

Being and Becoming: Pracademia, Positionality and Praxis

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Abstract: The emergence of pracademia—and of the pracademic as a category of professional identity—is contested, poorly defined, and conceptually problematic. Having spent over two decades as an educational practitioner and now situated within the academy following my doctorate, I find myself inhabiting a space of professional transition. Yet, the literature surrounding pracademia, particularly within the field of education, remains limited and inconsistent in its attempts to define and understand these liminal spaces and those who occupy them. This paper takes as its research problem the need to more clearly articulate and examine the nature of pracademia as both a conceptual and lived space. Using a reflexive, autoethnographic approach, this study draws upon my own shifting identity as a lens through which to explore the construction of the pracademic self. Employing Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, I interrogate the intersections of symbolic violence, doxa, and the distribution of capital across the social fields of practice and academia. Key findings suggest that identity within this space is fluid and contingent, shaped by the tensions and affordances of both academic and practitioner worlds. Pracademia emerges as a site of rupture and possibility, formed within the imperceptibly thin overlaps of adjacent social fields, and sustained through the lived experience of pracademics themselves. Ultimately, the paper argues that despite the tensions and contradictions inherent in the pracademic condition, pracademia serves to enrich both the academy and the field of practice. In doing so, it opens up new ways of thinking about professional identity, knowledge production, and the permeability of institutional boundaries.

Keywords: Pracademic, Pracademia, Professional Identity, Bourdieu.

1. Introduction: Being and Becoming

I am a Pracademic, or at least some part of me is, or perhaps rather some part of me was. The difficulty here is that the classification of ‘pracademic’ is contested. This contestation exists between academic disciplines and fields of practice, and indeed across the academy and practice as a whole. In this paper I reflect on my journey into (as well as through and possibly out of) the realms of pracademia in attempt to detect those aspects of my professional, academic, and personal self, forming within my habitus, which anchor me within both the academy and within practice. I will use that part of me, the academic, to interrogate the experiential differences and similarities that I have within practice through a Bourdieusian lens, while also attempting to use that part of me, the practitioner, to relate these concepts to the functionality of such theory in practice. I do this through a reflective process as described by Alvesson & Skoldberg (2005), in that reflection allows me as an academic to turn inward towards the practitioner self in order to critically engage with my positionality across and within both the academy and practice.

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In this way I also engage with conscientization (Freire, 1988), in that through this critical reflection of my own actions I develop an awareness of a social reality, the pracademic. To this end the two main aims of this paper are to explore and conceptualise pracademia as a liminal space through a reflexive interrogation of personal professional identity, using Bourdieu's theoretical tools; and to challenge reductive definitions of the pracademic by examining how pracademic identity is dynamically formed and negotiated at the intersection of academic and practitioner fields.

This paper, therefore, offers a novel understanding of pracademia not as a bridge between academia and practice, but by developing the work of Turner (1967) and positioning pracademia as a complex, liminal space. By using the metaphor of graptolites in shale, it suggests how pracademia only becomes visible through the presence of pracademics themselves. This conceptualisation moves beyond existing definitions and metaphors in the literature. Additionally, while Bourdieu's concepts have been applied in various educational contexts, this paper makes a unique and original contribution by applying them to the concept of pracademia. This theoretical approach provides new insights into how the pracademic identity is formed and negotiated through the interplay of Bourdieusian tools.

To achieve this, the paper challenges the dichotomy between theory and practice, instead proposing a more fluid, interconnected relationship, and considers the process of pracademic identity formation, highlighting it as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a fixed state. This contribution is particularly valuable as it moves beyond simple categorisations based on career history or qualifications. This perspective contributes to ongoing discussions about how pracademics negotiate the liminal space between academic knowledge and practice.

To achieve this, the paper asks two main questions:

How is professional identity constructed and negotiated within the liminal space of pracademia?

In what ways can Bourdieu's theoretical tools illuminate the tensions, transitions, and possibilities experienced by those who inhabit the pracademic space?

2. Literature Review: Praxis, Positionality, and Graptolites

Hollweck et al. (2022) noted that the term pracademic has been evolving across literature, initially describing the praxis of politics and administration. Over time, the term has gained traction in disciplines such as conflict resolution (Volpe & Chandler, 2001), law (Schneider, 2013), nursing (Andrew et al., 2013), politics (McDonald & Mooney, 2011), organisational studies (Panda, 2014), policy (Murphy & Fulda, 2011), education (Dickfos, 2019), and social work (Owens, 2016). In education, this development has been particularly notable across social media and professional literature. However, as Netolicky (2020) points out, education often constructs jargon, or 'edu-words,' leading to the possibility that pracademia reflects a non-existent divide. After all, theory and practice are inseparable (McGregor, 1960). Eacott (2021) also critiques the literature's uncritical acceptance of a theory-practice binary while advocating for the exploration of pracademic spaces. This paper reflects on the terms pracademic and pracademia, their positioning, and associated models and metaphors to understand and locate the author's identity as a pracademic.

