonstrate that we were separate and had a different philosophy of learning, one that prioritised the social model of health over the biomedical model. At a time when the nursing section of the university library was relatively small, we were encouraged to appropriate evidence from sociology, psychology and social policy to inform our practice, as well as from the biomedical sciences and to value qualitative research alongside quantitative.

Practice informed by research is hotly contested. We refer to it here as the most frequently invoked but least favoured formulation of the role of practice in the professional doctorate. While it is a subject worthy of substantial investigation, it is tangential to our discussion and is not explored in critical detail.

### **Second move: practice runs alongside research on a parallel track**

Our second move conceptualises an equally as problematic relationship, one in which research runs in parallel to practice. Here the researcher and practitioner are akin to the elemental inhabitants of an imagined City. The embodiment of water and oil. They traverse the same streets, visit the same places of interest, but as elemental entities have a negative valency. They are unable to connect. They have different ideas about what research questions are important and interesting. They disagree about the methods that confer research as worthwhile. They diverge on the conversations and bodies of knowledge to which research should contribute.

Nowotny et al.'s (2001) seminal distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge gestures towards this second move. Mode 1 knowledge, academic knowledge, is bounded by detached forms of inquiry, contemplative forms of reasoning and the establishment of what claims to be universal truth. This form of knowledge contrasts strongly with Mode 2 knowledge which is generated in the site of application, is transdisciplinary, highly reflexive and subject to novel forms of accountability. Mode 2 knowledge envelopes professional knowledge, its forms of inquiry are contextualised, its reasoning is pragmatic, and it aims to establish insight, which is fluid, ephemeral and subject to change. In this move, practice is cast as the errant teenage sibling to research. She knows what to do but refuses to behave in the ways research has carefully coded, analysed and predicted.

Research may be well intentioned in its desire to inform professional practice. But the desire is misplaced. The academy and sites of professional practice inhabit realms of existence compelled by dissimilar gravitational centres. The dissimilarity echoes and elaborates upon that made by Schön some decades earlier (Schön 1992a), between the 'high ground' of manageable disciplinary problems that lend themselves to solutions', which is quite unlike the 'swampy lowlands' of professional practice where problems are messy, ill defined, uncertain, confusing and incapable of technical solution. When the academic and the professional practitioner meet, the framing of the problem and the solution they arrive at takes the form of incommensurability:  $2 + 2 = \text{orange}$ .

### ***Narrative five: marginality embraced***

Marginality is key to my journey: marginality of space, time, language, academia, gender, age. The EdD sits in a marginal position within academia, I sit in a marginal position within the academic discourse. I always feel behind, invisible, running out of time, sitting on the edge, disrupting main discourses, being on the threshold, always longing to be let in, for belonging, but ultimately, I seem to have made marginality my space of belonging. That space in between practice and research, between theory and its transformation into practical output is a space I feel at ease with. But it's also a space I feel uncomfortable within. I constantly move in between these positions, reshaping and

revisiting my conceptualisation and my experience of the EdD. Its marginality within the academic discourse. A marginality I choose to embrace, although not always feeling at ease.

It is quite possible that part of what determines the varied relational configurations between research and practice is the non-unitary status of the phenomenon practice. The meaning and purpose of practice is particular to fields. Even within specific fields, practices vary along a number of dimensions. The idea of practice as juxtaposed to research is caught in Bourdieu's (1990) theorisation of the distance between the 'truth of the academic world and of the social world in general' or what he otherwise defines as the 'logic of science' and the 'logic of practice'.

*Marginality embraced* seems to develop a diffractive reading by introducing other parallels: between marginalities – the professional doctorate and the professional in marginal positions. Or the axial parallel implied by the 'space in between practice and research, between theory and its transformation into practical output'. Space prevents us from pursuing a comprehensive Bordieuan reading of the researcher-practitioner moving through these spaces. Nonetheless, we can't help but notice, especially in *marginality embraced* and *the impossibility of college life*, echoes in what Bourdieu (2000) came to describe as 'cleft habitus', the researcher-practitioner moving between different spaces and feeling comfortable in none.

