

# Artistry in Practitioner-Inquiry

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## Introduction

The five-chapter dissertation that is common in the field of education is a product of a largely unquestioned set of assumptions about how research should be done and what it should look like. It is a product that is bolstered by a whole set of institutional procedures and requirements that have become somewhat routine in many schools of education—research courses, doctoral committees, and institutional review boards are all part of the vetting process. The five-chapter format is not a recent innovation. Its roots lie in classical rhetoric where it arose as an organizing heuristic in expository compositions, originally in speeches and persuasive discourse. Its obvious utility is borne out by the fact that some version or other of the heuristic is used as the authorized formal guide to composing dissertations in colleges of education and in social science departments nationally and internationally. However, we wish to question the value of the heuristic and some of its assumptions for modes of research that are becoming popular as more and more practitioners are engaging in research on their own practice (Jarvis 1999).

The conversation that initiated this paper focused on issues of confidentiality and rigor. We work with students in a doctoral-level, professional practice program in which many of our students are principals and educational leaders who aim to conduct practitioner projects, and their “dissertations” are therefore focused on dealing with problems of practice at their own institutions. This means that their attempts to maintain institutional anonymity not only seem impractical and impossible (in the small state of Hawai‘i), but also a violation of the very idea of practitioner research. Can they be both practitioner and researcher? We view this dichotomy as problematic—not just because it is a version of the theory-practice dichotomy in which the practitioner is denied the role of legitimate inquirer, but also because it depicts the researcher unrealistically as a sort of non-practitioner.

In addition, conversations about rigor were part of the early and ongoing discussions about our new doctoral

program in professional educational practice, and as we approached the dissertation stage the question of the nature of rigor loomed large. Standards of rigor, validity, and verifiability are codified in textbooks and the rules of confidentiality that are rightfully demanded by human studies committees, but they feel somehow inappropriate in this new setting.

We wondered if there might be different measures of rigor, not only as they apply to the “dissertation as product” but also to the “dissertation as process” and to the dissertation as part of our collective conversation about the “rigor” of the program. We found ourselves talking about the product using cumbersome language like “the paper that we are calling a dissertation” or “the dissertation in professional practice” for want of better terms. We envisioned something different—a more holistic model that did not separate theory from practice, process from product, or the researcher from the research.

Indeed, it seemed to us that the integrity of the whole is dependent on the artful integration of the parts. We believe that a better approach lies in overcoming the pernicious dualism between researcher and practitioner and in reconstructing the idea of the practitioner-inquirer as an artist. Our efforts in this work directed us to Dewey’s aesthetics. In this paper, we take a look at practitioner-research from the perspective of Deweyan aesthetics, drawing on the work of Elliot Eisner (1998), Donald Schön (1983), and others to help us rethink ideas of confidentiality, rigor, and the role of the dissertation.

## Acknowledging Context

As a prelude to the discussion, we need to say a bit more about the context in which our questions and concerns arose. By the time the twenty-eight cohort members embarked on their individual inquiries, they had already completed group consultancy projects in public and independent schools in the state—a project based on a similar one pioneered by Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. These consultancy projects entailed two semesters of research and writing

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and a substantial report that the students presented to teachers and administrators in the schools where they did their studies. Thus, the dissertation in practice did not constitute what is traditionally viewed as a “capstone” project, but one of two major program projects.

The impetus to rethink and reconfigure the traditional education dissertation format grew naturally out of the special nature of practitioner research, but it was also nurtured by the unique context of Hawai‘i. Many educators in Hawai‘i, especially Indigenous educators, are concerned about current educational practices and suspicious of imposed models of research that are neither congruent with, nor respectful of, Indigenous knowledge.

