

Defining and exploring pracademia: identity, community, and engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to define pracademia and conceptualise it in relation to educational contexts. This paper contributes to and stimulates a continuing and evolving conversation around pracademia and its relevance, role and possibilities.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a conceptual exploration. It draws upon existing and emerging pieces of literature, the use of metaphor as a meaning-making tool, and the positionalities of the authors, to develop the concept of pracademia.

Findings – The authors posit that pracademics who simultaneously straddle the worlds of practice, policy, and academia embody new possibilities as boundary spanners in the field of education for knowledge mobilization, networks, community membership, and responding to systemic challenges. However, being a pracademic requires the constant reconciling of the demands of multi-membership and ultimately, pracademics must establish sufficient legitimacy to be respected in two or more currently distinct worlds.

Practical implications – This paper has implications for knowledge mobilization, networks, boundary spanners, leadership, professional learning, and connecting practice, policy, and research. While the authors are in the field of education, this exploration of pracademia is relevant not only to the field of education but also to other fields in which there is a clear need to connect practice/policy with scholarship.

Originality/value – This paper provides a new definition of pracademia and argues that pracademia identifies an important yet relatively unknown space with many possibilities in the field of education.

Keywords Engagement, Practice, Identity, Community, Pracademia, Pracademic

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: pracademia as “both/and” and distinct

Pracademia is an embryonic and emerging concept that appears sporadically in literature across multiple fields in which practice and research are intertwined. In the field of education, pracademia is a particularly underdeveloped space; the term is sometimes mentioned, but without its meaning being fully formed or thoroughly explored. In particular, the term *pracademic* is making an appearance in conferences, social media platforms, and most recently, academic writing (see [Hollweck and Doucet, 2020](#); [Netolicky, 2020b](#)). Emerging from a disjointed and multi-field history, pracademic can be understood as both noun and adjective. Whereas the pracademic experience can refer to the collaborative relationship between researchers and practitioners, a pracademic is characterized as a single person who is engaged as both practitioner and researcher ([Powell et al., 2018](#)). In this paper, we use the term to refer to an individual who “spans both the ethereal world of academia as a scholar and the pragmatic world of practice” ([Panda, 2014](#) p. 150; [Walker, 2010](#), p. 1). With questions



arising as to whether it is “just another made-up edu-word” (Netolicky, 2020a, para. 1), and with the term critiqued for its lack of definitional clarity (Wilson, 2019), the authors of this conceptual paper—three self-identified “boundary spanners” (Lieberman, 1992) across the domains of practice and research, operating in different international educational settings—aim to define and explore the concepts of both pracademia and pracademic, particularly within the field of education.

As co-authors, our interest in pracademia and what it means to be a pracademic has developed over the past few years through numerous discussions, meetings, conference symposia (Hollweck *et al.*, 2020, 2021), and our own writing (Campbell, 2022; Hollweck, 2018, 2019; Hollweck and Doucet, 2020; Netolicky, 2020a, b, 2021). In this paper, we draw back the curtain on what currently exists in the field, define pracademia, and add to its conceptualization in relation to educational contexts, including its relevance, role, and possibilities. Through exploring existing and emerging literature, utilizing metaphor as a meaning-making tool (Netolicky, 2015), and drawing on our own positionalities, we conceptualize pracademia as the dynamic connecting or liminal space between educational research and the classroom, school, and policymaking, and seek to unpack what it means to be a pracademic in educational contexts.

Whereas pracademia is often (mis)understood to describe the intersection of practical experience and academic theory (Shea, 2007; Wilson, 2019), in this paper we challenge this type of binary thinking. As Dewey (1938) noted, “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities” (p. 17). We argue that practice is never atheoretical nor as Carr and Kemmis (1986) state, “some kind of thoughtless behaviour which exists separately from ‘theory’ and to which theory can be ‘applied’” (p. 113). Instead, we adopt *both/and* logic more common in philosophical pragmatism (Dewey, 1916, 1938) and poststructural thinking (Hetherington, 2013; Pinar and Irwin, 2005; Tan, 2015). This thinking reflects the contexts in which educators work. For example, teachers and school leaders regularly engage with research, analyze data, and evaluate impact and outcomes; and academics regularly engage with communities, schools, leaders, and learners through scholarship. Moreover, the importance of connection, collaboration, and co-creation of knowledge among teachers, school leaders, and researchers has long been established in the field (Goodlad, 1975; Lieberman, 1992). As Hargreaves (1996) argued, these types of partnerships, “can open up better possibilities for improving teaching, creating and disseminating really useful research, and bringing about educational change” (p. 106). More recently, there is pressure for greater research impact and community-engaged scholarship in the academy, which has increased the use of networks in public education as a knowledge mobilization (KMb) strategy (Briscoe *et al.*, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 2017; Cooper *et al.*, 2018). In fact, “[s]chool partnerships involving external networks with research-practitioner relationships are increasingly being seen as a means of facilitating KMb for increasing research use in practice” (Briscoe *et al.*, 2015, p. 20). However, a Canadian study by Cooper *et al.* (2018) found there are few supports available to researchers for their KMb efforts, especially with non-academic audiences; and when there are supports available, they are not heavily accessed (p. 8). Concomitantly, “despite countless professional development initiatives intended to help teachers develop research-based practices associated with student learning, for the most part research and practice remain disconnected” (Butler and Schnellert, 2008, p. 36). Thus, with pracademia positioned at the nexus of both domains, there is powerful potential in exploring pracademia as a legitimate part of the ecology of the education system. Hence, we focus in this paper on the tensions and possibilities that arise from attempts to define and legitimize this space, especially in terms of identity, community, and engagement.