### Third move: Practice is unframed by research

Both first and second moves are problematic. Our third is even more so. In our third move, research unframes professional practice. Causal links of improvement or benign coexistence trammelled along lines of linearity is replaced by relations of disruption, subversion and challenge (Fox and Slade 2014).

The researcher-practitioner is drawn into the academic fold. But nothing is as they imagined. The idea that research and practice are in some way complementary, enchanted within a symbiotic embrace of mutuality, overlooks the extent to which what counts as truth and as evidence for practice may not carry the same weight in the academy. The changing status of Learning Styles is a powerful case in point illustrating the unframing of practice. Learning Styles (the classification of students and pupils according to a preferred mode of engaging with new information and the matching of pedagogic style to meet the determination of those differences) were promoted by policy (Dearing 1997, 24), picked up by institutions and recorded on lesson plans of individual teachers who were required to demonstrate that they had identified students' learning styles and developed teaching strategies to accommodate them. It was further enforced by OfSTED. Seven years after Dearing, learning styles were exposed as neuromyth in a report published by Coffield et al. (2004) which asked and unambiguously answered the question, 'Should we be using Learning Styles'. If Learning Styles exposed as neuromyth is a worthy example of research unframing practice, it is an incomplete one. A literature review published in 2015 found that 89% of research papers listed in the ERIC and PubMed research databases, implicitly or directly endorsed the use of Learning Styles in post-16 education (Newton 2015). Coffield et al. (2004) and Pashler (2009) are categorical in exposing the inadequacy of Learning Styles theory and yet it persists.

But perhaps what is suggested as illustrative is merely an inverted replication of research informing practice. In move one the imagined informing was a constructive, proactive move of determining what practitioners should do. In this move, it is a reactive one asserting what practitioners must not do. The actual outcome of the Learning Style contestation might just as easily be used to illustrate our second move of research as running in alongside practice. What counts as categorically true for the academy could not undermine the intuitive marker of truth adopted in professional practice. Hence Learning Styles continued use.

There is a more fundamental way in which research unframes practice. Founded on the premise of producing reflective practitioners, developing professional knowledge and work-based research, impact is central to what defines the EdD. There is however, a policy narrative that sits behind these claims. The EdD promises to develop the researching-professional. Impact is accomplished through

generating new knowledge relevant to the workplace and the successful researching-professional's improved practice. The trouble with this idea is that it works from the premise that professional practice is susceptible to the creativity and innovations that the EdD inspires. We are not here considering the contours along lines of differences between knowing professional practice, knowing about professional practice and knowing how to change professional practice. Nor are we particularly mindful of the differences between professional knowing based on academic prowess or professional knowing based on experience, one valuing critical questioning and deliberation and the other based on fast paced, decision making drawing on tacit criteria. We are instead suggesting that the capacity to bring about change in professional practice is complex and contextual. The EdD assumes a symbiotic relationship between research and professional practice. But the symbiosis metaphor is multi-directional, it implies a mutuality between the workplace and the academy with each receptive to the other.

The promise of the EdD, research impacts professional practice, finds little conclusive evidence beyond that offered by marketing narrative. In an attempt to address this lacuna Boud et al. (2018) explored the perceptions of professional doctorate graduates on their workplace and professional area. There is no readily identifiable or widely used framework for investigating the impact of Professional Doctorates on their workplace. The capacity of the research conducted by the researching-practitioner to influence their workplace is mediated by – for example – a set of complementary processes that promote the creation, exchange and utilisation of information and knowledge within an organisational context – the 'learning practices' used across a particular organisation (Sung and Choi 2014). These learning practices are themselves filtered through layers and structures at an individual, interpersonal or institutional level. Other significant moderators that shape the positive association between research and professional practice are connected to the organisational culture and attitude towards innovation. This is bounded by whether the organisation leans towards high-risk exploration, which may bring about innovation and yield long term return, or instead prefers to remain in a low risk terrain of existing norms, rules and practices, which instead exploit capabilities (Boud et al. 2018).

