Professional doctorates reconciling academic and professional knowledge: towards a diffractive re-reading

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Professional doctorates reconciling academic and professional knowledge: towards a diffractive re-reading

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the different epistemologies that define the Professional Doctorate, paying close attention to how Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) doing a Professional Doctorate reconcile academic and professional knowledge. Through a narrative exploration of the literature published since the first UK Professional Doctorates were awarded in 2000, the paper situates the Professional Doctorate within the confluence of the workplace, the profession and the university. From this stance, the paper explores distinct knowledge terrains between knowledge generated by Professional Doctorates in the context of application and knowledge generated in the context of disciplinary laws applied to sites of practice. The purpose of this discussion is to understand if, how and to what extent Professional Doctorates reconcile competing knowledge terrains. This study draws towards two broad conclusions. The first conclusion suggests that in the literature identified, the distinction between academic and professional epistemologies has little resonance. Instead of the dichotomous knowledge generated in the context of practice in contrast to knowledge generated in the context of disciplinary laws, Professional Doctorates were ensconced within several competing epistemologies. The literature identified focuses on impact and identity, concepts the study employs as lenses to guide a discussion. The paper thus views the process of reconciliation first through the lens of impact and then through the lens of identity. The investigation then draws a second conclusion: The epistemic landscape occupied by the Professional Doctorate is involved in a reconciliation of more significance that the putative academic and professional binary. The paper is compelled towards a diffractive re-reading of this academic-professional knowledge tension. This new reading allows a full recognition of both difference and mutual entanglement between knowledge generated in the context of practice and knowledge generated in the context of disciplinary laws.

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Introduction

The proliferation of Professional Doctorate programmes (PD-programmes) since the latter part of the twentieth century – offering a diversity of forms, fields and disciplines – responds to the needs encoded in the knowledge society or knowledge economy, or more recently in calls for knowledge transfer or knowledge exchange. The policy demand is for professionally relevant post-graduate education (Kot & Hendel, 2012). This change re-situates the university within its third mission, beyond research and teaching: Making a contribution to society.

However, making this contribution foregrounds tensions between conflicting perceptions of what counts as knowledge or what is meant by practice. Conflict which is further complicated by PD-programmes which vary in terms of their structure, curriculum and modes of assessment. The Professional Doctorate postgraduate researcher’s (PD-PGR) quest for knowledge is located at messy intersections between the workplace, the profession and the university. Unlike PhD candidates, PD-PGRs tend towards mid-career, late-career or career-change professionals, usually employed while pursuing for a part-time self-funded doctoral degree. The thesis they produce is premised on making a contribution towards knowledge and professional practice (Bourner et al., 2001). And while there is a distinction between the profession and the workplace, PD-PGRs typically undertake research within their own professional context in workplace sites within which they are deeply implicated. A challenge, therefore, faced by PD-PGRs is the need to navigate a complex study environment in which their professional employment is a significant component. It is worth noting that while professional practice-based PhDs or PhDs undertaken in fields such as education, health or social work might face similar epistemic challenges to those encountered by PD-PGRs, our purpose for this paper is to understand the experiences of PD-PGRs.

Knowledge, the university and the professional workplace

The once settled intimacy between the university and knowledge (its generation and understanding) is now precarious (Barnett & Bengtsen, 2019). Trust, expertise and knowledge once embodied in the professional have been disaggregated (Morley, 2003). Attempts to define knowledge are fraught with difficulties. Difficulties compounded by alternative facts, post-truth and the emergence of opaque algorithms determining 'digital truth' (Harrison & Luckett, 2019). Even without the distraction of bad faith actors – the essence, legitimacy or genealogy of knowledge is elusive.

Academic traditions from positivism, through critical theory, critical realism to an emergent posthumanism have overlayed each other's knowledge conceptions with quick succession. Amidst this flux, propositional knowledge (knowledge that) found in books, journals and libraries, competes with knowledge made and found in situ (knowledge how), pursued by interdisciplinary teams who briefly come together to address a specific problem.