Author pracademic positionality

Pracademics are sometimes called practitioner–researchers (Robson, 1993) or scholar–practitioners (Jenlink, 2005; Macintyre Latta *et al.*, 2017; Wasserman and Kram, 2009).

The notion of a pracademic is of a boundary-spanning individual who sits bestride the worlds of practice and academia, working to bridge the gap between research and practice (Netolicky, 2020b). They are someone simultaneously active as a practice-based professional and an academic, researcher, or scholar. Pracademics bring a research lens to their work in schools and education systems, and tacit lived experience to their writing and research. Pracademia, meanwhile, is the field or the space in which practice and scholarship are simultaneously engaged with one another. Similar in use to the noun *academia*, pracademia frequently refers to the life, community, and world of those straddling the spaces of practice and academia. However, the use and conceptualizations of pracademia could also refer to a new space and context of operation for those who do not traditionally sit within the parameters laid out by traditional conceptualizations of “practice” and “academia”. Ultimately, the focus of this paper is on defining and conceptualizing pracademia as a liminal space and what it means to be a pracademic— an individual working astride and dynamically across both practice and academia domains.

As pracademics ourselves, we are each actively engaged in multiple local and global education spaces, including schools, universities, academic research, education boards, networks, and advisory committees. At the time of writing, Trista is a Part-Time Professor at a university, director of the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC) Education Project, project manager of a mentorship and leadership project for the English-language education community in Quebec, Canada, and a board member of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement. Deb is an executive leader in a school, an Honorary Research Associate at a university, a book author and editor, the Chair of the board of a local primary school, and member of various education networks and advisory committees. Paul is a senior leader in a primary school, Partner Tutor on graduate programmes at a university, Vice-Chair of the International Professional Development Association, and a member of editorial and publication boards. Our active engagement in practice, academic, and advisory spheres influence the exploration of pracademia in which we engage in this paper. We authors are living pracademic realities, each experiencing plenty of unpaid work, questions about our legitimacy in some spaces, and the perceived valuing of one sphere over another depending on the multiple contexts in which we are operating.

Literature: the complexity of pracademia

The term pracademic has a thirty-year history in scholarly literature, although its original coining remains unclear (Owens, 2016). One of its earliest appearances can be traced to John Nalbandian (1994) who reflects as a pracademic—both an elected politician and professionally trained administrator—on the logic of politics and administration in his article for the *Public Administration Review*. The term’s recent popularization has been credited to Paul Posner (2009) in the journal of *Public Budgeting and Finance*. He argued that although very little had been written about pracademics, they are effective brokers and can enhance cooperation and communication within networks that include “adaptable and cross-pressured” actors from spaces of policy, practice, and academia who “serve the indispensable roles of translating, coordinating and aligning perspectives across multiple constituencies” (p. 16). In their literature review, Powell *et al.* (2018) outline how the word pracademic has been used intermittently to describe those in their field who simultaneously straddle the dual worlds of practice and scholarship, industry work, and research. However, there remains no consistent understanding of the term, no one identifiable group of pracademics and no clear defining criteria. For Wilson (2019), “this suggests that, at best, the word might mean different things to different people, and at worst is too woolly to be of any use (p. 3).

Pracademics in the literature can be found in a variety of fields: conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation (Avruch and Nan, 2013; Susskind, 2013; Volpe and Chandler, 2001;

Vuković, 2017; Wilson, 2019), law (Schneider, 2013), nursing (Andrew and Wilkie, 2007), policing (Braga, 2016; Willis, 2016), political science (Posner, 2009; McDonald and Mooney, 2011), project management (Walker, 2010), public administration and non-profit management (Powell *et al.*, 2018; Vrentas *et al.*, 2018), organisational studies (Panda, 2014), environmental health and protection (LaPorte and Opp, 2016; Runkle, 2014), and public and foreign policy (Brans and Pattyn, 2017; Murphy and Fulda, 2011). In the field of education, the term pracademic has mainly been restricted to popular educational forums, such as twitter and the blogosphere. Yet, it is starting to gain traction in higher education (see Collins and Collins, 2019; Dickinson *et al.*, 2020) and other academic writing (see Hollweck, 2018; Hollweck and Doucet, 2020; Netolicky, 2020b).

There have been several recent efforts to conceptualize pracademic positionality (see Bartoli *et al.*, 2012; Hollweck, 2019; Panda, 2014; Susskind, 2013). For Posner (2009), the meaningful intersection of academic research and on-the-ground practice has been an aspiration of many fields, usually attempted when academics collaborate with practice-based professionals and vice versa. There are also many ways in which academia and practice have melded, including knowledge sharing, networks, partnerships, and internship or “in-residence” programs. However, there is growing interest in the boundary spanning work of pracademic brokers who exist in and connect both spaces. For Walker (2010), one of the core attributes of a “true” pracademic is an intense curiosity about what underpins their professional practice and personal experience. He defines pracademics as “boundary spanners who live in the **thinking** world of observing, reflection, questioning, criticism, and seeking clarity while also living in the **action** world of pragmatic practice, doing, experiencing, and coping” (p. 2). For both Walker (2010) and Panda (2014), “pracademic” is a pragmatic term for a somewhat rare breed of individual who works at the interface of practice and academia. This is likely a common space for those engaged in graduate studies, but the literature tends to focus on individuals who have moved beyond their academic studies yet remain engaged in both research and practice.