Through my teaching and leadership outside higher education, practice has never been an atheoretical vacuum (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Since my first teaching role in 2002, my practice has intertwined with academic research. Teachers in England typically hold an undergraduate degree and postgraduate teaching qualifications constructed by the academy, embedding theoretical foundations from pedagogues, psychologists, and sociologists. These qualifications establish social, symbolic, and temporal connections with the academy, yet, as Butler & Schnellert (2008) note, a disconnect persists between practice and the academy.

The separation of theory and practice dates back to Aristotle, privileging theory over practice (Friesen, 2022). Kolber & Heggart (2022) highlight this division between teachers and academics, compounded by calls for research-informed practice and demands for academics to demonstrate practical impact. Such divides suggest a problematic gulf between theory and practice, implying theory precedes practice and that they exist in isolation. Bouten-Pinto (2016) critiques this as projection and othering, wherein practitioners and academics reinforce preconceptions about each other's identities and roles.

However, theory and practice likely exist in dynamic equilibrium, influencing each other reciprocally (Posner, 2009; Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Shea (2007) and Wilson (2019) describe this interplay as an intersection, while Friesen (2022) uses the term "liminal space." This resonates with me, drawing on my geoscience background. Friesen's metaphor of graptolitic shales illustrates the intertwined nature of theory and practice. Graptolitic shales, formed in the Palaeozoic era, feature fossils existing as impressions in one layer and casts in another, reflecting twin moments of the same reality. Similarly, theory and practice are twin moments in the same reality as praxis (Freire, 1970), or as academic curiosity paired with professional drive (Walker, 2010). The split between academy and practice is visible only when the pracademic reveals it, akin to splitting the shale.

Defining the pracademic within this liminal space remains challenging. Definitions vary: a practitioner turned academic (Fowler et al., 2023), an academic engaged in practice (Volpe & Chandler, 2001), or a translator between theoretical and practical spaces with simultaneous expertise in both domains (Hollweck et al., 2022), while Wilson (2019) argues the term's nebulousness undermines its utility. Because definitions remain contested, literature often relies on metaphors like the Mobius strip (Hollweck et al., 2021), the bridge (Panda, 2014), or the revolving door (McCabe et al., 2016) to capture the pracademic's dual role. The literature generally frames pracademics as individuals within academia who actively engage in practice. This coalescence around the pracademic identity, rather than pracademia itself, suggests that developing this identity may be central to defining pracademia. Dickinson et al. (n.d.) propose that pracademics construct new identities by existing in both practice and academia. Knights & Clarke (2014) discuss the fragile academic self that emerges during transitions between these domains, while McCabe et al. (2016) identify the potential disjuncture between practitioner-academics and career academics.

Pracademics occupy a contested space requiring legitimacy in both practice and academia. This positionality constructs a fragile identity distinct from purely academic or practitioner roles. To explore this further, I turn to Bourdieu's framework to examine the symbolic capital and symbolic violence inherent in navigating the problematic, liminal space of pracademia.

3. Bourdieu's Tools: Pracademic Habitus and the Fragile Professional Self

It is not clear what separates the space of the academy and practice, and neither is there consensus about the size or form of the separation. However, even though Campbell (2022) highlights pracademia as a problematic space with lack of consensus and ill-defined boundaries, she also highlights that discussions surrounding pracademia and its links with professional capital require further and deeper exploration. This section explores the concepts of professional capital and the pracademic through the conceptual lens provided by Bourdieu. To do which I now describe some of the Bordieuan tools that I shall employ.

3.1 Field and Habitus

Bourdieu's concept of field, defined as a "configuration of relations between positions objectively defined in their existence and in the domination, they impose upon occupants' agencies or institutions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p72-73), is central to understanding pracademia. Fields are dynamic social spaces of structure, agency, and conflict, existing through their inhabitants (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1989; Colley & Guéry, 2015). The academy and practice can be viewed as overlapping fields whose boundaries are constructed by historical power relations, creating the liminal space inhabited by pracademics.