The certainty of Cartesian duality has not survived (intact and unscathed) the decolonial onslaught. Epistemicide (Grosfoguel, 2013) – the exclusion, silencing, distortion or mishearing of subaltern knowledge – an injustice perpetrated on the Global South by the Global North has become entrenched within Higher Education policy in the
Global North as STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are valued for providing worthwhile and economically useful knowledge in contrast to ‘rip-off Mickey Mouse degrees’ (Allen, 2023) – presumably the humanities, arts and social sciences.

There is a profound risk of providing little more than caricature when surveying this terrain. Nonetheless, the distinction we operationalise has its derivatives. Plato theorised a relational distance between a knowing subject in direct or indirect relation to a known object. Aristotle distinguished theoretical and practical sciences. While Kant (1958) differentiated what we know prior to experience and what we know based on experience (Buehl & Alexander, 2001). These dualities find an echo in Gibbons et al.’s (1994) seminal distinction between modes of knowledge. Mode 1 simplified as knowledge development which is linear, causal, disciplinary and cumulative – arising in universities, in contrast to, Mode 2 knowledge – produced in the context to which it is applied, responding to problems or arising therein.

In a sweeping gesture towards contemporary discourses, Young and Muller (2014) lament conceptual silence around definitions of ‘knowledge’ in discussions of knowledge society, knowledge worker and the knowledgeable professional. While the body of work to which they are aligned provides a valuable insight into this lacuna we have inadvertently explored, their theorisation is not strictly in view. Mindful of professional development, which might variously include initial teacher training, a short skills focused course, or any Higher Education study, they sought to understand the nature of expertise, a composite of knowledge and action. Their focus did not extend to the PD-PGR tasked with writing a doctoral thesis, which might be initiated for a host of personal, professional or career motivations.

Research into practice – the necessary focus of practitioner research – can take fragmented paths: about practice; into practice; or through practice (Frayling, 1993). Professional knowledge encompasses a broad spectrum: cultural; personal; process; propositional; tacit; implicit; explicit; public; and private, each with a relationship to workplace practices (Eraut, 2009). Knowledge emerges through continual revision and constant interaction within changing environments which blur boundaries (Scott et al., 2004). What this suggests is that while polarised notions of knowledge are helpful starting points for our discussion, they are unlikely to offer meaningful or satisfactory conclusions.

**Literature review: methodology**

A four-stage iterative literature review was undertaken between January 2021 and June 2021 using an approach closely aligned to Grant and Booth’s (2009) critical (rather than systematic) review. We aimed to identify key texts rather than offer exhaustive coverage and sought to scope for conceptual contribution rather than tabulate what is known with a view to making recommendations for practice. Indeed, the paper situates itself in the space between the known and practice.

Beginning with ‘search and select’ we identified potential literature using the terms professional doctorates, academic knowledge, professional knowledge and synonyms, in both title and text. We identified 113 potentially suitable texts, published in English since 2000, when PD-programmes had become established in most UK universities.
(Bourner et al., 2001), the geo-political context from which we write. Throughout each stage, we sought to exclude studies premised on professional development (through terms such as nursing, social work, teacher education) that did not also make direct reference to professional doctorates and professional practice. At stage two ‘title review’, two authors independently reviewed these 113 papers for relevance based on their titles. Of 113 sources, both reviewers agreed that 73 papers were fully in scope and worthy of a more detailed stage three ‘abstract and scan’ review. The stage three review led to further reduction, with 29 texts ultimately identified as within scope. At stage four, the final data extraction stage, we summarised key information from each paper – reference details, abstract, research question, aims of the study, country of origin, cohort/sample/population size, methodology, key findings. While the papers were largely empirical, we did not deliberately filter those that were conceptual if they were relevant. Beyond publication in a peer reviewed journal, no other standardised quality criteria were deployed to sift the identified papers. A final review of these stage four texts led to a detailed annotation of each text based on exploring its central thesis and how it addressed our central concern.