Most often, pracademics in the literature tend to occupy full-time academic posts and manage to remain active in their relevant field of practice (Wilson, 2019). For those self-identified pracademics, they note that their practice work is often devalued as “a lesser endeavor, an ‘outreach’ or a ‘service’” (Avruch and Nan, 2013, p. 207) and does not always count for academic tenure or promotion (Susskind, 2013). It is important to note, however, that for these pracademics, their status within a university context comes with many benefits: access to journals; professional networks; the expectation and funding of scholarly contributions and committee work.

There are also pracademics who primarily hold positions in schools or systems (e.g., teachers, school and district leaders, policymakers) yet they also continue to remain active in scholarly activities, such as editing and publishing in academic journals, presenting at conferences, and leading research projects. Wilson (2019) citing Wildman (2002) argues that because of their experience at “the coalface”, these pracademics tend to have insider status and more credibility in the world of practice due to their tacit knowledge gained experientially and incrementally. However, access to full-time academic study is likely not practical nor affordable and engagement in many scholarly activities is likely not funded nor promoted (Posner, 2009).

In the literature, pracademics are often considered dual citizens because they are actively engaged in both the world of academia and practice, yet exclusively belong to neither (Panda, 2014). For Vuković (2017) pracademics are a “hybrid type of specialist” who marry the best of both worlds. Yet, Cuccia (2013) warns that as long as the practice and academic spaces are viewed as completely static, pracademics will struggle: “You cannot be ‘fully’ in one field or another, because you divide yourself between the two” (para. 8). Thus, being a pracademic requires a constant process of reconciling the demands of multi-membership (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015), learning how to negotiate in two worlds, and establishing sufficient legitimacy to be

respected in both communities (Kuhn, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2018). Ultimately, pracademics are different from both practitioners and academics; they are adaptable and possess the mindset of both, yet exclusively belong to neither group. More than merely occupying a space between, or existing in duality, those immersed in pracademia additionally grapple with and formulate an alternate pracademic identity that embraces a separate and distinct space and community.

Given policymakers' orientation towards practice, throughout this paper practice-based professionals and policymakers have been grouped together. This conflation reflects current conceptualizations of the "pracademic" in the literature; a term first attributed to a politician and adopted in a variety of fields to reflect the practice and academia relationship (Panda, 2014; Posner, 2009; Walker, 2010). However, greater exploration beyond this paper as to the role and function of educational policymakers as pracademics and/or within spaces of pracademia is needed. Ion *et al.* (2019) highlight the disconnect between expectations and outcomes from policymakers' research engagement, highlighting the need for frameworks which enable communication and interaction, and a more sophisticated navigation of the complex political, bureaucratic, and institutional cultures which influence this. This broader social ecology as discussed by Tseng (2012) is both complex and contextually driven. Arguably, this emphasizes possibilities for conceptualizations of the pracademic and pracademia to include policymakers and the policy making space, however for the purposes and parameters of this paper, practice and practice-based professionals will incorporate policy making and makers.

So, what does it mean to be a pracademic in different educational spaces? What tensions arise in the complex negotiation of the dual worlds of practice and scholarship? What roles do identity, community, and engagement play in pracademia? These are the questions that we explore in this conceptual paper.

Metaphors for pracademic and pracademia

As part of our initial exploratory thinking and attempts to wrestle with the terms, we considered how the use of metaphor might help us better understand and negotiate the complexities of pracademia. Metaphor used in this way is "a meaning-making frame and analytical tool for defining reality, structuring experience, and understanding intangibles" (Heffernan *et al.*, 2019, p. 84). It can be a useful device for conceptualization due to its recognizability (Kelly, 2011) and its capacity to provide new ways of theorizing (Schechter *et al.*, 2018). Here we use metaphor to help clarify and condense complex realities and make sense of conceptual systems (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Paranosic and Riveros, 2017). We realize that moving beyond dominant and traditional metaphors can provide more interesting, inclusive, and productive ways to understand concepts (Heffernan *et al.*, 2019). However, we also recognize that metaphors' meanings shift based on context, how people use metaphor, and the dynamic interplay between interpreter and recipient (Baake, 2003; Johnson-Sheehan, 1999). Here we build from more obvious and simplistic metaphors to more uncommon ones, acknowledging the need to consider how our choice of metaphor limits or constrains what is communicated, how it might exclude particular views, or if its recognizability marginalises some groups from sharing in its meaning (Netolicky, 2019). Below we test out three metaphors to theorize the concept of pracademia and how the pracademic is situated within that space:

- (1) The bridge,
- (2) The Möbius strip, and
- (3) Dismantling the wheel.

The bridge

The bridge is the most simple and simplistic of the metaphors explored here. For that reason, it is both a clear representation of how pracademia might be conceptualized, but also risks being overly simplistic. As the pracademic is someone active in both academia and practice (Collins and Collins, 2019), they can serve as a bridge between scholarly and practice-based worlds, grounding their practice in research, championing research and theory in the workplace, conducting research, and partnering with academics and practice-based professionals (Short, 2006). The notion that the pracademic can “bridge the gap” between practical and academic aspects of a field, and even cross it (Murphy and Fulda, 2011), is based on the common premise that there is a gap and a disconnect between the worlds of practice and scholarship (Butler and Schnellert, 2008). The pracademic acts as a conduit between research and daily practice who lives in both worlds and enhances their own research and practice through the pracademic lens (Kormanik *et al.*, 2009).