The concept of field is inseparable from the concept of the habitus, with Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, p16) defining habitus as "historical relations deposited within individual bodies as mental and corporeal schemata". The habitus predisposes individuals to act in specific ways within fields (Noyes, 2008). Professional identity and its formation or change, aligns with concept of habitus, because professional identity involves past experiences, present engagement, and future orientations (Biesta et al., 2015), and like habitus professional identity forms over time, a gradual shift from one state of being into another. Indeed Sommerland (2007) described the formation of professional identity and professional reproduction as sociohistorical, concerned with the development of the habitus which changes over time as the habitus interacts with a changing field. Indeed Wacquant (1990) suggested that workplaces (as fields) are the crucible of identity formation which aligns with the work of Ibarra (2003), who suggested that moving into higher education from practice is not a transition from practice to the academy but rather a fundamental restructuring of the self, the development of a new (possibly fragile) identity, a new persona, part of which is the development of a new set of professional and personal values.

This is something that I keenly felt moving from practice to the academy, for example when I first joined the academy I was exhilarated by a sense of autonomy I had not felt before, but it was an illusion of autonomy. Although the restrictions of dally practice may have disappeared, there was a requirement to accept and adopt new values ideologies, and indeed emotional responses to the taken for granted truths of academia, regardless of how at variance these shifts may have been from my pre-existing values, ideologies, and emotional responses (Gourlay, 2011). Although such changes could be viewed as normal for role changes as if an outsider in a new culture (Wood et al., 2016), these are better understood as sites of symbolic violence where shifts in the values of capital are felt deeply as I as actor shifted from the field of practice to the field of the academy.

3.2 Capital

Capital in Bordieuan terms is a field-specific, creating differentials and inclusion/exclusion relations. One of the most common forms of capital within education in England across both the academy and within

practice is symbolic capital, which shapes field perceptions and legitimises worldviews. It is embedded in social thought, language, and relationships, influencing agent behaviours. Education plays a crucial role in perpetuating and codifying social typologies and structures and exerts significant influence through symbolic production, to impose these particular worldviews (Bourdieu et al., 1994). Examples of this can be seen at graduation, where through ritualised and symbolic acts including the use of academic gowns to denote differing ranks, hoods to differentiate differing degree subjects, and the use of postnominals (Round, 2024), show the world of the academy and those beyond it that the academy has power and authority to not only confer the right to wear certain clothing but also through this act of consecration allow the augmentation of people's names. Within educational practice this can also be seen through the use of uniforms, and the social consecration of prize giving and assemblies, where teaching staff are given privileged geographical positions within rooms to reproduce the social cohesion and hierarchical social order of the institution.

3.3 Symbolic Violence

The main forms of capital described by Bourdieu (economic, cultural, social, and the all-encompassing symbolic capital) become the objects and instruments of struggle, which Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence' (Baroutsis, 2015; Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu suggests that symbolic violence can be embodied in an individual's predisposition to act in accordance with the wishes of the field. Symbolic violence secures an agent's compliance to the fields' domination through the shaping of beliefs, actions or practices associated with the exclusion of other beliefs, actions and practices by considering them as illegitimate (Baroutsis, 2015). Symbolic violence is often imperceptible and invisible, it is exerted through symbolic channels of communication and cognition and occurs where power is accepted as legitimate. This is because symbolic capital such as esteem, belief, recognition, and having the confidence of others, represents perceived authority to exercise power, and therefore generate sites of symbolic violence by withholding symbolic capital, or reducing the value of a species of capital within the field.

3.4 Doxa

Doxa can be better understood through the term 'taken for grantedness'. It is imposed by dominant agents, acting as a generative form of power (Baroutsis, 2015; Swartz, 2013). Bourdieu suggests that this taken for grantedness constructs a view of the social world that is "so natural and self-evident that it is seen as the only view in existence" (Bourdieu, 1977 p164). Dominant agents (in other words those actor/s who possess the highest amount of the species of capital which has the highest value within the field) are more able to impose doxa - their beliefs of how things should be, and unquestionable social truths (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Kloot, 2009). These assumptions relate to capital value, game rules, and field dimensions (Kloot, 2009). As a cultural expression of dominance, doxa is also contested, being both the object and instrument of social struggle across the field (Baroutsis, 2015; Swartz, 2013).

4. Reflections on my Pracademic Self: Method and Discussion

Without a clear understanding of how I am positioned across the academy or practice, it is impossible to fully understand or identify the subjectivity (Holliday, 2007) which lead to the social construction that I

will define as pracademic. Or as Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) suggests any analysis of a social phenomenon, such as pracademia, must be imbedded within a self-analysis (Hamel, 1998). Therefore, without a representation of my experience and positionings, and how these elements have shaped and defined my understanding of my reality, I cannot truly understand the ways in which I am approaching this reflection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Moore, 2012). I would at this juncture, like to assure the reader that this autoethnographical paper, and the data used to construct it, are indeed located within myself, and are my reflections of my social construction. Ethical permission has been sought and obtained from my institution.