Overall, we concluded that the question of reconciliation between these diametrically opposed ways of knowing – the ways in which knowledge is constituted, produced, and used or legitimated – was sparse in the literature surrounding PD-programmes. The binary with which we approached the subject quickly fragmented into several competing and contrasting modes of knowing within the PGRs’ knowledge landscape. More salient concerns emerged such as questions of impact or identity. Two abiding concerns within this polarity might be framed in terms of: what impact does the PD programme have on the profession or the workplace? Or how does undertaking a PD programme impact on personal and professional identity? Following the literature, our quest to understand if, how and to what extent PD-PGRs reconcile academic and professional knowledge is diffraeted through the lens of impact: initially impact on the workplace and followed by impact on identities.

Impact on the workplace: professional contexts and development

In undertaking a Professional Doctorate, PD-PGRs commit themselves to a rigorous critical investigation of matters they consider significant to their professional practice (Kumar & Antonenko, 2014). This ‘close-to-practice’ (CtP) research (Wyse et al., 2021) straddles three interdependent sites of knowledge-production: firstly, where the research is undertaken – the research site, secondly, the workplace site – frequently (but not always) the same geo-location as the research site, and finally, the pedagogic site, which is the academic learning space, the university. The conception, development and completion of a doctoral thesis impacts directly on how these sites of knowledge production are independently and relationally configured.

Our focus on the impact the PD-programme has on the workplace site is sensitive to the profession, the professional and the professional workplace occupying distinct spaces. We consider the extent to which the professional doctorate has a specific impact on the professional context and professional life of the researcher. Our review of the literature suggests that professional doctoral study and its impact on the PGR has been extensively researched (Boud et al., 2018; Burgess et al., 2011), in preference to the impact on the
workplace or the professional context studied (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019). Amongst other things this may in part be due to the complexity of measuring contextual impact (Fox & Slade, 2014).

**Knowledge tensions in professional contexts**

When PGRs respond to and reflect upon live issues with intellectual rigour, the workplace becomes a site of significant knowledge generation. Thus concluded Lester’s (2012) study based on reading 33 practice-focused doctoral theses produced in 11 countries between 2000 and 2009. However, this assertion was not based on an empirical review of workplace changes but rather premised on a detailed assessment of the doctoral theses. This provided the basis for Lester’s elucidation of workplace knowledge as: reflection on action, practice as research, research within practice, research for practice, and synthesis. Scott et al. (2004) issued a prescient warning about the tensions between academic knowledge and professional knowledge. This paper echoes this concern, though demurs their conclusion. Scott et al. (2004) recognised these tensions as reverberating through and across a fragmented academic field, a field they characterised as disciplinary, transdisciplinary, technical, dispositional, and critical. The challenge for researching professionals, ensconced in the workplace is that they occupy these knowledge terrains at multiple levels from ‘peripherality’ to ‘full membership’ (Scott et al., 2004, p. 55). For the PGR, professional knowledge frames, articulates and instigates their research idea, it is also key to the design of their conceptual framework with which they synthesise ‘personal experiences and contextual information with the existing theories and empirical data that has already been generated in the field’ (Kumar & Antonenko, 2014, p. 60).

Much of the focus on the PD programme in connection to the workplace is in a similar vein to the work discussed so far in this section. There is a great deal of attention placed on the person of the professional doctorate and the extent to which they make the necessary reconciliations. Burgess et al.’s (2011) multi method study explored tensions in the purpose and impact of the professional doctorate, pointing towards the role played by a supportive and inclusive work environment for the successful integration of the doctoral research and researcher. They draw towards an idealised notion of symbiosis – a linear knowledge and skills transfer from the professional doctorate study to the workplace – to characterise this relationship. This theorisation built on their previous work adding weight to the argument that, given the contextual barriers and restrictions practitioners may find in the workplace, learning how to accomplish knowledge and skills transfer had a curricular implication: it is suggested as an integral necessity of academic learning. They also discussed the crucial role of being-in-the-world-with-others (Bourdieu, 1990), acknowledging the significance of how individuals present themselves in their work context. The relationship between professional knowledge and academic knowledge and the extent of symbiotic transfer of knowledge and skills to the workplace is thus argued by Burgess et al. (2011) as a function of being-in-the-world-with-others.