The metaphor of “pracademic as bridge” refers to more than being a static object. It involves active bridging work in which the pracademic labours intentionally to connect and knit together theoretical scholarship and the realities of practice. In education, this dynamic bridging work is more than teachers applying action research to their own settings, or academics researching schools. It involves applying research to practice, and practice to research—yes—but the pracademic-as-bridge does this through their multi-membership and work in multiple spaces, including school, university, research, policy, board, network, and/or committee.

The Möbius strip

Another metaphor that we use to explore pracademia is that of the “Möbius strip”. Discovered by the German mathematicians Johann Listing and August Möbius in 1858, the Möbius strip is best described as a two-dimensional object in three-dimensional space. Variations of the design—a surface with only one side and only one boundary curve—date back more than 4,000 years to the early alchemists of ancient Alexandria, Egypt. For Alagappan (2021), “[t]he unorientable quality of the Möbius strip is perhaps its most distinctive” (para 4). In exploring pracademia, we were drawn to the fluidity and dynamic element of the Möbius strip—its unorientability—to conceptualize pracademia as it “reflects the human quest for continuity and infinity within the bounds of space and time” (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2018, p. 42). Like the Möbius strip, the ways of doing and ways of being within pracademia are inextricably linked together. This conceptualization opens up the possibility to embrace and explore the complex and dynamic “space between” entrenched positions (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As Wilson (2015) notes, the pracademic “combines the “practical” with the “academic”; it is a scholar—*hyphen*—practitioner who draws from both sides and not merely from the either-or camps that seem to forever disconnect academics and professionals’ (p. 28). Through the Möbius strip metaphor, the pracademic is conceptualized as *both* practice-based professional *and* academic. Their two connected identities thus inform all decisions and choices when it comes to their work and cannot be pulled apart, parsed, or separated. This highlights the possibility of the pracademic space as being one where the complex interplay of scholarly thinking, research, and tacit knowledge can emerge, and offer a new lens for understanding the field of study.

Dismantling the wheel

Given that pracademia and the pracademic are still frequently viewed from the situatedness and comfort of dominant membership of a particular community, the metaphor of “dismantling the wheel” represents the scope to disassemble the traditional conceptualizations of particular domains, roles, and spaces within education. The cyclical

nature of the wheel references the continual cycle through which systems operate and reproduce similar or the same outcomes, highlighting the possibilities that come from dismantling traditional definitions and conceptualizations of spaces within the field of education. Dismantling paves the way for rebuilding the network and collaboration of a new community that embodies multiple memberships, and the increasingly complex and novel contributions those within this liminal space can offer to education. Dismantling the wheel, or reimagining traditional conceptions, offers recognition, legitimacy, and attribution of value to those who choose to remain working simultaneously within, between, and beyond the demarcated spaces of practice, policy, and academia.

While the metaphor of pracademia as dismantling the wheel can be seen as a challenge for fields to consider questioning their assumptions and systems, pracademia that challenges assumptions about knowledge and its application (such as perceived divides between theory and practice or between schools and the academy and perceived or systematic hierarchies of knowledge) makes space for embracing new, or strengthening marginalized, ways of thinking. As noted in the Introduction to this paper, pracademia is about both/and thinking and about the creation of something new and distinct. As [Netolicky \(2021\)](#) notes, it is about “co-creating a collective space shared by teachers, school leaders, scholars, policymakers, political advisors, and community members. It is about working within and across education spaces and working together” (p. 3). Pracademia that dismantles the wheel is not about disruption or destruction, but about making space for unique contributions to a field by those committed to a continual and complex negotiation of spaces, relationships, communities, and identities.

Defining pracademia

Having reviewed the literature and explored three possible metaphors for pracademia and the work of pracademics, we use the word *practice* to refer to the worlds or spaces in which practice-based professionals primarily operate. In education these include schools, professional associations, education systems, education governance, and policymaking. Academia-based scholars tend to operate primarily from universities. The pracademic may be primarily based in the sites of practice or the academy but operate from and across both practice-based and academic places and spaces.

In the field of education, the worlds of research and practice are often interconnected. Many practice-based professionals or academics might identify with the “dual world” pracademic positionality; many might consider themselves pracademics. Action research, for example, is popular in education through which practitioners examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully using research techniques ([Bogdan and Biklen, 2007](#); [Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999](#); [Ferrance, 2000](#)). However, being pracademic is distinct from a teacher-as-researcher stance ([Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009](#)) or even the academic researching practice stance, as the pracademic lives actively and simultaneously in both spaces. The space between practice and research is a contested and negotiated site ([Jansson et al., 2010](#); [Macduff and Netting, 2010](#); [Reed, 2009](#)). For [Panda \(2014\)](#), it boils down to “a tussle between scientific rigour and practical relevance” (p. 143). Whereas methodological rigour and approach are sacrosanct for researchers, it is the relevance of the research outcomes to address immediate practical concerns that is most important to practice-based professionals ([Metzenbaum, 2013](#); [Pettigrew, 2001](#); [Radin, 2013](#); [Vrentas et al., 2018](#)). We view the pracademic as simultaneously straddling the worlds of practice and scholarship, working and leading from within both traditions, and engaging in the distinct bridging world of pracademia.