The idea of artistry, then, that we discuss in this paper arises from the epistemological encounters that were inherent in our work in the EdD program. These encounters demanded a critical, reflexive approach that took into account the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of human experience. As one of our Indigenous cohort members notes in her work, “While this study is being conducted to fulfill degree requirement of an American institution, I hope to honor my Indigenous heritage by adapting traditional western academic constructs in ways that are compatible with and supportive of my Indigenous values; ways that lead to achievement of Indigenous educational aspirations” (Hattori 2014, 11). Her view is informed by current educational scholarship in Hawai‘i and the Pacific region that is influenced by Indigenous epistemology and perspectives. Close to half of the members of that first cohort identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and sought inspiration in the work of scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who call into question colonizing methodologies found in western scholarship about native peoples. Her work invites us to consider approaches that are more respectful and more in tune with Indigenous sensibilities. We tried to avoid the natural duality that this dilemma presented and let our conversations reflect the tensions among different approaches and contrasting views. By acknowledging the complexity of our task, encouraging a critical informed approach, opening the space to ways of knowing that were more intuitive and non-linear, we sought to re-conceptualize the notion of inquiry and approach it through the lens of artistry.

## **The Problems of the Research/Practitioner Dichotomy**

The view that research and practice are distinct endeavors is one that is deeply entrenched in academia, in spite of efforts to challenge its dominance (Schön 1983). In the received opinion, the aim of the researcher is to discover or reveal truths about the world; the role of the practitioner is to apply the discoveries of the researcher in the field of practical affairs. Donald Schön refers to this dominant view as the technical rational model—a view that underwrites a strict division of labor between knowers and doers. His work recounts the 300-year history of the technical rational model that culminates in the neo-positivism of the mid-nineteenth century. But positivism has all but vanished as an acceptable account of science. Wittgenstein (1964), for example, points to our “craving for generality... our preoccupation with the method of science...(and) the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case” (18). Lakatos and Musgrave (1970), Popper (1935), and Feyerabend (1975) have all argued for a conception of scientific understanding that is not limited to a narrow conception of method, but views science more broadly as an art. Nevertheless, positivism as an ideology is especially prevalent among researchers in education and in the social sciences, including those who might disclaim any allegiance to positivism, and presents a persistent threat to the idea of practitioner inquiry. Among the most potent of positivist convictions is the belief in the exclusivity of the researcher—one consistent with the higher status of the researcher as knower over the practitioner as doer. For those who embrace this mindset, the idea of practitioner research is an oxymoron, and even if they are willing to admit that practitioners can inquire into their practice, they are inclined to view it as a very low level of inquiry that does not aim for the growth of knowledge but seeks, merely, to find out what works.

We believe that this is a false dichotomy that should be laid to rest once and for all. First, research, if it is to be understood as methodical inquiry, is not exclusively the work of academic researchers. We all inquire with varying degrees of skill and insight, and for a variety of purposes. Secondly, the idea of driving a wedge between researcher and practitioner, knower and doer is a distortion that ignores the roles of the researcher as a doer and the practitioner as a knower.

One of the arguments that seeks to support the exclusivity of the researcher as knower is the claim of methodological expertise—a claim that the activity of research can be understood exclusively in terms of methodological procedures. But this view of science as method has been refuted by recent philosophers of science. Thinkers like Kuhn (1962), Lakatos and Musgrave (1970), and Feyerabend (1975) have adopted a more historical and developmental approach to understanding the nature of science and have questioned the idea of science defined in terms purely of uniform procedures. “Successful research does not obey general standards; it relies now on one trick, now on another; the moves that advance it and standards that define what counts as an advance are not always known to the movers” (Feyerabend 1975, xix). If the idea of uniform procedures in scientific endeavors is suspect, then it would be even more suspect when approved methods in the physical sciences are taken to be authoritative in human studies, and yet again, even more so in understanding the nature of practical inquiry.