The argument we pursue here may seem something of a contradiction. We have cited research that contradicts the efficacy of what was a popular and pervasive practice in the use of Learning Styles and then extended this discussion to suggest that research has negligible impact on the workplace primarily because the impact is premised not on the value of the research itself but what happens when this research encounters the workplace. There is, we argue, an apparent lack of symbiosis between workplace and academy. Although the EdD pivots on the equitable intersection between the academy and the profession, it might more reasonably, as Malfroy (2004) suggests, be thought of in terms of the academy, professional practice and change. For the EdD, the workplace is the site of research but not its ultimate object. The shift from profession to professional practice foregrounds the extent to which the EdD's most profound impact is felt by the individual and it is this impact that leads to the most profound influence on practice, as suggested by 'Narrative six: *the impossibility of college life*'. This notion of unframing is echoed within the literature. If the EdD has an impact, it is on the individual – their professional growth (Kumar and Dawson 2013); their presentation of self and being in the world (Burgess, Weller, and Wellington 2013); increased personal and professional confidence as well as enhanced engagement within and beyond their workplace (Fox and Slade 2014). The Professional Doctorates most profound impact is not on practice but the practitioner: the lives and careers of the researching-professional (Burgess and Wellington 2010).

The trouble with this very personal impact is that the exploration that generates it does not necessarily result in creativity or innovation in the workplace. In part this is because of the reasons already outlined about the ways in which individual agency is mediated by institution. But more significantly it is because learning, the generative dance on the edge of a volcano (Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes 2005) re-positions the researching professional. The researching-professional is compelled to occupy a space between prevailing academic norms (questioning and criticality), brought into sharp relief by what she has learnt as a result of her study (that Learning



Styles have no empirical base) and the norms and values of the workplace (compliance). She must somehow be both critical of practices her study has led her to understand more deeply while continuing to engage with them. What her professional responsibilities are – use learning styles to enhance student learning – has been unframed by her knowledge that there is no empirical basis to belief that using learning styles enhances student learning.

*The line of flight* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) we pursue here is one that suggests practice is unframed by research, not only because new learning renders aspects of practice obsolete or futile but because the researching -practitioner is so profoundly changed by the experience that practices they had hitherto accepted with little question are no longer tenable, but the workplace itself is not amenable in a straightforward, cause equals effect way to the learning that emerges through an engagement with research.

As *Narrative six: the impossibility of college life* suggests, through vivid recall, it is not practice that is changed by the EdD but the practitioner (Pratt et al. 2015). This narrative fragment points towards that moment when the professional sense of who we are and what we know can no longer be reconciled with professional location. In Bourdieuan terms, a moment of ‘hysteresis’, of misalignment between habitus and field (Bourdieu 1977).

The EdD brings about change in how and what professionals think, what they aspire to, their perceptions, the judgements they make, their behaviour, what they do and their interactions. These are the discursive materials of practice. This misalignment is a moment when college life becomes impossible, a moment of disruption, subversion and challenge (Fox and Slade 2014). We read this space diffractively in as much as it gestures towards an embodied and lived experience beyond a research/practice binary.

### ***Narrative six: the impossibility of college life***

I can't say that the EdD was the only reason I found working in a college impossible. After all, I started the EdD in response to a failed OfSTED (two of them). OfSTED was the bane of my professional life. I thought a doctorate would help me come to a deeper understanding and capacity to comply with the elusivity of quality as OfSTED required. I could not have been more wrong. Rather than adding to what I knew, the EdD caused me to instead question what I thought I knew. I could no longer read a policy document or quality framework with a singular view to evaluating the extent to which my working practices were compliant. Instead, I critiqued and questioned its premise. I wanted to see what evidence lay behind its assertions. The EdD erased the indelible mark of failure that OfSTED had tattooed on my forehead. Working to institutional arrangements that expected me to intone and enact the absurdities of policy took too heavy a toll on my well-being. The ideas the EdD allowed me to explore were like a balm. Theory is my super-hero.