We see three main threads emerging: identity, community, and engagement. We define pracademia as characterizing the plurality of spaces, and the space itself, occupied by those

interacting within, between, and beyond the domains of practice and academia. It involves the three key components of:

- (1) Pracademic Identity—the complex, enduring process of situating and understanding self, and how this relates to the communities we interact with(in);
- (2) Pracademic Community—how the self is situated within the communities we interact with(in), and the sense of connection and belonging that does or does not exist because of the community membership the individual does or does not hold; and
- (3) Pracademic Engagement—the dynamic interplay between the self, the other, and the space, and the consequential action, communication, collaboration, knowledge-making, and influence.

Pracademia implies ways of being, becoming, and action that involves the developing sense of self, and situating it within the communities and spaces in which we engage; it connects the varied yet related domains of knowledge, expertise, practice, and experiences as a means of acting and contributing within, across, and beyond the worlds of practice and academia. Sometimes pracademia implies the situating of the self astride these worlds with “a foot in each”, sometimes moving dynamically between, and sometimes occupying a unique space.

The three dimensions of pracademia

Pracademic identity

Identity is complex, slippery, and hard to define (Lawler, 2014; Mockler, 2011), yet an understanding of identity is key to engaging with the convoluted, multipart professional worlds, or spaces, that educators inhabit. Identities have been described as “imaginings of self in worlds of action” (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 5) and identity as the “situated, ongoing process through which we make sense of ourselves, to ourselves and to others” (Netolicky, 2020b, p. 19). Here, we define identity as the complex, enduring process of situating and understanding self, and how this relates to the communities that individuals interact with(in). Identity is a contextually situated, fluid process. Individuals navigate multiple identities and participate in multiple spaces and places. In pracademia spaces, the multiplicity is amplified.

When applying identity to the concept of pracademia, identity becomes slipperier still, and the borders between identities more porous. The pracademic identity is not about navigating identities but about assuming dual or multiple identities simultaneously. In terms such as scholar-practitioner, practitioner-academic and academic-practitioner, the hyphen functions as a bridge between the two words and the two worlds, joining them and indicating simultaneity. Yet in all these hyphenated words there is always one identity in the first position. Murphy and Fulda (2011) describe this duality as a “revolving door” through which the pracademic circles between worlds. This duality or multiplicity leads to dissonance in terms of identity and belongingness. Wenger (1998) talks about identity as a locus of selfhood and of situated social power through belonging, legitimacy, and membership. The complexity of Wenger’s (2010) notion of each individual as an embedded social participant and meaning-making whole-person entity (mind, body, spirit, human experience), perhaps hints towards why identity is so complex, contextual, and resists definition and logic. The worlds of practice (at the school, system, association, or policy levels) and scholarship operate on conflicting values, different rewards systems, and use different languages (Caplan, 1979). Practice-based professionals and academics can each enjoy interacting with colleagues of similar backgrounds, interests, values, professional language, and shared understandings, and can fear rather than relish interrogation of the relevance of their practice by paradigmatically different colleagues (Collins and Collins, 2019). The construction of practice and scholarship as dichotomous rivals can lead to division and disconnect (Collins and Collins, 2019), rather

than collaboration, cooperative inquiry, and connection. To navigate these often-conflicting spaces, the pracademic identity is often liminal, liquid, and in flux (Dickinson *et al.*, 2020).

A convolution of pracademic identity is that the pracademia space is often one between or overlapping the spaces of practice and scholarship. Practice-based professionals operate in schools and education systems. Any scholarly work they do exists outside their primary world and is often un(der)valued or unacknowledged by the school or policy space. Academics generally inhabit and are members of the academy, so their practice-based work is outside this world, but also positions them by its outsider nature as on the periphery of the academy. Carton and Ungureanu (2017) found that scholar-practitioners perceive their hybridity as a potential threat to their own professional survival. The pracademic becomes the outsider to at least one of the professional worlds they inhabit. They are insider-outsider, or outsider-insider, never quite belonging in each space. Not only that but moving into the world of practice can negatively impact a person's academic career prospects (Murphy and Fulda, 2011), and engaging in scholarship is not often valued, and may even be questioned or criticised, in the world of practice.

The motivations of the person operating in and across pracademic spaces are not simple or straightforward. There may be a tangle of cognitive, relational, and emotional reasons why a person does the kind of boundary spanning work that is often without obvious measures, professional recognition, or financial reward. This is work that can be personally and professionally exciting and gratifying (Murphy and Fulda, 2011). For example, while we authors are engaged in networks across and between research and practice, we have found that in practice spaces our (often unpaid) academic work is disregarded or even disparaged; and that in academic circles the work of practice is sometimes seen as without value, not "seen", or a sideline to the main scholarly event. Yet there are spaces in which partnerships, networks, and collaborations can flourish, and we have experienced these, too. It is these networks that allow the pracademic—or those operating in the space of pracademia—to feel belongingness and develop a socially-embedded identity not just as an individual operating across the "in between", but a member of a group of those operating similarly in hybrid, dual or multiple education spaces.

Pracademic community

This group membership and socially embedded identity allude to what earlier conceptualizations of the pracademic have highlighted as the important role of community and communities (Khun, 2002; Posner, 2009). Community membership and the interaction within and across communities have long been evident in how forms of KMB, creation, and dissemination have been reported on and evaluated (Lieberman *et al.*, 2017). This sits alongside the varied forms of networks that broker partnership working, and forms of collaboration straddling, practice, policy, and research worlds (Chapman *et al.*, 2016). Cullen *et al.* (2014) emphasize how those in both practice, policy, and research spaces are continually seeking to understand how collaborative endeavours or networks across communities can be utilised in the pursuit of knowledge and impact. Seeking collaboration across practice and scholarly spaces assumes traditional conceptualizations of each space and the associated roles within them. It does not account for pracademic individuals operating within, between, and simultaneously in a combination of these spaces. There are varying degrees of identification and recognition of the unique contribution of the pracademic within both their own space of pracademia, and each of the interacting spaces of practice and academia, as well as their membership of these respective spaces, and their capacity to act with influence and recognised expertise (Kuhn, 2002). Identifying and exploring pracademic influence, action, and expertise moves beyond traditional conceptualizations of traditional spaces and roles, or what it means to be employed in a particular space.

