Guest editorial

Pracademia: exploring the possibilities, power and politics of boundary-spanners straddling the worlds of practice and scholarship

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Pracademia and pracademics

This Special Issue (SI) of the *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* (JPCC) “Pracademia: Exploring the possibilities, power and politics of boundary-spanners straddling the worlds of practice and scholarship” builds on a conversation that began in a symposium presentation (Hollweck *et al.*, 2020) at the 2020 International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) in Morocco. We (Trista, Deb and Paul), along with our colleagues Leyton Schnellert, University of British Columbia, Canada and Danette Parsley, Chief Executive Officer at Marzano Research, USA, were interested in whether the terms *pracademia* and *pracademic* were resonating for others in the ways that they were for us. The symposium was called “Pracademics: Exploring the tensions and opportunities of boundary-spanners who straddle the worlds of academia and practice.” As self-identified pracademics, or individuals operating in spaces which could be characterized as pracademia, from Australia, Canada, Scotland/Hong Kong and the USA, the session aimed to unpack what it meant to be a pracademic in educational contexts and spark an evolving conversation about the possibilities, limitations and tensions that are inherent in pracademia and pracademic positionality. Scheduled for the last timeslot on the final day of the congress, we were pleasantly surprised to see our small room at full capacity. It soon became clear that pracademia as a concept, space and identity in education resonated with participants and was worth exploring further. The idea for this SI was a result of this first symposium and the discussion on pracademia continues with contributing authors presenting in subsequent ICSEI symposia (2021, 2022-forthcoming) and even on social media platforms like twitter (see #pracademia or the #aussieED chat that was held on October 17, 2021).

In this SI we hope to further open up the discussion on pracademia and pracademics. Considering the lack of definitional clarity in the literature, our intention, therefore, as co-editors is to situate and conceptualize pracademia in the field of education, which we consider the messy in-between space, spaces, or stance of research and practice. We want to advance thinking about the possibilities, power and politics of pracademia, give voice and visibility to pracademics, and build on the momentum and community that was started in that small conference room in Morocco. In doing so, we challenge the binary understandings of the relationship and tensions between research and practice. Through interrogating traditional conceptualizations of these domains, and the people operating within, between and across them, we emphasize how we can understand, advocate for and legitimize this unique contribution characterized by pracademia and the pracademic. Although we do offer a definition of pracademic and pracademia in this editorial, we encourage readers to explore how the different authors in this SI wrestle with the terms, trouble pracademia as a space, identity and community, and ultimately, respond to the guiding questions that were included in our international call for papers:

- (1) What is a pracademic and who decides?

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- (2) What does it mean to be a pracademic in different educational spaces?
- (3) What issues and/or tensions arise in the complex negotiation of the dual worlds of practice and scholarship?
- (4) What role does identity and belonging play in pracademia?
- (5) What does pracademia (if anything) offer the field of education?
- (6) Is the term limiting or empowering?

The six papers selected for this SI together present an international perspective on pracademia in education. The contributing authors are from Australia, Canada, England, Hong Kong, Qatar and Scotland; they are pracademics, academics, teachers, leaders and consultants working in higher education, schools and systems.

- (1) The first paper in the SI is our own: *Defining and exploring pracademia: identity, community, and engagement*. It is a conceptual exploration of pracademia and the result of an ongoing and evolving conversation between three pracademics from Canada, Australia and Hong Kong/Scotland. We use metaphor as a meaning-making tool to define and conceptualize pracademia and make a case for its contribution to the field of education.
- (2) The second paper *Education focused pracademics on Twitter: Building democratic fora* is an autoethnographic case study by Steven Kolber and Keith Heggart who collaborate as a practicing teacher and early career researcher from Australia to examine the features of pracademic practice within online spaces.
- (3) The third paper *Pracademic productive friction: boundary crossing and pressure points* describes another collaboration between pracademics, John Paul Mynott and Michaela Zimmatore, a head teacher and primary teacher from the United Kingdom, who examined their experience leading and facilitating Lesson Study in an elementary school.
- (4) The fourth paper *Pracademia: an answer but not the answer to an enduring question* by Scott Eacott, an Associate Professor of educational leadership in Australia, is a conceptual paper that problematizes and questions whether pracademia resolves or perpetuates the theory–practice divide.
- (5) The fifth paper *Dwelling in liminal spaces: twin moments of the same reality* by Sharon Friesen is also a contribution from higher education. In this thinking piece, Friesen describes herself as a Canadian pracademic and uses her work in pracademia to make the case that pracademics are well suited and attuned to make meaningful social change within an education system.
- (6) The final paper in the SI *Exploring perceptions of pracademics in an Arab context* is an empirical study on pracademics by Youmen Chaaban, Abdellatif Sellami, Rania Sawalhi and Marwa Elkhoully from the University of Qatar. The research examined whether the term pracademic resonated as a professional identity for 18 individuals working in teacher professional development at universities in Arab countries.

This SI concludes with an Afterward by Carol Campbell, from the University of Toronto, which brings together the emerging points and insights from each of the papers, situates this within the context of professional capital and community, and offers questions and wonderings as to the future of pracademia. The papers collectively illuminate and analyse the nature of the work of those who identify as pracademics operating within the space of

pracademia, the value it might add, and the influences and drivers behind it. In doing so, productivities and problems remain around how this work may be understood, nurtured and connected to other forms of impact and influence within, across and beyond the field of education. In Campbell's *Afterward* to this special issue, she poses the questions "... is it a new field of study or is it a fad that moves in and out of popularity? Will there be a future *Journal of Pracademics*?"