### **Fourth and final move: a diffractive reading**

We have so far assumed and worked within a notion of research and practice as two distinct entities that may be heuristically conceptualised as objects in a shifting relationship to each other. However, when thinking through the extent to which research unframes practice because of the ways in which it changes the practitioner, the idea of symbiosis casts a shadow.

We have by now become embroiled in a hotly contested terrain with a clamorous history. It is unlikely that contemporary moves towards ‘close to practice research’ (Wyse et al. 2021) will offer the possibility of a less fractious fourth move. What we work towards is the possibility of a close-to-practice research based on entanglement. With this we gesture towards our fourth and final speculative move: a diffractive reading of the place of professional practice within the EdD.

Diffraction offers a way through the research and professional practice nexus. The distinctions made between research and professional practice, between the academy and the professional are the inevitable outcome of dis/connections between knowledge and its situatedness. A diffractive

reading (Barad 2007) celebrates the oneness of body and mind, of human and the more than human world. It recasts subjectivity as an ecological rather than an individual accomplishment. The researcher-practitioner transgresses the spaces between the academy, research and professional practice as an embedded, embodied, extended and enacted 'I'. This does not dissipate antagonisms. It points towards generative and creative ways of inhabiting them and through them coming to know the world. We hear in this notion several echoes.

One echo is the idea of research as an embedded and embodied practice. Might this connect to Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theorising thought as not always conscious or reducible to an abstraction: his concept of the *habitus*, a learned series of bodily dispositions within which we are placed, through which we perpetuate the social order. The patterns of our daily lives are not experienced or learned through conscious abstraction, but through repeated movements and actions which become habitual. Thus, the *habitus* defines our living and professional practices, deportment, modes of speech, manners and tastes. *Habitus* marks us as un/belonging. Through it, we know more than we can articulate. It is an embodied knowing through which we live, rather than think or speak. In our collaborative autoethnographic conversations, we were mindful of this entanglement and its resonances. Diffraction allowed us to read beyond the mutuality generative and generated disposition, to notice more forcefully how we diffracted with each other, like waves that displace themselves after encountering a surface. We moved and re-positioned ourselves, always in constant flux and becoming. *Being part of a faith community* illustrates the wave like displacement that community makes possible.

### ***Narrative seven: being part of a faith community***

A diffractive understanding of the role of practice within the EdD is that the EdD student is both student and practitioner simultaneously, often both insider and outsider, and is 'entangled' with other things too. So for me, I am practicing as a tutor of health and social care whilst also researching students' narratives of online tuition and learning how to research. I am drawing on my ongoing experiences and connections in other roles, both professional and voluntary. Being part of a faith community is important because my local community includes a well-known oral historian who occasionally gives me pearls of wisdom, as well as a few other supportive academics. The participants in our research studies are also drawing on multiple experiences of being and connecting. The participants in my study are students but this is not the only role from which they draw their narratives about online learning. One is a teacher at an FE college who is learning to teach online by observing how her university tutorials work. Another is part of an online GCSE class and is able to make comparisons with her experience of university tuition. I also have some tutor participants in my study, and they have drawn from a range of roles and experiences in their narratives too, from an online choir to a parent of a child attending school online.