Drawing upon practical expertise, alongside skills in research, publishing, synthesizing, and disseminating knowledge, ideas, and research, the pracademic is able to act as a member of multiple communities with influence across spaces. But, as Dickinson *et al.* (2020) highlight, this does not account for the isolation, liminality, or disruption experienced by those occupying and navigating multiple spaces and the consequence this has for the forming and reforming of their personal and professional values and identities. Nor does it account for the discomfort of not quite fitting within one particular community, or the lack of value others may attribute to the other aspect of your identity; the element that sits outside the traditional boundaries of an individual's primary role and its space. The complex interplay between the influences that come from operating in multiple spaces, alongside the messiness that characterizes the forming and reforming of personal and professional identity as someone with membership in multiple spaces or domains, highlights the need for more fluid conceptualizations of the practice-based professional, policymaker, or academic, or the recognition and articulation of a new space educators may operate within; pracademia.

Depending on the focus, aims, and membership of a particular collaborative or multi member and multi-membership endeavour, people will be members of various communities, requiring a crossing of boundaries (Smith *et al.*, 2017). The possibilities that come with the cross-fertilization of knowledge, ideas and interactions can result in not only new possibilities of understanding the challenges and contexts we find ourselves in, but individuals may voluntarily or involuntarily begin to acquire a new understanding of who they are, or who they want to be as a result of the knowledge exchange, and collaboration within and across spaces.

This sort of interaction is often discussed within the parameters of the dominant discourse around research and practice divides. These discourses can too frequently focus on forms of engagement and dissemination, instead of looking at the interaction and influence required within the domains of practice, policy, and research to reach an intended outcome, and who or what might be involved in enabling that. Sitting alongside this are competing conceptions of "evidence", "policy", and "practice" and the role and form of research within and across them (Campbell *et al.*, 2017). Tseng (2012) argues that broader consideration of the social ecology of research use is required to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the relationships, organizational settings, and political and policy contexts within which those engaging in and with research are operating in. The more commonly narrow focus on the "cognitive, affective, and motivational processes" however decontextualises the complex interplay of acquisition, understanding, and application of knowledge across boundaries (Tseng, 2012, p. 7); a complex interplay which can characterise the space of pracademia, and the goals, action, and successes of the pracademic.

Pracademic engagement

Conceptualizing pracademia as a space and a community is not just about the individuals that make up that community, it is also a recognition of the increasingly complex demands placed upon educators and education more broadly, and how we innovatively respond to these. We continue to see the evolving and pivotal role of education in society, and the expectations of educators to be at the forefront of responses in times of global health emergency, financial crisis, constitutional uncertainty, civil unrest, forced migration or even a conflict of values. This has collectively added to the complexity educators are having to negotiate, and both enabled and required a reimagination of how we meet these shifting demands (Campbell, 2020). This requires increasingly complex and iterative modes of interaction, knowledge creation, mobilization, and action not possible through traditional divides or characterizations of spaces and domains. However, it is the collective and co-constructed spaces of pracademia, emphasising new ways of thinking, which could enable

these more iterative modes of interaction so vital for negotiating the complexity we now face globally.

Given the pracademic's multiple membership of various communities and spaces, [Posner \(2009\)](#) highlights the skill they have in forging and utilizing networks in the pursuit of collaboration. Pracademics are in a constant process of reconciling the demands of multi-membership wherein they must navigate different "regimes of competence" ([Kubiak et al., 2015](#)). The sophisticated and intricate understanding of culture, relationships, perceptions, and expectations in multiple spaces and domains, often referred to as the tacit dimension, or tacit knowing; that "we can know more than we can tell" ([Polanyi, 1966](#), p. 4), is something characteristic of those operating as pracademics. [Willis \(2016\)](#) cautions against solely attributing the capacity to work between spaces to pracademics, but rather emphasizes the complementary skills, experience, and knowledge of pracademics alongside practice-based professionals, policymakers, and academics. [McCabe et al. \(2016\)](#) highlights the pracademic's capacity to engage with and synthesize ideas and research with the goal of operationalizing them in practice and policy, while also utilizing their knowledge of the language and culture of multiple domains to be able to translate between each. The effective pracademic must not only learn to negotiate in two worlds but must also have established sufficient legitimacy to be respected in both ([Kuhn, 2002](#); [Powell et al., 2018](#)).

With the pracademic or space of pracademia characterizing those who utilize their community membership, relationships, and knowledge of the various organizational and political contexts that make up the spaces of practice, policy, and research, those operating in the space of pracademia offer an important model of the interactive process that [Campbell et al. \(2017, p. 223\)](#) describe as "knowledge co-creation, sharing and application between and among researchers, practitioners and policymakers". While [Tseng \(2012\)](#) highlights the traditional reliance across domains on traditional research to practice models and how networks can serve or reinforce these, the complex and interconnected negotiation, and multidirectional and paced movement within the space of pracademia emphasizes the multiple and many possibilities for interaction, and knowledge creation, exchange, and dissemination. Termed in one way as "boundary spanners" by [Haas \(2017\)](#), pracademics arguably represent the possibility of cross-domain interaction and exchange; reimagining traditional spaces and their boundaries to more successfully and sophisticatedly mobilize and exchange ideas and perspectives, and foster relationships, all in the pursuit of learning, improvement, and tackling the complex challenges faced by educators globally.