4.1 Locating my Practice self

While Narayan (1993) and Foote & Bartell (2011) emphasize locating oneself through categories like gender, class, and educational background, I align with Lu & Hodge (2019) holistic approach, recognizing that positionality shifts based on situation and knowledge construction (Choi, 2006). Rather than deep-diving into identity politics or producing a formulaic list of social categories (Marcus, 1998), this reflection aims to identify loci that help readers understand its subjectivities and potential biases (Choi, 2006). Moving away from reflection as mere confessional tale (Pillow, 2003) or cathartic proclamation of privilege, I instead seek to deconstruct the authority of academic 'knower' and practitioner 'doer'. This positioning acknowledges the limits of my understanding of pracademia as a constructed reality (Narayan, 1993), showing how I am located and consecrated within both academy and practice (Cormier, 2018). I was trained within the natural sciences (my undergraduate degree was in Palaeontology), and taught positivist methodologies and ideas, within Biology, Chemistry and Physics to children between 11 and 18 years in the state and independent sectors in England. I was also the Deputy Headmaster (It is also worth noting that I am male) at my last secondary school with a responsibility for Boarding students, Safeguarding, and Pastoral Care. Both aspects of my professional life (Teacher of the natural sciences, and Senior Leader) have had a profound effect on my understanding of both the secondary education system and my personal, pedagogical, and philosophical positioning.

4.2 Locating my Academic self

After completing a Master's degree and having enjoyed the research aspect so much, I did something that would change my life forever. I completed a Doctorate. Not however the PhD but rather a Professional Doctorate (the Doctor of Education or EdD). Choosing a professional doctorate rather than a PhD as Deputy Head was important to me because I wanted to develop my understanding of the theory that guided the principles that ordered the work I was engaged in, I wanted to challenge and disrupt the taken for granted norms (doxa) of my establishment and field, I wanted the academy (via research) to influence practice, as well as practice building into the theories of the academy. After a successful defence of my thesis, I took a post as a lecturer in education, and now, two years after starting work in a university I am also a senior leader within the school my subject is located in, a fellow of Advance HE, and supervise several doctoral students (EdD and PhD). In this sense, by having a background in practice and being aware of the subtle signals' codes and symbols from that space, and now being immersed in the academy where I engage in rigorous and reflective analysis, I find myself with many of the identifying marks of a 'pracademic' (Walker, 2010).

4.3 Locating my pracademic self

These marks are not just aspects of my positionality but also of my developing professional identity and reality. I have, as did , had a number of interactions with colleagues and indeed the wider academy which can be considered as symbolic violence as described above. Not because my academic credentials are not up to par, but because the capital value of my experience and understanding of curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment outside of the academy are not always considered as having equal worth (Fowler et al., 2023) to the experience and skill developed within the academy. This is an example of doxic shift resulting in symbolic violence. I hold a teaching qualification (the Post Graduate Certificate Education – secondary science, or PGCE) designed by the academy and through displays of capital, such as graduation, the academy consecrated me as a teacher. However, when entering the academy as academic from practice the capital value of this teaching qualification was diminished. Within a space of symbolic violence, the value ascribed to the capital of my PGCE was reduced and not recognised as an appropriate teaching qualification. Although it is possible that this could be discussed in terms of the applicability of teaching practice at the secondary level and teaching in HE, I was expected to attain an alternative teaching qualification, which was self-directed reflective and did not contain any elements of observation, teaching placement, feedback, or the practical rigour of the PGCE.

In other words, there is a disconnect between the doxic unquestioned and taken for granted social truths about what is important, what experience and skill carries weight, and this importance shifts as the pracademic moves from one field to another. As part of the construction of my pracademic identity the shift in doxa was felt particularly in instances of interview for posts within the academy where the capital value of my experience in leadership, management and pedagogy as part of my practice self was ascribed less value than other aspects of my academic self (Owens 2016). This shift in capital value was not linked to any codified reason but rather there was a taken for granted truth that experience in practice is not as valuable as experience in the academy. Conversely when I have attempted to move from the academy back into practice, interview panels have been critical of my theoretical background seeing that academic-self aspect as being disconnected from the realities of practice.

Yet at the same time I have found that within university teaching spaces the students I work with have greatly valued the ability to translate theory into practical examples, and vice versa, they have found the examples from ‘the real world’ of education more helpful than the theory alone. When in a lecture I discuss the importance of knowing and engaging with a particular skill, theory or knowledge base students know that I have been part of the ‘hiring and firing’ process in the jobs they currently or aspire to work in, and have implemented academic theory in the work place and have used experience in the work place to critique theory.