However, in spite of these criticisms, a sort of methodological fundamentalism or methodolatry is evoked in which the prestige of the researcher is upheld in virtue of their expertise purely as methodologists. Methodolatry may be understood as the view that the application of approved methods is the distinctive and defining attribute of research, and that the work of the researcher should be given purely in terms of the application of uniform procedures. So much for the role of conjecture, imagination, prior experience, situational knowledge, and other practical skills. Paul Feyerabend has attacked this view of uniform procedures arguing that we should understand science as an anarchic process rather than a rational, rule governed activity. Dewey (1934) also points to the importance of practical expertise in the capacity of the practitioner to formulate solutions to problems. Dewey invites us to reflect on the case of the physician, whose practice demands knowledge of established standards. “But,” he points out, “cases are *like*, not identical. To be used intelligently, existing practices, however authorized they may be, have to be adapted to the exigencies of particular cases... the physician’s own personal attitudes, his own ways (individual methods) of dealing with the situation in which he is concerned, are

not subordinated to the general principles of procedure, but are facilitated and directed by the latter” (171).

From the perspective of practitioners, then, the idea that their work is held to be dependent on the work of the theoretician— Schön’s “technical rationality”—ignores the important role of practitioners as problem solvers. Indeed, it is often the case that it is the scientist and theoretician who is dependent on the practitioner for insights into the workings of nature.

Are we to understand that practitioners must await the orders of researchers before they act? Jarvis (1999) reminds us that practitioners are often knowers long before researchers happen along. And Feyerabend (1975) similarly observes that “Chinese Technology for a long time lacked any Western scientific underpinning and yet it was far ahead of contemporary Western technology” (xxi). Dewey (1916) reminds us, too, that “the sciences grew gradually out from useful social occupations” (201). How are we, then, to understand how practical knowledge arises? Not just by trial and error, surely; but from systematic inquiry into practice.

These observations serve to remind us that science is often the handmaid of practitioners, seeking to justify and explain what is has already been established in practice for years. Experienced and sagacious scientists frequently seek out practitioners and their knowledge of practice in order to inform their studies. This would not be the case if practitioners were regarded as lacking knowledge.

Jarvis (1999) writes that practitioners must play two roles, that of researcher and practitioner; but his two-role position maintains the researcher/practitioner division. It also complicates the ethical dilemma posed at the beginning of this paper about preserving anonymity. The rules and duties of researcher and practitioner are set up so that they collide. The two-role approach also poses problems about rigor when standards of research practice are applied in different situations. Is it an error to apply standards of rigor in the field of, say, physics to human studies? Aristotle famously wrote in his *Ethics* that “it is a mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits” (2000, 4).

Our approach is to argue for a more diverse conception of inquiry and of associated conceptions of rigor—an approach that is more cognizant of the particular nature of individual cases, of local knowledge, and of the importance of insider knowledge.

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## Artistry in Practice

In opposition to the technical rational model with its dualistic conception of research and practice, theorists like Donald Schön and Eliot Eisner have proposed a different approach that views the practitioner as an artist rather than a strict methodologist.

But what does it mean to compare the work of the teacher and other educational practitioners to that of the artist? One must take care not to set up a further dichotomy between practitioner and artist. We find that the same kind of dualistic thinking that separates research and practice applies in popular conceptions of art, and this viewpoint is supported by a number of influential writings in aesthetics. Collingwood (1958), for example, draws a strict line between art as a fine art and art as a craft. Dewey is critical of this approach. The target of Dewey's criticism of traditional aesthetics is what he refers to as the "museum conception" of art. This is the view of art that exalts the art object as something that possesses an almost magical or spiritual quality and venerates the artist as someone with special status—as the possessor of preternatural sensitivities and gifts of creative expression, someone for whom the normal rules do not apply. The problem with this view is that it places art outside of the range of normal human activities and creates a disconnection between art and common experience. Dewey's view, on the other hand, does not exaggerate the differences between art and practice, but emphasizes their similarities.

Central to Dewey's (1934) conception of art as it is experienced is the concept of *an* experience. Not all experience develops into *an* experience—only those experiences that "stand out from the flow of experience" and take on a personal, emotional, and intellectual significance and importance so that "each moment has significance in terms of the whole" (44). Dewey refers to two kinds of experience at this point: *an* intellectual experience (or experience of thinking) and a practical experience or experience of doing or making. Both thought and action may be said to involve aesthetic qualities in that they possess "a satisfying emotional quality because...of internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement" (45). That is, they possess artistic potential.