However, considering how the multi-membership and boundary-spanning work of the pracademic can often be devalued, we are interested in what sustains the continued engagement of the pracademic in both spheres. Specifically, there is a growing interest in conceptualizing the work of the pracademic (see [Bartoli et al., 2012](#); [Hollweck, 2019](#); [Panda, 2014](#); [Susskind, 2013](#)) and how working within both traditions might help "bridge the rigor to relevance gap" ([Daly and Stoll, 2018](#), p. 373). [Hollweck \(2019\)](#) offers a four quadrant "pracademic inquiry cycle" adapted from the work of [Susskind \(2013\)](#) (see [Figure 1](#)).

Whereas the upper half of the "pracademic inquiry cycle" is focused on the world of research, such as defining and documenting a problem of practice, developing research questions, selecting a research design, exploring scholarly literature, and building general theories, the lower half of the iterative cycle is focused more on the world of action, where solutions are proposed, rationalized, and then tested in the field, igniting new problems of practice. In this iterative cycle, the pracademic is both a practice-based professional—a gatekeeper who understands the study context, has access to data and is motivated by the research's relevance to their workplace—and an academic who brings their scholarly qualifications and experience to bare through their tools of analysis and evaluation ([Powell et al., 2018](#)). KMB choices for pracademics, such as how the empirical evidence is communicated, published, and disseminated, is decided based on the audience, purpose, and

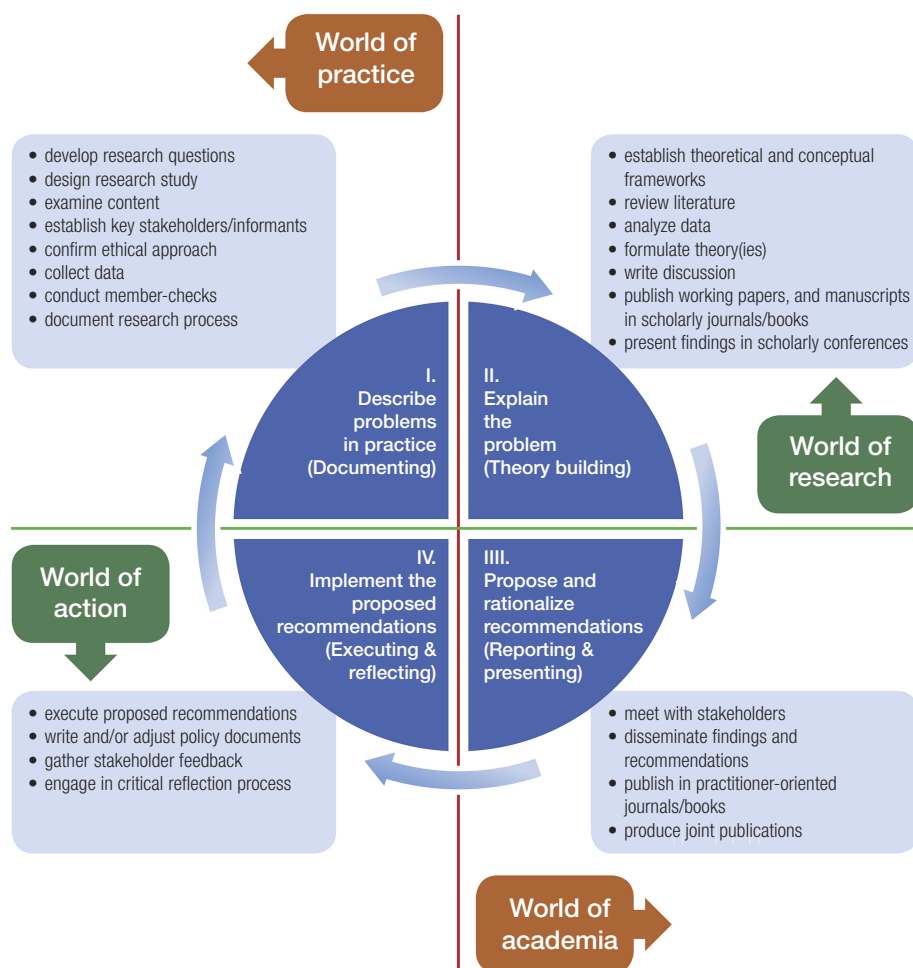


Figure 1.
The pracademic cycle of inquiry

priorities. Pracademics understand the ways in which the dominant academic language and jargon differ from the language of practitioners (Panda, 2014). Ultimately, pracademics have the desire and often the peer demand for clear professional relevance and possibilities for practical implications of their research in their field, but this is negotiated alongside the demands from the academy for research rigour, relevance, and originality of contribution.

Conclusion

More traditional characterizations of expertise and expected forms of action, contribution, and influence—that rely on well-established conceptualizations of the spaces and roles an individual occupies—could serve to limit or hinder potential new forms of influence and contribution of those that operate within, between, beyond and as an alternative to the spaces of practice and academia. By naming, theorizing and conceptualizing a, perhaps not new but alternative identity, that of the pracademic, and space or community, referred to as pracademia, within the field of education, we begin to open up conversations about the role,

function, and purpose of those that do not identify, nor operate, within the confines of the academic or practice and policy domains on their own, but exercise influence and enjoy membership of more than one or all of them.

