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Editorial:

Ten Years of Connecting Researchers

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Abstract

In this editorial, we build on the current discussion around the nature, relevance, and future potential of the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP). In the 10 years of its existence, JRP has managed to offer a platform to researchers who are prepared to acknowledge the challenges and raise fundamental questions about research practice. It has helped readers in reassessing the formulaic prescriptions of research and in imagining creative extensions to research practice. The discussion has also offered a number of ideas to strengthen the publication further. Some of these ideas have been explored, especially the place of research practice in building the civic and professional competencies needed in the twentyfirst century, examining the state of research practice in the troubled grounds of universities, engaging with research spaces outside the university system, and pursuing the quest for competence or good professional practice in applied disciplines. JRP should continue to be a venue for future conversations on what we mean by research and how it is to be carried out and evaluated.

Index Terms: undergraduate research; scientific competence; professional competence; good practice; applied research; peer learning; publication culture

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This being the 10th year of publication of the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP), we engage in a reflective exercise of looking back and looking forward. Thinking about the short history of JRP, we are reminded of what has been referred to as Heinz von Foerster's Theorem Number One:

The more profound the problem that is ignored, the greater are the chances for fame and success. (Foerster, 1972, p. 191)

As a lead thinker and scientist, Foerster was keen to bring the whole range of *scientific competence* (not necessarily the *method of reduction*) to bear on the problems of cognition, education, society, and humanity. The so-called theorem stated above carries the suggestion that inquiry into these complex domains must confront the profound problems of interdependence, communication, and regulation, which often frustrate our conventional approaches to inquiry.

Applying the theorem to JRP, it is clear that fame and success could not be our goal as long as we remain interested in the profound problems. Through this scholarly journal, we seek to play a role in establishing communication among researchers that reminds them of the profound problems, and hopefully leads them to develop innovative solutions too.

Since communication and connection among researchers is a key part of our mission, we decided to collect the voices of our readers and contributors on the occasion of the 10th year of publication of the journal. We offered them a set of trigger questions through the JRP Forum ([Msg 461](#), January 26, 2014):

- (a) How would you describe the journal and its relevance?
- (b) Do you have an interesting incident relating to this journal that you would like to share?
- (c) How would you describe your involvement with this journal?
- (d) How have you used the journal so far and how do you plan to use it in future?
- (e) Does the journal meet your expectations/requirements?
- (f) What are your suggestions for enhancing the relevance, usefulness, and influence of the journal?
- (g) Do you have any specific proposal for the journal (on your own behalf or on behalf of your institution, academic society, professional body, etc.)?

These questions generated responses and comments from several members of the JRP Forum. It would be too much to reproduce all the responses here. Therefore, we have selected a few of them and arranged the material below.

1. Comments From the JRP Forum

The comments are arranged under three categories: (a) impressions, (b) involvement, and (c) expectations. A review of these comments leads us to a set of ideas to strengthen the publication further, as summarised at the end of the section.

1.1. Impressions

“Tremendous 10-year journey.” (Ahmed Shaki, Reader)

“JRP is interesting and altogether rare.” (Keijo Räsänen, Associate Editor)

“The journal is still very relevant.” (Gabriele Bammer, Associate Editor)

“The journal has a unique role; it is an academic forum for discussing, theorising, and describing the practice of research.” (Alistair R. Anderson, Associate Editor)

“JRP is a model for many other journals, in part or whole, and will continue to be a model for future journals too. It is the review process that is so interesting.” (Wesley Shrum, Author)

“The importance of JRP lies in its determination to continuously address a wide range of intellectually challenging topics and to offer new analyses, encouraging new approaches and scholarship.” (Branislav Radeljić, Reader)

“JRP is different from other journals. First, it has created a community of not just early-stage researchers but ‘persons’ who are willing to share and learn mutually. Second, it has a much deeper purpose than just getting people to publish articles, that of facilitating a reflexive process of introspection and self-learning. And, [due to] the fact that it is open-access, it challenges the academic world to open up knowledge spaces, especially if knowledge has to contribute to social change.” (Joseph Satish V., Reader)

1.2. Involvement

“I have recommended JRP to a range of colleagues looking for somewhere to publish methods-based articles.” (Gabriele Bammer, Associate Editor)

“I use the journal to provide interesting examples of research issues, especially those affecting our practices.” (Alistair R. Anderson, Associate Editor)

“My involvement is, first, in learning from other fellow researchers in other domains. And second, in attempting as often as occasions arise, to promote a larger awareness related to scientific knowledge on material artefacts: their conception, their production, and their use.” (François-X. Nsenga, Distinguished Reviewer)

“In the last 10 years I have learned more from JRP than from any other source.” (D. P. Dash, Editor)