The complexity of multiple interactions between the interpersonal – individual and their colleagues, and the organisational – individual and their workplace, has seemingly deterred substantial research into this area. Boud et al.’s (2018) study of graduates, which aimed at gathering evidence of their influence within their workplace and professional field, drew conclusions similar to that cited by Burgess et al. (2011) some years earlier.
They concluded that the PGR’s capacity for organisational influence was dependent not only on how well the doctoral research fitted with the institutional strategies and practices, but also importantly on the person of the graduate, their being-in-the-world, dispositions and capabilities. Specifically, it required that they were able to promote and lead ‘boundary-spanning conversations’ (Burgess et al., 2011, p. 924). This conclusion is further echoed by Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2019). Their study, drawing on the experiences of researching professionals and the authors’ own colleagues, highlighted the importance of alignment between the focus of a doctoral study and the organisational context. Recognising the significance of the PGR and their capacity for interpersonal and/or organisational level influence, they argued that there needs to be far greater understanding of the ‘possible interplay between agency and social structures’ (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019, p. 409).

Much of this literature exploring PD-PGRs and the workplace places little emphasis on navigating or reconciling knowledge terrains. This discussion is subsumed or elided within an almost exclusive focus on the impact of the PD-PGR on the workplace. The reconciliation process we prioritised in this exploration is folded into metaphors of ‘merger’, ‘symbioses’, or ‘integration’. And while these studies recognise the person of the PD-PGR as pivotal to the process, each recognise that it is the interplay between agency and structure that ultimately determines the impact that postgraduate study has on the workplace. This ecological view of agency is an interesting but peripheral concern. The reconciliation of academic and professional knowledge remains in question as it seems not to determine the PD-PGR and their relationship to the workplace.

Cognitive and affective professional development

The reconciliation of academic and professional knowledge is an unexpectedly peripheral consideration in the literature we identified. This is further evidenced in studies that focus on PGRs and their professionalism. Mapping changes associated with PGR during doctoral study and after graduation, Burgess and Wellington (2010) concluded that impacts were largely at an individual rather than an institutional level. If the focus of discussion remains on the individual (rather than the institution or the profession) it is possible to surmise that while the PD-programme is an academic undertaking, its impacts are not exclusively academic. While the PD-PGRs who participated in their study reported academic development in terms of improved skills, knowledge and understanding, these were equitably balanced by affective changes in terms of their attitudes, feelings, self-esteem, dispositions and emotions.

This has intriguing implications for our central concern regarding reconciliations. Lundt’s (2018) conceptualisation of ‘research-mindedness’, a cognitive development that enhanced the PD-PGRs capacity to theorise their practice, is made possible only when filtered through affective change. PD-PGRs’ accomplished ‘research-mindedness’ through cultivating an inside/outside persona, criticality, rigorous and creative reflection (on and/in action). The interplay between agency and structure is once again referenced in Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn’s (2019) identification of individual reflexivity/collective reflexivity which, they argued, as necessary for organisational change. When academic and professional knowledge is explored through the lens of the PD-PGR and workplace impact, reconciliation is folded into metaphors. When the lens shifts slightly
to instead focus on the PD-PGR, their cognitive and affective development within the workplace, a somewhat distinct notion of dialogue between academic and professional knowledges, becomes possible (Scott et al., 2004). For instance, if academic knowledge is understood as ‘disposition’ or ‘transdisciplinarity’, academic study can help researching professionals to ‘a re-evaluate their knowledge perspectives’ (Scott et al., 2004, p. 50). The re-evaluation of knowledge perspectives is highlighted in a study that views it as a pre-requisite for the transformation of practice. The potential for radical transformation of practice is most heavily accented when working within academic knowledge as critical and the concomitant transformation of practice is one that creates disruptions and change.