Of course a great deal of human activity is experienced at a level that never achieves artistic integration, even at the most basic level of what could be considered art. Dewey

refers to these as "non-aesthetic experiences." Actions are performed out of duty. They are banal or repetitive and carried out in a sort of mechanical and thoughtless way. "In much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after" (46). "There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not *an* experience (47). Such experiences exist between two poles: loose discursive, humdrum experiences and constrained, mechanical, coerced experiences.

Certain preconditions are required if the work of practitioners is to be practiced as an art. First, there is a spirit of personal engagement in the work: "The ideal of interest is exemplified in the artistic attitude" (Dewey 1916, 142). Practitioners are almost by definition required to be interested in their work. They cannot adopt the dispassionate perspective required of the researcher.

The very word art may become associated not with specific transformations of things, making them more significant for mind, but with simulations of eccentric fancy and with emotional indulgences. The separation and mutual contempt for the 'practical' man and the man of theory or culture, the divorce of the fine and industrial arts, are indications of this situation. (Dewey 1916, 143)

Artistry requires a "full and free interest" in one's work. Fullness of interest refers to the intimacy of the insider viewpoint—the kind of detailed understanding that comes with familiarity of a particular situation or activity—the situational awareness of what is often referred to, disparagingly, as the "subjective point of view." Free interests introduce the conditions and nature of communities that enable artistry to flourish—non-restrictive social conditions that allow people to explore alternative viewpoints and encourage experimentation. When these preconditions apply, then, the work of the artist may proceed unimpeded.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey refers to the initial requirement of artistic activity as "an impulsion" which suggests more than mere interest, but interest that serves as motivation to act. In addition, impulsion must encounter resistance. Adversity has the potential to convert experience into *an* experience. This, in outline, is the structure and form of every experience. This process of making things difficult, of challenging oneself and others, is essential if reflection is to be awakened and take us beyond the merely

mundane and routine. “Impulsion from need starts an experience that does not know where it is going; resistance and check bring about the conversion of direct forward action in re-flection; what is turned back upon is the relation of hindering conditions to what the self possesses as working capital in virtue of prior experiences” (Dewey 1934, 66). Artists are persons who seek out resistance and adversity, accepting new challenges, trying out things that are new, exploring new practices, and adapting old ones.

Thus, exploration or experimentation is characteristic of the artist. “There is,” Dewey writes, “a tendency among lay critics to confine experimentation to scientists in the laboratory. Yet one of the essential traits of the artist is that he (sic) is a born experimenter” (Dewey 1934, 148). Artistic experimentation is the process of trying things out. It is manifested in a spirit of adventure, in seeking to create new things and new ways of doing things. The process has similarities to Donald Schön’s (1983) conception of problem solving as “reflection in action.” Schön describes a situation in which teachers have “allowed themselves to become confused about subjects they are supposed to ‘know;’ and as they have tried to work their way out of their confusion, they have also begun to think differently about learning and teaching” (67). Here we have an instance of an impulsion that produces resistance and reflection in which the teacher “reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation” (68).

The idea of “allowing” oneself to become confused—to grasp at the problematic factors in a practice and empower oneself to experiment with options, raises some difficulties for the practitioner; especially when he or she operates in a strictly regulated community of practice. Many organizations and professional groups discourage innovation and exploration of the type demanded of the practitioner artist, limiting creativity and maintaining a rigid grip on the scope of individuals’ professional judgment. Novelty is equated with heterodoxy and, at worst, subjectivity.

Methodologists claim that “practitioner research” lacks objectivity, for how can practitioners possibly separate themselves from their interests. Interest is

equated with lack of objectivity. The idea that someone can be both practitioner and researcher, both insider and outsider, is tantamount to a contradiction. But the conception of the practitioner artists offers an alternative view that eschews the goal of an objective outsider in favor of a reflective, critical insider equipped with an insider’s understanding and situational awareness and furnished with a repertoire of prior experiences to seek solutions to practical problems.

Such a perspective, of course, raises questions about the “positionality” of the researcher and attempts to ameliorate these “biases” by means of “bracketing” aspects of the self so that a degree of objectivity is maintained.