“I have used the journal for teaching research methods to research students. I provide links to articles and then recommend that they also search through the journal for other articles. Students have always enjoyed the articles they read because they are written accessibly and they can identify with others’ experiences (e.g., the special issue on Students’ Reflections on Doing Research, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2007).” (Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Associate Editor)

“I constructed a lot of learning, not only from the articles, but also from the operational process followed in the journal. Reading, reviewing, and contributing in the JRP Forum has shaped my development as a researcher.” (Anand Agrawal, Reviewer)

1.3. Expectations

“Use all means to make the journal known to as many researchers as possible.” (François-X. Nsenga, Distinguished Reviewer)

“We may have some special issues focussing on the researcher.” (Anand Agrawal, Reviewer)

“I would like to see a burgeoning of articles about interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods.” (Gabriele Bammer, Associate Editor)

“There is a danger of JRP being identified as somewhat ‘fringe’ and it would be good to see more contributions by mainstream established authors.” (Gabriele Bammer, Associate Editor)

“Add a section where research students can publish their viewpoints about methods, methodology, analytical tools, and the difficulties they have faced with their research. Please come up with more special issues as well as publish at least four issues in a year instead of two.” (Ahmed Shaki, Reader)

“An interesting point was made about creating an outlet for student experience. I agree, but with some caveat. It needs to fit into a larger picture of research practice, which is the journal’s remit.” (Alistair R. Anderson, Associate Editor)

“Special issues can play an important role. They offer an opportunity to create a forum of knowledge and research in a specialised, even a niche, area. Yet there is a risk that some of the niches may be too specialised for the scope of the journal.” (Alistair R. Anderson, Associate Editor)

“Special issues deviate from the heterogeneity [of general issues], evoke interest, and are probably created by people who know each other or at least work in the same research area. Should we invest in creating more such

issues? Or, otherwise aim to increase coherence or communication among the articles published? Two possible themes: (a) collapse of the university illusion and research/researchers outside universities and (b) concept of practice.” (Keijo Räsänen, Associate Editor)

“It seems to me that the abstracts could benefit from published work on structured abstracts (Kelly & Yin, 2007). Since the journal is in part transdisciplinary, it should inform both researchers and policy-shapers.” (Gabriel Della-Piana, Distinguished Reviewer)

“I’d be very interested in a special issue on how to involve undergraduate students in research. It’s the norm for undergrads in the sciences to engage in research; it’s more counter-cultural for students in social sciences to do so.” (Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Associate Editor)

“Consider opening discussion forums for each article so that readers can discuss their views with others and also with the author of the article through an open platform.” (Anand Agrawal, Reviewer)

1.4. A Reflective Summary

On the surface, the above comments may appear person-specific, but underneath, they are rather interconnected. The comments link up quite well with our own assessment of the challenges and opportunities before JRP. It is not hard to see these comments in an integrated form, as presented below.

JRP is recognised for its focus on drawing out the open, dilemmatic, and evolving aspects of research practice, irrespective of domain or discipline. This is what gives the journal its distinctiveness. This is an important differentiator as it offers a unique value to researchers and professionals who are prepared to ask fundamental questions about the conventions of research practice. The journal has connected such persons across national, institutional, and disciplinary divides. It has inspired some of them with the deeper purpose of freeing research practice from formulaic prescriptions and releasing the spirit of innovation in research. This spirit of innovation must be harnessed in developing research practice to tackle the seemingly complex and intractable problems of our times.

Users and contributors acknowledge the journal not only as a learning resource, but also as a system that facilitates their development as researchers. The journal provides them with material that is useful for their role as teachers and students of research. It creates opportunities for peer learning among researchers working in different areas. The journal promotes a larger awareness about the nature and demands of scientific practice.

Although innovative thinking and practice are often associated with the periphery (rather than the centre), it is well to recognise that JRP runs the risk of being sidelined as a fringe publication. The journal needs to reach a wider audience, especially students (both undergraduate and graduate students), persons engaged in interdisciplinary and

transdisciplinary enquiry, researchers outside universities, and policy-shapers in various fields. This may be attempted by: (a) enhancing publicity, (b) focusing on students, (c) developing relevant special issues, (d) improving coherence among articles, (e) attracting established authors, (f) addressing issues relevant to policy-shapers, (g) publishing articles on new methods of enquiry, (h) introducing structured abstracts, and (i) developing discussion forums to engage authors, readers, and other contributors.

This exercise of listening to the users and contributors of the journal has been helpful in several ways. It has lent support to the original vision of the journal to serve as a regenerative link among researchers. At the same time, the exercise has also raised a number of ideas to strengthen the publication further. No doubt, these ideas would fuel the journal's progress in the next 10 years. Some of these ideas will be discussed below, leaving scope for the discussion to continue in future editorials.