The diffraction of academic knowledge into five distinct dimensions (Scott et al., 2004) coupled with the invocation of the affective as a defining mechanism through which institutional change is enacted is a reminder that the PGR experience and its impact on their workplace cannot be defined through a singular lens. PGRs experience their doctoral studies and its impact on their professional lives – the embodied interplay between agency and structure – along multiple axial points of difference.

The PD programme is premised on enhancing the capacity of graduates to make a difference to the workplace. But it would seem that this outcome is accomplished indirectly when the experience of postgraduate study changes the dynamic of workplace relationships and forms of engagement with workplace practices (Fox & Slade, 2014). In other words, impact or agency is mediated through the structure of the workplace itself or the nature of learning. If the PD-PGR aligns their research to institutional strategies within an organisation willing to engage with the outcome of a study, there is strong potential for impact. It is also the case that while PD programme study yields both cognitive and affective outcomes, the development of theoretical understanding of the workplace is not valued on the exclusive basis that it is a mechanism through which workplace change is accomplished. It is a worthwhile end in itself.

Exploring the notion of reconciliation through the lens of the workplace points to the extent to which impact, like agency, is a mediated, ecological, indirect outcome. Indeed, it might be considered as an effect. Fox and Slade’s (2014) interviews with EdD graduates suggested that their academic knowledge tended to be kept at a conceptual rather than an instrumental level. If change is accomplished as much through the dispositional affective or non-cognitive aspects of PD-PGRs, then an exploration of reconciliations through the lens of personal and professional identity may provide some insight.

Impact on personal and professional identity

A second dominant theme that ran through the literature was the impact that PD programmes had on the personal lives and professional development of PD-PGRs. Viewing reconciliations through the lens of personal growth and development, reconciliation remains tangentially displaced by impact on personal and professional identity.

Confidence and cognitive growth

Narratives analysed by Burgess and Wellington (2010) highlighted PD-PGRs gaining confidence in their use of language, their capacity to engage in debate – putting their
view forward in different settings. This seems a precursor to the ‘boundary-spanning conversations’ elaborated upon by Burgess et al. (2011, p. 924) a year later. The emphasis placed on the personal or professional impact of PD-PGR belies a preoccupation with learning as product. With a view that alternatively framed learning as process, Costley and Stephenson (2007) pointed towards the structure of PD programmes. PD-PGRs being authorised to define the scope and direction of their doctorate without imposition regarding methodology supported their personal growth. This work by Costley and Stephenson (2007) gestures towards a re-consideration of the privileging of the university as the only legitimate knowledge producers. The extent to which PD-PGRs are compelled to accomplish being-in-the-world-with-others across multiple not always coherent knowledge terrains, situated the PD programme within a process through which the university is repositioning itself within an era of ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000). The invocation of supercomplexity has implications for our developing thesis. If complexity defines a state of affairs in which demand exceeds available resource, presenting an individual with an excess of data, entities or clients, supercomplexity is of an entirely different order. It points to conceptual excess, a multiplicity of frameworks requiring reconciliation.

**Evolving identities through critical incidents**

Supercomplexity, referenced by Costley and Stephenson (2007), gestures towards a particular strand of thought within the literature. Personal growth and professional development are outcomes necessitated by living in an era in which navigating competing conceptual demands – such as academic and professional knowledge – changes our sense of self. Contemporary conceptualisations of identity (derived largely from a social constructionist view) sees identity as shape-shifting and fluid. Identity is here likened to a form of pastiche or collage emergent from individuals’ interactions with others and their relation to context. Practitioners encounter this multiplicity in several ways as professionals, students and academic researchers – along with additional familial and social roles. Beijaard et al. (2004) posit that professional identity is made up of both the person, who is informed by tacit knowledge developed through practical experience, and their professional context. In contrast, the student/developing academic researcher identity is informed by propositional and explicit knowledge developed through formal study (Scott et al., 2004). But the ways in which these professional and academic identities are sutured together varies. They are, at times, distinct identities, enacted within distinct geo-locations while at other times they blur and meld within or between different utterances, determined by both spatial and temporal axial points.