A diffractive reading allowed us to move beyond the Cartesian mind's only certainty – its ability to be present to itself. The body exists in space and time and the mind's parameters are defined through its interaction with a physical environment. It is through this interaction that the cogitating mind arrives at 'certainties' (Hayles 1999, 203). A diffractive reading challenges the research and practice binary and its associated hierarchies. A diffractive reading refuses the stance of the reflective practitioner. This is an unnerving rejection. The reflective practitioner has dominated professional practice for at least three decades (Brookfield 2017; Schön 1992a). Its rejection is based on a realisation that, grounded in conceptualisations of experiential learning, reflective thinking assumes a pre-existing world, a knowable object independent from the knowing subject. In disrupting this settlement, Barad (2007) contrasts the optical metaphors of reflection and diffraction. Both describe the behaviour of waves (light, sound or water) when they encounter a boundary. As a physicist, she points out that reflection refers to waves bouncing off an obstacle. Thus, the metaphor implies a mirroring. Extracting a representation of the world. Diffraction refers to waves spreading out from and bending around an encountered obstacle, boundary or opening. The

metaphor emphasises the value of attending to difference, patterns of interference, the effects of difference making practices. It is therefore not a simple optical metaphor but a method and practice. Predicated on a relational ontology, diffraction implies time-space-matter and meaning as co-constitutive (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017). In our terms, theory and practice co-existent. In Bordieuan terms, field is embedded in the concept of habitus. Habitus shapes field and vice versa. Diffractive reading adds to this relationship an extra element of disruptiveness, a line of flight beyond the centrality of the 'I' and of the human. Diffraction allows for unforeseen relationalities to emerge, between humans and other-than humans, for theory to become not only practice, but also methodology. Diffraction is indeed a powerful tool employed to disrupt, to bring in multiple perspectives in a cacophony of voices that challenge hierarchical binary structures 'to make a difference in the world' (Haraway in Barad 2007, 71). Diffraction reinforces differences rather than looking for unity and enables marginal positions to emerge, to be seen and heard. It is a political act that allows for the presence of the excluded. In reading, writing and thinking together we considered our own *scattered experiences of transformation* or recounted vague sensations of *becoming wolf-woman* the value of diffraction as an ethical stance of accepting the otherness of the other, or valuing marginality, as an onto (epistem) ology enabled the movement our project needed.

Emerging from Haraway's (1997) pioneering work, diffraction *offers* a strategy for making a difference in the world in ways that avoid reductionist thinking. Diffraction is generative in as much as it creates something new. It breaks out of reflection with its cyclical, inductive thought regime (Hill 2018).

Through reflection, the researcher-practitioner becomes an autonomous outsider who views knowledge and objects from a distance. Her gaze remains firmly within a research and professional practice binary. She holds the world at a distance (Barad 2007), representing images of reality. The act of representation is fantasised as having no impact on the object being represented. With diffraction we were able to think, experience and embody the performative act of doing research and writing about it. It allowed us to accept mutuality and entanglement; entanglement of theory and practice, of academic, personal and professional lives, of writing, thinking, living and embodying research. Our diffractive methodology allowed us to view the world from within.

### ***Narrative eight: scattered experiences of transformation***

My EdD journey as a language professional is characterised by nomadic experiences of migration and transformation and by a complex interaction between embodied and lived experiences between the margins of the personal and of the professional. This nomadic journey allowed space for non-linear thinking, to be attentive to disruptive elements and to reflect on my own diasporic journey into the uncertainty of becoming a language professional and a researcher. In this way, nomadism, besides being an ontological framework of reference, also becomes a methodology, that gives voice to transversal and fragmented personal and professional journeys in a disruptive and unconventional way. Learning and developing as a language professional, as a researcher and later on in my life as a psychotherapist do not seem to follow linear and predicted trajectories into knowledge and professional life. My own narrative account, as well as those co-constructed with the participants in my research journey, seems to give voice to scattered and fragmented experiences of transformation in which personal and professional knowledge are intertwined, connected and interrelated in a non-linear assemblage of occurrences and circumstances that define the multiplicity of the self.

Diffraction is first of all a reading strategy; it is a strategy against reading the academic canons to reproduce them in a different format, reinforcing established patterns and parameters. A diffractive reading meant allowing ourselves to be affected by the work, to be entangled within it, allowing an affective engagement with theory. In our immersion, we felt a shock of recognition during moments of unexpected insight. Such moments located in the folds between research and professional practice, between academic practice and folk theory, we later found to be important moments of

knowledge production, theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. Diffraction is also a mode of writing, of intermingling different voices in a dialogical and relational mode, without hierarchies and pre-established outcomes.