### **Bias and Bracketing**

In most research endeavors, subjectivity is viewed with skepticism and is avoided as a contaminating factor. Even in qualitative research, where the researcher is deeply imbedded in the work, often as a participant as well as observer, there is a sense that researcher assumptions and bias need to be named and set aside. Bracketing, as the practice is generally known, is described in the literature as a means of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analytic processes (Ahern 1999). In practice, it involves putting aside “repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants’ life experiences” (Chan et al. 2013, 2). It is part of the “method” of “doing” qualitative research and helps to establish the rigor of the work. In many ways this seems like a noble task, but this practice raises several questions for us as it has for others in the past (see Humble and Cross 2010). Bias often lives deep below the surface and even the best researchers are oblivious to their own biases. The “tenacity of unconscious bias” (Gould 1996) makes it unlikely that it can be resurrected from the depths, exposed, and explored in a useful manner before the study commences. Rather, the revelation of bias is likely to dawn slowly over the duration of the study or even after it is completed. We agree with Ahern (1999), who acknowledges that bracketing is a long-term process that is “an iterative, reflexive journey that entails preparation, action, evaluation, and systematic feedback” (408). Constant reflection, reflexivity, and monitoring of emotions and

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perceptions can be valuable tools in the inquiry process and should be part of any inquiry process. At best, we can begin to tame our subjectivity by enhancing our awareness of it (Peshkin 1991).

### Process, Product, and the Myth of Replication

Another dualism that often arises in our discussion of inquiry or research is the process-product dichotomy. It is not unusual to speak of them as separate and distinct, the process leads to the product and if we want to replicate the product we can simply follow the same process and will likely come to the same conclusion. In this scenario, as we discussed earlier, following a particular method insures a valid outcome and the potential for replication is highly valued. But with practitioner inquiry the process and product are inseparable, intertwined, and mutually reflective. That is, the product is imbedded in the process and process is imbedded in the product. Replication is not possible because there are too many variables including the unique knowledge and skills of the practitioner and the practitioner's relationships with the context and with the multiple players involved. More precisely, it is the constellation of relationships built over time, within the distinctive ever-evolving context that are reflected in the process-product<sup>1</sup>. These cannot be replicated, nor should we want them to be, because ultimately it is both the uniqueness of the story that the practitioner tells—its elements of believability and resonance with the experience of his/her readers—that gives the work life. Resonance is more important than replication in practitioner inquiry and a careful, artful rendering of the process is valuable because it constitutes the product, not because it permits someone else to replicate it. In Dewey's terms, situations can be like, but not identical. Experience and what Dewey refers to as "plasticity"—our human capacity to take what we have learned in past situations and adapt them to novel ones—are preconditions of the growth of practical understanding.

All of our EdD cohort members were educational professionals. They entered the program with a list of accomplishments and a high level of expertise in their fields developed over time. They knew the stakeholders, had access to multiple sources of information, and were sensitive to the complexities of their organizations. It is precisely because of their unique set of skills, perspectives, and experiences that their studies are valuable to others in

the profession. Since they engaged their unique strengths to seek solutions to practical problems, it stands to reason that no one else could enter their situations with the same degree of authority to tell the story or have the same degree of access to documents and people. Their credibility as central players within the organization helped to lend credibility to their study. Koch and Harrington (1998), practitioners in the field of health, identify "believability and plausibility" as goals for interpretive research and as measures of rigor. Because practitioners are deeply embedded in their social context, they understand the complexity of the unique setting and have the insight to tell a story that is believable and plausible and that has resonance for other professionals.

In conclusion, it is in virtue of the practitioner inquirer's capacity for resonance and plasticity, for their ability to adapt past knowledge to new conditions, to modify methods to fit novel situations, and to be willing to try things out experimentally that we refer to them as artists.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This hyphenated term was inspired by Freire (2000) who used the terms "student-teacher" and "teacher-student" to overcome the duality of teacher and student. His terms point to the inseparability and interdependence of teacher and student and the sense that they are mutually informing.
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