Possibilities, power and politics

Although perhaps tempting to dismiss "pracademic" as simply another buzzword or a meaningless addition to edubabble that "involves the ridiculously fluffy words and silly sloganeering intended to obfuscate issues and confuse non-educators" (Woolman, 2018), the term actually has a thirty-year history and is most often attributed to Nalbandian (1994) who wrote "Reflections of a 'pracademic' on the logic of politics and administration" for the journal *Public Administration Review*. In the scholarly literature, pracademic has appeared across a number of disciplines and with multiple uses but has only recently begun to gain traction in the field of education (Collins and Collins, 2019; Dickinson *et al.*, 2020; Hollweck and Doucet, 2020; Netolicky, 2020b). Although pracademic has different meanings across the literature, most often the term describes those in their field who simultaneously straddle the dual worlds of practice and scholarship, industry work and research (Powell *et al.*, 2018). For Volpe and Chandler (2001), pracademic describes those who are scholars and teachers who practice what they preach, walking the talk and talking the walk. The term's most recent popularization is credited to Posner (2009) who used it in the scholarly journal *Public Budgeting and Finance*. When defining pracademics in this SI, we reference Walker (2010) who describes them (us?) 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). In our paper (Hollweck *et al.*, 2021), 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, and involving the three key components of identity, community and engagement. We define pracademics as those who not only work and lead within and across the traditions and domains of practice and academia, but who also engage in the bridging work of being between and across domains.

Moving past the long-standing "tussle between scientific rigour and practical relevance" (Panda, 2014, p. 143), this SI raises the possibility that pracademia and pracademics might offer an alternative to dichotomous thinking. For us, it is not a question of theory versus practice, nor academic versus practice domains. It is not about a hierarchical view of contributions, or the valuing of one role in a field (practitioner, researcher, policymaker, pracademic) over another, but rather about the value of coalescence, collaboration and intentional multiplicity. We hope that this collection of articles will challenge readers to consider whether the term pracademia is useful to the field of education and how pracademics might play a brokering role within the educational community. In co-editing this SI we were interested in how pracademics might work with teachers, teacher educators, researchers and policy-makers in ways that disrupt boundaries, catalyse education change and spur transformational learning at the micro, meso and macro levels. We also wanted to raise critical questions about pracademia and what it means to be a pracademic. As Deb (Netolicky, 2020a) wrote in a blog post following our 2021 virtual ICSEI symposium "The more we explore [pracademia] ourselves, and the more people reach out to us to talk about their own experiences, thinking, and research data, the more I see [it] is as an emerging concept, space, and identity in education, with the potential to knit together the varied values, languages, reward systems, identities, and work of educators in policy, in schools, in universities, and across systems and spaces."

Where to from here?

In reflecting on the nuances and implications inherent in this SI, there remains a need to continue the conversation, engage in further empirical study, and enable a broader theoretical development of pracademia that explores the role of power, agency and legitimacy. There is value in naming, understanding, and critically examining the roles of those straddling the worlds of practice, policy and research. This work illuminates a complex interplay between the knowledge, experiences, expertise and networks educators draw upon in order to widen the scope of their collaboration and engage meaningfully in the field of education. However, it also comes with a knotty negotiation of spaces, identities and expectations, and a considerable volume of additional labour, out of hours and unpaid, or unrecognized in an individual's professional context, be that primarily practice, policy or research.

Multi-membership of practice, policy and/or academic spaces requires an emergent and fluid process of reconciling the demands, expectations, norms and influences that characterize work within each of these spaces (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015). While such work may be focused on knowledge brokering, mobilization or exchange to support the advancement of the field in all forms it may take, pracademics or those operating in spaces conceptualized as pracademia must learn to negotiate the worlds or spaces they are operating within, and in order to have influence or impact, establish sufficient legitimacy in each of the spaces or communities they are moving across and between (Kuhn, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2018). The brokering, mobilization, exchange and leadership described in this SI connect to the field of educational change. These connections, while requiring further theoretical and empirical development, demonstrate how conceptualizations of pracademia not only define and legitimize the work of those operating in such spaces, but offer identifying markers or definitional frames to the networking, professional learning and development of professional capital of the pracademic. The SI itself also gives visibility to the work of pracademics and a concrete opportunity for us to network, collaborate and think together.

As highlighted in the Afterward, the ways in which the pracademic and pracademia are conceptualized and exemplified throughout this SI raise more questions than answers. The contributions herein offer a range of possibilities for the worlds of practice, policy and scholarship, and for boundary-spanners straddling these worlds. There is an explanatory power to the terms pracademia and pracademic in making sense of the experiences and contributions of those straddling spaces, roles and networks within a field. What emerges from this examination are opportunities to reimagine how systems, fields and institutions might create, mobilize, and exchange knowledge and ideas in ways we may not currently prioritize, attribute value to or plan for. The irony is not lost on us that the important insights of the authors of this SI sit within a paywalled academic journal, primarily accessible to those in the world of scholarship and inaccessible to those in the world of practice. The conversation needs to continue and extend beyond the parameters of the paywalls that act as a gatekeeper of much thinking that could make important and significant contributions to education's fields and spaces. To advance the scholarship and practice of boundary-spanning pracademia, it is pivotal both that the integrity of scholarship is protected and that we consider how wider dissemination of ideas and conceptions of pracademia and the pracademic are enabled across the varied spaces such individuals may be operating within. We thank the authors in this SI for their contribution and look forward to the continuing conversation that builds on this work.

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