### *Narrative nine: becoming wolf-woman*

I haven't thought about this for years. A diffractive reading welcomes creative ideas and uncanny interpretations: the familiar made strange, the everyday taking on the numinous aura of the otherworldly. A refusal of the binary – even the human/nonhuman binary. This feels uncomfortable. Towards the end of my EdD I had an overwhelming sensation of becoming-animal. Of becoming wolf-woman. I had worked in the college for years. As becoming wolf-woman, everything I had previously known became strange. I felt as if I was walking through my workplace, a college, late at night, long after everyone had gone home. It was dark. It should have been silent. I wandered down corridors, looked into classrooms, and up at the walls decorated with corporate images of smiling success stories. As becoming wolf-woman my senses changed. I became aware of traces, things that had always been there but my becoming wolf-woman senses heightened. I could hear conversations from miles and moments away. They sounded like echoes. My colleagues spoke. Several conversations clamoured around what they said, politicians' pronouncements, shock, panic and fear inducing newspaper headlines; muffled voices confirmed or confronted what they said, sometimes drowning them out. It was an agonisingly slow process, becoming wolf-woman. But I noticed the change overnight. Does it really need saying? Becoming wolf-woman's professional practice changed.

### Conclusion

While diffraction and its associated philosophies have had significant impact on education, it is nonetheless an emerging onto (epistem) ology, characteristically a loosely connected set of ideas that are still taking shape. This study contributes towards that formation. We have plugged diffraction into our thinking and working spaces, allowing it to inspire and inflect rather than define our approach and its boundaries.

We conclude that a diffractive reading has generative implications for the relationality between practice and the professional doctorate. Diffraction moves our analysis beyond mimetic reflection: the impulse to reify and replicate a linear causality between research and practice. Through diffraction the 'research leads to improved professional practice' linearity becomes a research/practice nexus contingently performed. Sometimes the contingently performed nexus is a wave; at other times it is a particle. Sometimes research informs practice. At other times it undermines, unframes or merely parallels practice. A diffractive reading disrupts the privileging of stasis.

We each have a preferred reading of the theory/practice nexus. The value of our approach lies less in our conclusion but is diffractively located in the process of reading and writing as inquiry (Richardson 2003), that is in moving in, out and around the possibilities performed by the invocation of research/practice.

We conclude that posthuman narratives generated through collaborative autoethnography enable the production and analysis of expansive rather than reductive data. Diffractive patterns of knowing confer intelligibility on the incommensurable. Parts of the world are able to make themselves comprehensible to other parts of the world (Barad 2007, 185). In other words,  $2 + 2 = \text{orange}$  does, after all, make sense. Posthuman narratives generated through collaborative autoethnography resist the geometry of exclusion between self and other, self and not-self; between I and not-I (Barad 2014). By grounding our analysis in dialogue rather than quasi scientific qualitative method, knowledge emerges through the assemblage of self, research, memory, colleagues, virtual and physical encounters.

A diffractive reading of the contingent relationality between practice and the professional doctorate negates not difference, but its binary. A diffractive difference is not 'in opposition to

sameness, nor is it synonymous with separateness' (Trinh 1988). It is, to use Barad's words, an 'agential cut', that is a boundary drawing exercise deploying a magnifying lens (rather than a razor) to demarcate the entangled effects of elements within phenomena. The agential cut disentangles. It does not reproduce separations but rather, as one move, cuts together-apart (Barad 2014, 168). This idea is dispersed/diffracted throughout the paper. Our analysis and our writing assume an iterative (re) configuring of patterns of differentiating and entanglement.

The novel contribution made in this paper, namely that research/practice and the professional doctorate is a fluid grouping, has enabled other exploratory moves within which difference is neither erased nor flattened. It has instead become a node for coalescence. Body/mind, male/female, wolf/woman, insider/outsider is brought into diffractive relation.

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