Indeed, there are several examples of my lived reality that suggest there is (in terms of experiential realities if nothing else) a notable gap between the field of the academy and the field of practice (Panda, 2014). As an educationalist in practice my daily life was dictated by the school bell, by the urgency of term dates and external examinations; by the imperatives imposed by the local and national authorities, and the inspection process of the highly neoliberalised space of compulsory education. Particularly in the fee-paying sector when the pressure of sales is as important as the pressure of the delivery of lessons, or the marking of books and homework. Where the engagement with after curricular activities, relationships with

parents and other stakeholders (which were observed, inspected, and scrutinised) formed part of annual pay and professional development review processes.

In this world of practice while studying in the academy, I found myself in a space of symbolic violence when I was told on numerous occasions that I was over-thinking, that I was spending too much time researching and reflecting on my day to day practice, and that in meetings no one wanted to know what Bourdieu, Foucault, or Freire would describe a situation as, but rather what the solution to a situation would be – and can we have it enacted by the end of the day ‘please’! In this crucible my habitus was inculcated with the natural and self-evident doxa that results, actions, outcomes and impact, over theoretical frameworks, philosophical positionings, or reflective criticality were important.

My time in the academy has also been marked by the emphasis of neoliberal ideals, the importance of recruitment and student satisfaction, however what is most notable by its absence is the speed. There is a lack of immediacy, a drive to get things right rather than to get things done, an insistence that we consult widely and thoroughly. That we interrogate the proposals for change through critical and reflective lenses. That we discuss the work of theorists and researchers while reflecting in and on practice (Schön, 2013). There is still marking, and there are deadlines. There is still pressure to have student satisfaction and achievement at the core of the work, but this pressure is also to develop research and create knowledge as well as to be a facilitator of knowledge delivery. According to Panda (2014) and Duncan (1974) this is where the liminal space of the pracademic exists. Not in the detail of the day to day work, but rather in the shift in value systems, in the disconnect between the value ascribed to rigour and scholarship in the academy, and the value ascribed to relevance and applicability in practice. In other words, knowledge is the end goal of the academy, where as in practice knowledge is the means to an end (Wood, 1988).

It is through the interactions of capital, symbolic violence, and doxa, that the habitus is changed, augmented, and shaped by the field it intersects, and it is this moulding of the habitus, through the mechanisms of the field, that alters the professional identity of the pracademic. Dickinson et al. (n.d.) suggest that pracademics have a fluid approach to professional identity, adapting it according to the audience and situation. However, I posit that the longer I stay out of a practice setting and therefore the more time I spend within the academy, the less of a pracademic I will become. My professional identity over time will become less malleable. Thus, as I become consecrated and inculcated within the academy, my habitus develops to become more connected to the field, the doxa of the academy more deeply imbedded within my habitus.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored pracademia and the identity of pracademics through reflective engagement with literature and Bourdieu’s theoretical tools. The journey between practitioner and academic spaces presents unique challenges and opportunities, shaping the professional identity of those who, like graptolites, exist simultaneously in the shale of academy and practice.

While increasingly present in both academic and practice-based aspects of education discourse, pracademia remains contested and poorly defined. This paper navigates the conceptualisations and metaphors describing this space, from the chasm between theory and practice to the liminal overlap of two

Bourdieuian fields: academy and practice. Crucially, this paper suggests that pracademia exists only because pracademics themselves exist. Like graptolites revealed by splitting shale, the pracademic space is made manifest by those who inhabit it. This moves beyond career-based definitions, emphasizing a unique and often fragile professional identity. Transitioning between fields involves restructuring selfhood, negotiating value systems, adapting to cultures, and reconciling expectations.

Bourdieu's concepts—field, habitus, capital, and doxa—illuminate these dynamics. Pracademics navigate shifting capital values, instances of symbolic violence, and conflicting doxic assumptions. My transition from educational practice to academia illustrates these challenges, such as the diminished value of teaching qualifications in academic contexts. Similarly, the tension between school leadership's practical imperatives and academia's reflective rigor highlights the necessity of adaptability.

Despite undervaluation, the pracademic perspective uniquely bridges theory and practice, applying lived experiences to academic discourse and vice versa. As academia and practice increasingly intersect, fostering pracademics' development can enrich both fields. The journey of becoming and being a pracademic involves ongoing negotiation of identity, capital, and doxic truths. Embracing pracademia's complexity can offer pathways to address challenges in an interconnected world.

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