2. Undergraduate Research*

* This topic arises from the comment made by Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Associate Editor, JRP (see her comment quoted under Subsection 1.3 above).

The topic of undergraduate research has been raised a few times within our editorial team. From time to time, we do receive enquiries and proposals on this theme from potential authors. There appear to be exemplary initiatives of undergraduate research at certain institutions, for example, Wulf-Andersen, Mogensen, and Hjort-Madsen (2013) reflect on a case of how undergraduate students were engaged as “research learners” at Roskilde University, Denmark. Still, undergraduate education remains rather encumbered with content, with limited opportunity for research learning.

Due to the increasing regulation of higher education and the widespread implementation of standardised qualification frameworks, undergraduate curriculums have been burdened with ever more varied requirements. Consequently, the institutional capacity for experimentation and innovation tends to be restricted. If anecdotal evidence is to be taken seriously, any spare academic capacity in undergraduate education has been absorbed by the seemingly unending demands of institutional and program-level accreditation.

Of course, there are interesting examples of universities that continue to see themselves as leaders (not followers) of public understanding of education. Consider the “[Aims of Education](#)” lecture series at The University of Chicago. Delivering the 40th lecture in this series, the sociologist A. Abbott questions the idea of education based on a fixed curriculum and fixed content:

Just because I have argued that the materials and skills we try to teach in class are not themselves the thing that is education does not mean one can easily find education without them. Indeed, to invoke another, more famous, metaphor, you can think of the curriculum as the shadows cast on a wall by the light of education as it shines over, under, around, and through the myriad phases of our experience. It is a mistake to be sure to take these

shadows for the reality, but they are something that helps us find or grasp or intuit that reality. The false notions that there is a fixed curriculum, that there is a list of things that an educated person ought to know, and that the shadow-exercises on the wall themselves are the content of education—these false notions all come from taking too seriously what was originally a wise recognition—the recognition that the shadows do in fact provide a starting point in our attempt to fully envision reality.

But note that in this metaphor it is not just the shadows on the wall that are not education. Knowing reality isn't education either. Education is the light, the shining thing that assigns meanings. If you have it, all the rest—the core skills and the *lingua franca* and the basic materials, all those shadows on the wall—suddenly becomes obvious. (Abbott, 2002, p. 7, column 4)

In their eagerness to make education an instrument of public policy, governments around the world are holding universities accountable for meeting various targets, in areas such as access to education, student progression, graduate employability, and so forth. As a result, all but a few universities are losing sight of the “shining thing,” that invisible essence of education to which Abbott alludes in the above comment. Such far-reaching ideals of education are easily subordinated to the regulatory demands on education, whether imposed by governments or professional bodies.

Still, there is perennial doubt about the effectiveness and value of such regulated forms of education. Does this education really produce the type of citizens and professionals needed in society? From the standpoint of this journal, two general questions could be asked with regard to undergraduate education or adult education, in general: (a) What forms of research practice could be associated with the civic and professional competencies needed in the twentyfirst century? (b) How could these forms of research practice be embedded in undergraduate education (or adult education)?

To initiate discussion around these questions within JRP, we can use article categories such as *Provocative Idea* and *Viewpoints & Discussion*. We invite all interested readers to consider this possibility and engage in developing the general understanding and practice of undergraduate research.

3. University Illusion*

* The term *university illusion* was used by Keijo Räsänen, Associate Editor, JRP (see his comment quoted under Subsection 1.3 above).

Universities, as research spaces, appear to be under tremendous strain. Burdened by content-heavy curriculums and competitive funding regimes, universities are hard-pressed to pursue creative directions in either teaching or research. The frustration and danger of this state of affairs is captured in the ironic comment of Peter Higgs, who shared the 2013 Nobel Prize in physics:

Today I wouldn't get an academic job. It's as simple as that. I don't think I would be regarded as productive enough. (Quoted in Aitkenhead, 2013)

By and large, university work is still structured around disciplines and narrow specialisms, with fairly rigid boundaries separating the worldviews, activities, and symbols that distinguish those specialisms. Each of those has its "top journals." Despite various attempts at new "publication cultures" (Kueffer, Hadorn, Bammer, van Kerkhoff, & Pohl, 2007), the price of not publishing in the so-called top journals is just too high for researchers who are trying to survive and build a career in the university system.

But there are cracks in the system too. Not everyone working within universities would necessarily follow the dictates of the system. Academic deviants have always existed in universities. Among them are researchers who are willing to ask the fundamental questions. JRP owes a part of its success to them. Naturally, the future of JRP also depends partly on them.