Pivotal moments in PD-PGR identity formation occur when academic and professional selves are brought into tension, or where conflict arises between an individual’s sense of self and the impositions of the professional or academic context within which they are located. Referred to as ‘critical incidents’ or ‘critical moments’, they require identity work. Individuals are compelled to engage in the (re)negotiation of their identities, forming, repairing, or strengthening (perhaps abandoning) their sense of self (Sveigsson & Alvesson, 2003). Through such critical moments the PD-PGR rethinks their positionality and engages in an interrogation of the contradictions within and between their different identities (Boncori & Smith, 2020). While Boncori and Smith (2020) take the
PhD rather than the PD programme as their focus, their study pivoted around a PhD-PGR working and studying simultaneously (typical of the PD-PGR experience). We have included them here as their distinction between learning and learned academic identity resonated with our exploration. They led us to the suggestion that identity may then represent the space within which the reconciliation between academic and professional ways of knowing is negotiated, with the interrogation of positionality being the process.

For Burnard et al. (2018) these shifts and developments are not confined to separate professional or academic domains but involve the creation of a hyphenated researching-professional identity. PD-PGRs are not singularly ‘insiders’ – practitioners, or ‘outsiders’ – researchers. They are both. Identities are brought together through critical reflexivity, as PD-PGRs are (become) researching-professionals. This process involves the development of new viewpoints and attitudes that transcend professional and researcher identities. Reflecting on her own experience, Smith (2020) supports this viewpoint, commenting on her realisation in the doctorate that she did not transition from being a practitioner to being a researcher but developed into a researching-professional. This notion of an emergent research professional identity, made up of bits and pieces of practitioner and researcher being implies a comfortable reconciliation. However, if the constructivist view of identity is accepted, rather than signalling reconciliation, research professional identity might just as easily represent an additional conceptual plane within which the PD-PGR is required to act. Another space within which they are required to navigate being-in-the-world-with-others.

If Smith’s (2020) suggestion of the research professional folds practitioner and researcher being comfortably into each other, Cunningham (2018) had previously suggested a less comfortable entanglement. He broadens the notion of critical incident to include the act of applying for a professional doctorate. This incorporates the professional self into an academic frame. Writing a research proposal imbues the professional self with academic meaning, causing what Cunningham (2018) refers to as a disturbance of equilibrium. What is significant here is that Cunningham theorises the process of writing and talking to others about a research proposal as requiring a level and mode of reflective engagement on professional practices that PGRs are unused to. His approach remains within the vein of identity as the grounds upon which academic and professional ways of knowing are negotiated. But while Smith (2020) hints at ‘third-space’ identities, Cunningham (2018) leans towards a subsummation. The professional self is re-written in academic terms. That identity as something that can be re-written is echoed by Boncori and Smith (2020). Their analysis of the first author’s autoethnographic account of engaging with a part-time doctorate whilst employed as a full-time HE lecturer similarly highlights the start of the doctorate as an intense moment of critical incident. Boncori, inhabiting HE student and HE lecturer roles simultaneously points to the textual engagement in identity construction. Writing a thesis is experienced as demanding, uncomfortable and emotional work (Burnard et al., 2018). This discomfort also featured in Crossouard and Pryor’s (2008) interviews with PD-PGRs at the start of their PD-programme. Disempowerment accompanied their attempts to reconcile professional and academic discourses. The dissonance was named some years later by Wadham and Parkin (2017) as ‘first strangeness’. Smith (2020) locates
this discomfort as connected to feelings of becoming a novice after years of being a confident practitioner in the field.