As we have noted, while those operating as pracademics often feel a sense of contribution or influence when working across spaces, the worlds of practice, policy, and academia work in different ways. They are made up of different structures, metrics, expectations, professional standards, and incentives. Traditionally, the worlds of practice and academia have been pitted against one another, as polarities (Wilson, 2019). For academics, their “practice” work has often been reported as being devalued or un(der)valued (Avruch and Nan, 2013; Susskind, 2013). For practitioners in schools, their “academic” work does not always count for promotion, tenure or in salary grids. However, there has been a noticeable shift in the educational landscape with increasing pressure for practitioners to engage with evidence-based research and for researchers to disseminate research more widely into practice using KMB strategies, such as networks (Briscoe *et al.*, 2015; Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Networks enable connection, collective action, and development of professional expertise (Azorín *et al.*, 2021), as well as positive interdependence because of boundary-crossing relationships that can improve social cohesion, bridge distinct knowledge communities, and provide exposure to different ideologies and methodologies (Robinson *et al.*, 2020). With the call for more brokers and collaborators across the research and practice domains, pracademia is well positioned as a legitimate and defined space in the educational ecology. Ultimately, for those pracademics working in universities and school systems, incentive structures in relation to renewal, tenure, and promotion will also need to be adjusted and aligned to recognize the value of pracademia.

One important role of the pracademic and pracademia is translation of research into practice/policy and practice/policy into research. Whilst rigour and relevance are both equally valid and valuable, there is a long-standing view that there is a disconnect in how research is transferred into organizational practice (Zundel and Kokkalis, 2010) or how research acts as a framework for understanding and guiding thinking and action (Penuel *et al.*, 2015). Summed up by Panda (2014): “Practitioners predominantly expect ‘actionable knowledge’, i.e., knowledge that can be used in decisions on the solution of acute and specific problems; researchers expect inspirations towards the production of scientific knowledge and dissemination of such knowledge through publications in peer-reviewed journals” (p. 149—150). The traditional avenues for sharing research findings are not always accessible to practitioners—in language or located behind academic paywalls (Offermann and Spiros, 2001); “even practitioners with doctoral degrees have been reported to stop reading the academic journals in their own field” (Posner, 2009, p. 24). A recent concern in the field is that when research fails to address the larger questions facing practitioners, these gaps become filled with popularizers lacking academic credibility and competent research skills (Posner, 2009). The increased use of online and social media to disseminate research and information, can be seen as leading to the rise of academic celebrities and influencers considered experts due to followership (Eacott, 2017, 2020), as well as the uncritical acceptance and proliferation of popular but unevidenced educational interventions that de-professionalize education from the inside (Baker, 2021). Perhaps, then, pracademia might offer the field what Nesbit *et al.* (2011) describe as “relevance without compromising methodological rigour and theoretical depth” (qtd in Vrentas *et al.*, 2018, p. 95). Pracademics, working at the nexus of practice and research, offer the powerful potential to transpose insights into praxis by virtue of their scholarly qualifications and experience in the field (Volpe and Chandler, 2001). The work of the pracademic is that of translating, brokering, bridging, and boundary spanning, with insights from, legitimacy in, and networks across multiple spheres.

Conceptualization and conceptual clarity are key to understanding and engaging with concepts (Evans, 2002). We have in this paper provided a new definition of pracademia that encompasses the spaces of pracademia and the three key components of identity, community,

and engagement. We argue that pracademia—as concept, space, and way of being—has a purpose in education. Pracademia holds an important space that hasn't yet been understood or utilized. Pracademics have a crucial role to play in connecting the dots between scholarly and practical domains in ways that empower those working in schools and policy rooms to meaningfully engage with research and to contribute outwards to narratives about education. They can embed scholarship in the work of schools and policy rooms, allowing research knowledge and methodologies to influence the work of those in domains of practice, so that the field of education can work increasingly in the spaces connecting academia and practice. We believe it is worth recognizing, amplifying, and growing pracademic perspectives in research and popular literature.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the emergence of stronger global networks of educators, including networks consisting of teachers, school leaders, university academics, higher education leaders, and policymakers. The pandemic showed the possibilities of what collaboration between and working across multiple spaces in a field can accomplish. The concept of pracademia, and of working as a pracademic across and between spaces, suggests that we may be able to reimagine boundaries, fields, and roles in education and in other fields. For the work of pracademia to be sustainable, the space between practice and academia needs to be valued in terms of legitimacy, credibility, and even paid work. Whereas for some, developing pracademia may be at odds with maintaining an already fragile positioning of education as an academic discipline (Wyse, 2020), it could take us further in the professionalization of teaching and education in its varied forms. Embracing the concept of pracademia may go some way to dissolving traditional dualisms of spaces that educators operate within, and increasingly across. It may be part of liquefying boundaries, so that rather than boundary spanning or boundary crossing, educators move back and forth along the Möbius-strip-style continuum comprising the multiplicities of research, practice, and policy. It may be engaging in multiple modes, spaces, and communities that open up learning, knowledge exchange, and mobilization of ideas and practices. It may be structural affordances from schools, universities, and policy bodies such as time, resources, avenues for recognition, and institutional support. For we authors, exploring and embedding ourselves in the identities and communities of pracademia is about making a positive difference in education; advocating for empowerment beyond the often-rigid structures, expectations and silos; and encouraging a valuing of alternate networks, contributions, and influences.

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