Embroided in their own complexity, universities are no longer automatically the principal venues for research. If the employment of PhD-holders is any indication, many of them are choosing full-time or part-time employment outside academia. Estimates of their proportion vary widely, from 40 to 70 per cent, depending upon which fields of research or institutions are being considered in the estimates (e.g., Anwar, 2013).

Besides, there are also the *reflective practitioners* working outside universities. The future of JRP equally depends on them. In the next 10 years of JRP, it will be vital to examine how research survives and adapts within the troubled grounds of universities, but perhaps more importantly, how it has fared outside the university system.

4. The Hard Nature of Soft Problems

We started with Heinz von Foerster's Theorem Number One, which gives us the courage to continue developing JRP. Interestingly, Foerster has a Theorem Number Two, which gives us the conviction that we must focus on areas where the methods of the hard sciences have not been particularly successful. The theorem states:

The hard sciences are successful because they deal with the soft problems;
the soft sciences are struggling because they deal with the hard problems.
(Foerster, 1972, p. 191)

Elaborating on the theorem, Foerster describes the method of reduction used in the hard sciences. Complex systems are broken up into smaller and smaller parts progressively, until at least one part is understood. The success of this method depends on the condition that any understanding of the parts can then be assembled back to understand the original system. Such a "favorable condition" (p. 192) does not exist in the soft sciences. Without this condition, the soft sciences pose a hard problem to the established method of scientific inquiry (i.e., the method of reduction). In the soft sciences, for example, in the study of ecology, society, language, identity, and culture, we are faced with complex

nonlinear systems, which are not mere aggregation of some constituent parts. Yet, the researcher as well as the common citizen is faced with problems in these systems that call out for attention, inquiry, and response. From the standpoint of JRP, acknowledging this fundamental difficulty and examining alternative approaches to inquiry more suitable for the soft sciences continues to be important.

Looking at the recent submissions to JRP, we find several submissions on research practice involving community collaboration, specifically from health researchers (one has been published in this issue, see Vukotich, Cousins, & Stebbins, 2014, and the related *Viewpoint* article, also in this issue). As health researchers know, despite the quality of the knowledge produced by their research, they are not always successful in producing the appropriate health behaviour in the target communities.

This echoes the “lab to land” issues in agricultural research and the “bench to bedside” issues in medical research, that is, products of scientific research do not necessarily translate directly to the practical field, addressing the practical concerns of stakeholders, be they agricultural farmers or patients in the hospital. Similar “theory into practice” issues are encountered in educational research, policy sciences, and many other applied disciplines. Although these issues have been discussed for decades in various fields, and new templates for research thinking and practice have been offered as solutions (e.g., community-based participatory research, team science, transdisciplinary research, translational research, integrative research, engaged research, etc.), no permanent breakthroughs seem to have emerged. Even the best results appear rather provisional and rooted in local conditions.

Such “hard problems”—meaning the difficult nature of the issues involved in applied research, arising from the irreducible complexity of the systems involved—have been encountered in many research areas besides agriculture and health, such as education, energy, peace, citizenship, community, sustainability, social policy, and so forth. These areas call for *professional competence* or good professional practice, not just scientific knowledge (Ulrich, 2011).

Clearly, this situation has implications for research thinking and research practice. The mentioned difficulties ought to lead our future conversations on what we mean by research and how it is to be done (and evaluated). In the next 10 years, such conversations may impact the entire portfolio of research practice, contributing to the logic and methods of research, institutions of research, research philosophies, and identity of researchers who are engaged in addressing the hard problems in the applied disciplines.

5. Back to the Vision

In 2005, when JRP was launched, it was our aspiration to identify opportunities for “creative extensions to research practice” (Dash & Ponce, 2005). We envisioned doing this by creating a space for research-inclined individuals to engage in critical reflection and peer learning. With hindsight, this appears somewhat parallel to the idea of “peer

learning” presented by Boud and Lee (2005) around the same time, although their focus was more specifically on the development of research students. Still, their notion of “becoming peer” appeals to us in the broader context of research practice in general:

Learning with and from fellow students as peers, learning to participate in faculty-based seminars alongside academics and visiting scholars, learning to participate in the research, presentation, and publication practices and learning to network internationally with fellow researchers, for example, all involve complex notions of “becoming peer.” (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 514)

Now in the 10th year of its publication, JRP appears to have stayed on track, of course not without its fair share of difficulties and challenges. The specific directions anticipated above might allow us to continue pursuing the same aspiration, without falling into the trap of fame and success. Although, in principle, JRP is meant for every research-inclined individual, we need to make specific efforts to involve those who are working with a similar focus but are not involved in the journal currently. Merely growing the number of authors or readers is not the aim; the aim remains connecting researchers with a view to developing our shared understanding of research practice and stimulating creative extensions to that practice.

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