The navigation of professional and academic knowledge takes place within and upon the identity of the PD-PGR through critical moments, and is an ongoing process threaded through the doctoral experience. While the studies we have so far explored focus on PGRs starting their journey, the process of re-writing the professional self as incorporated within an academic frame is continuous. For example, the literature review, the development of a conceptual framework and the methodology, require similarly intense entanglements. Research provides a ‘lens with which to interrogate the professional context’ (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008, p. 228) breaking down what had hitherto been neatly defined boundaries between theory, practice, the professional and the academic (Burnard et al., 2018). The profound impact of this identity work has been examined by Crossouard and Pryor’s (2008) case study research with textual engagement via formative feedback facilitating PD-PGRs’ developing identities as they navigate the professional and the academic. The study explored feedback provided to PD-PGRs, highlighting particular weaknesses in defining the HEness of doctoral study, engagement with methodology. For authors such as Cunningham (2018), Easterman and Maguire (2016), and Haynes and Fulton (2015), writing a thesis is the mechanism through which transformative change in identities occurs. Critical and reflective writing requires PD-PGRs to question their own assumptions, hence examine their identities. Nonetheless, Easterman and Maguire (2016) acknowledge that critical and reflective writing is an area that many PD-PGRs struggle with. They encourage PD-PGRs to conceptualise their professional doctorate as critical autobiography. Similarly, Haynes and Fulton (2015) posit the use of autoethnography to bridge the gap between theory and practice by developing critical discourse.

PD-PGRs’ engagement in identity work, however, is not a given. The degree to which these ‘critical moments’ foster change in identity depends on individuals’ responses to acknowledging and responding to incoherence between their identities. Boncori and Smith (2020), in the context of PGR researchers who already hold lecturing professional roles, developed the concept of the ‘learned and learning academic’ to represent different degrees of engagement with identity work. The learned academic is described as choosing ‘to remain within the confines of their existing knowledge and practice as informed by their professional expertise and experience’ (p. 274) whilst the learning academic reflects those who use critical incidents as learning moments that they choose to engage with. Boncori’s reflection on her own experience as a doctoral researcher demonstrates that movement along the learned and learning academic continuum is not unidirectional.

Conclusions: a diffractive re-reading

Our primary concern in this paper has been to explore if, how and to what extent PD-PGRs reconcile academic and professional knowledge, accepting Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge as illustrative of the navigation required. This is not an issue that has been given detailed attention within the body of literature we identified. It is possible that this absence might be because, as Barnet (2000) suggests, Gibbons et al.’s (1994) typology is compelling but not convincing. However, Barnet’s more nuanced account of the
navigation required complicates rather than calms the issue. PD-PGRs inhabit several competing and contrasting knowledge terrains. Professional ways of knowing may be held in contrast to a fragmented academic field, a knowledge terrain defined as disciplinary, transdisciplinary, technical, dispositional and critical (Scott et al., 2004). The navigation required varies depending on where and how PD-PGRs locate themselves within a differentiated terrain.

Our first attempt to understand this reconciliatory process looked at navigation through a workplace lens. The literature surrounding PD programmes emphasised the difference these make to the workplace, a legitimate site upon which reconciliatory negotiations are enacted. This exploration made two broad conclusions possible. The notion of impact – that theme that is typically threaded through any discussion of the PD-PGR and the workplace – assumes but does not analyse the reconciliatory process. It is synonymously folded into metaphors. More significantly, however, is the somewhat tenuous connection between the PD-PGR and meaningful change in the workplace at an organisational level. There is scant analysis that clearly distinguishes between changes to the profession in contrast to changes to the professional. Most often the two sites are erroneously conflated. Nonetheless, when changes are sited, they are mediated by the PD-PGRs’ capacity to ‘be in the world with others’ (Bourdieu, 1990). What makes the difference between some, or no workplace impact is the PD-PGRs’ capacity to engage in ‘boundary-spanning conversations’ (Burgess et al., 2011). This led us to consider whether a more insightful exploration of our concern might be located within an examination of the impact of PD programme study on identity. The site of reconciliation, rather than the workplace, is best understood as the PD-PGR themselves. Their capacity to develop ‘research-mindedness’, to work through critical moments or to re-textualize who and what they are. This may alternatively lead to the development of a third-space identity as a ‘researching-professional’ or a subsumptive re-textualized self in which the professional self is redefined in academic terms. This is a more pertinent discussion which points to processes of reflection, interrogation, critical engagement and the questioning abandonment of assumptions as the affective mechanisms through which reconciliation appears possible. It is also the case that the extent to which PD-PGRs accomplish this is varied.

We concluded the process of literature review, unsure of how best to address our central concern. Rather than a process of more or less successful attempts, PD-PGRs’ reconciliation of professional and academic knowledge remains – despite the clamour of competing, contrasting typologies – unsettled. The literature identified provided no reconciliatory process beyond whatever is enfolded in impact and its metaphors. But this is a troublesome conclusion.

We therefore returned to our assumptive openings. Our orientation and the invocations that support it rest on a foundational belief that there is a division between academic and professional, mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori. In these traditions the knowing subject (the PD-PGR) is an enclosure that peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context. For as long as we remain entrenched in this world view, a world view described by Mbembe (2018) as Eurocentric – one which attributes truth
only to Western ways of knowledge production, then the impossibility of reconciliation between academic and professional knowing remains. It is a definitional inscription lurking within what is accepted as ‘knowledge’.

In this decolonial critique of knowledge is a posthuman echo. We found more detailed inspiration in the work of Barad (2007), and thus re-read the literature to see what conclusions a diffraction re-reading pointed us towards. With this we were able to appreciate that looking at practice through an academic lens, and conceptualising practice – the moment of contact between academic and professional knowledge – is not a simple naturalistic activity. This realisation unsettles how we have so far viewed our central concern. We are not suggesting here that it unsettles the primacy of academic knowledge (this is a legitimate stance but not one that we pursue here), rather that it questions the assumed antagonistic relationship between academic and professional knowledge.

A diffactive reading of the identified literature surrounding if, how and to what extent PD-PGRs reconcile academic and professional knowledge allows us to reframe the academic practice of looking at professional practice as an active accomplishment; it is a process that requires filtering for relevance, distraction, and honing of frameworks that enable ‘seeing’ a mutual reciprocity. To ‘see’ is to actively intervene: ‘You learn to “see” through a microscope by doing, not just looking’, filtering out unwanted noise and tuning into the desired signal, differentiating between fact and artefact (Barad, 2007, p. 51). These are active and engaged processes. The diffraction of academic and professional ways of knowing accomplished by the PD-PGRs condenses both metaphor and strategy. In this sense, undertaking a PD programme in which PD-PGRs explore an aspect of their professional life – if read diffactively makes a difference in and to the world. The preoccupation with impact, which is threaded throughout the literature identified, is thus reframed. Barad’s (2007) extension of Haraway’s (1997) work takes an optical metaphor into the realms of material engagement as a method and a practice exploring how differences are produced and how they matter. In this diffraction process the knowing self is part of the material configuration of the world’s becoming.

This allows us to suggest professional and academic knowing might be considered as ‘entangled’. To suggest that academic and professional knowledge are entangled is not to say they are simply intertwined with one and other, as in the hyphenated joining of two separate entities. It is to say that they lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not a discrete affair. Indeed, not even atoms exist atomistically (Everth & Gurney, 2022). For the PD-PGR, academic knowledge and professional knowledge do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, academic knowledge and professional knowledge emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (Barad, 2007, p. ix). A diffactive reading enables generative mapping, in which fault lines are noticed as contingency and effect rather than essence. Thus, Cunningham’s (2018) ‘disturbance of equilibrium’ and Smith’s (2020) ‘first strangeness’ point towards the mutuality of contradictory existence in which ‘material-semiotic apparatus enables interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies’ (Haraway, 1997, p. 16).

A diffactive re-reading allows us to encapsulate if, how and the extent to which PD-PGRs navigate professional and academic ways of knowing. In making reference to diffraction, we have drawn upon posthuman theorising acknowledging academic and professional knowing as entangled: in the context of a PD-PGR these polarities lack an independent, self-contained existence.
A diffractive reading of the PD-PGR reconciling seemingly irreconcilable polarities questions the separations between knower/knowing and knowledge. It implicates reconciliation as conclusively inscribed within PGR identity rather than impact or institution. A diffractive reading highlights differences while recognising entanglement.

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