

The essential role of critical/contextual literature reviews in reimagining doctorates

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This session

- Introduction – reimagining Doctorates
- Expectations of practitioner research - what defines this approach
- Articulating critical and contextual knowledge for the thesis/project report
- Closing the loop for the style of presenting this section of the thesis
- Learning from examples – theses from the British Library
- Conclusion – practical recommendations and take aways

What is the best modus operandi to carry out literature reviews that include 'unpublished knowledge and information' (Costley and Nottingham, 2017) and provide the best way to report on practitioner-research?

New eco-world for the university and higher education

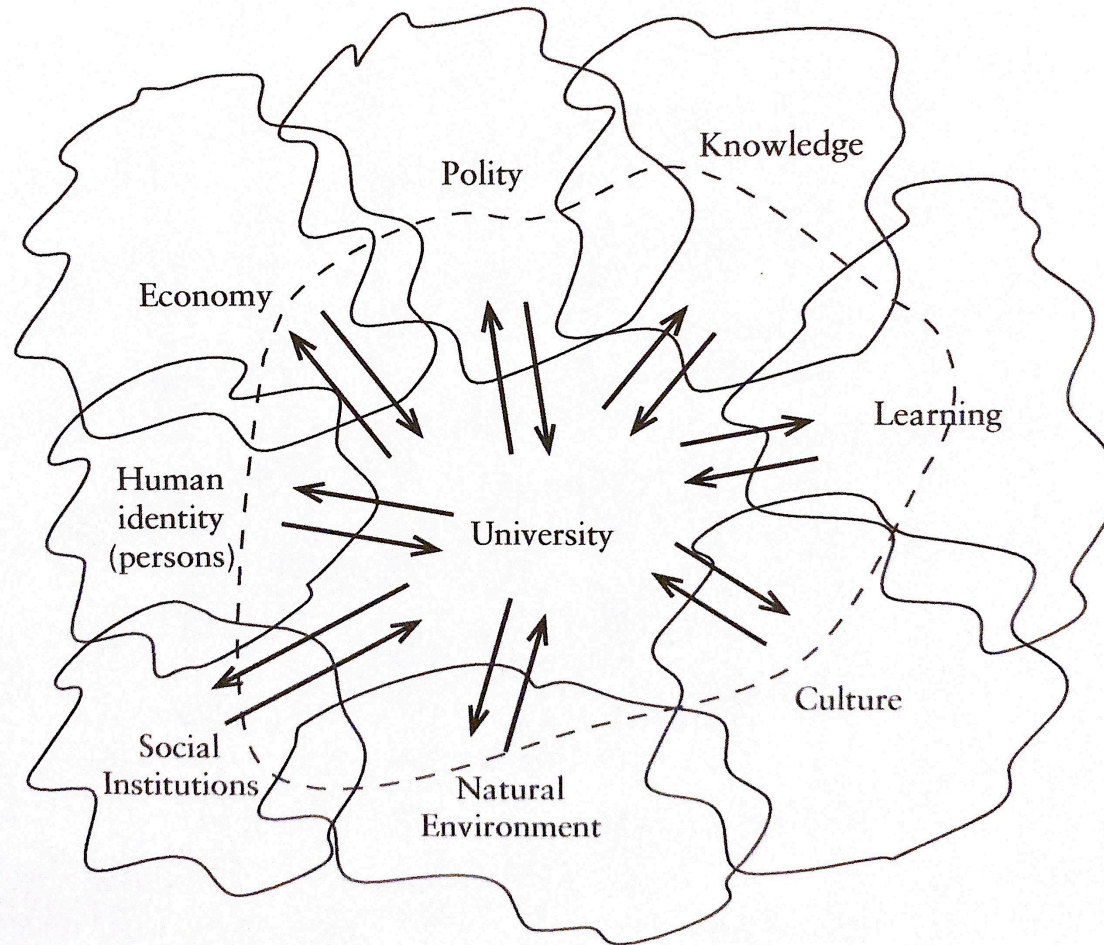


Figure 20.1 The ecological university, entangled with eight ecosystems.

“I suggest that there are no less than eight ecosystems that should especially come into view here, those of *knowledge, persons, social institutions, the economy, the polity, culture, learning and the natural environment*” (Barnett, 2022).

In the *Philosophy of Higher Education A Critical Introduction* by Ronald Barnett

New epistemic changes for practice-based degrees

...*modern* degree delivery patterns for the practice-based doctorate (Fillery-Travis and Robinson, 2018) have led to what some scholars have called *epistemic changes* in doctoral programmes and global doctoral standards (Costley, 2019).

As a response, the expectations involved in supervising and examining doctorates has been changing worldwide (ARC, 2023; QAA 2020).

Reimagining the doctorate relies on championing transformational properties that promote further diversification for the candidate population, the mode of study and the purpose of the doctorate (Taylor, 2023; Hammond *et. al.*, 2010).

Carter, Smith and Harrison (2021) talk about working in the ‘doctoral borderlands’ to formulate new research directions that present shifting values that respond to rapid and alarming change and transcultural diversity....

Practitioner research – new perimeters for practice

- Practice-based doctorate pathways are **now an established way** for postgraduate researchers to gain qualifications – *but they are not always understood*
- **Practitioner-researchers** (Jarvis, 1999) can also be called **practitioner-scholars** (Storey and Maughan, 2016).
- Study is generally oriented toward **senior practitioners** in a variety of fields **who are actively engaged in substantive professional roles during their studies** (outside of the academy).
- The degrees allow for ‘an opportunity for individuals to **situate professional knowledge** developed over time **in a theoretical academic framework**’ (QAA, 2020, p. 8).
- Practice-based doctorates and professional doctorates (PDs) **have a wider set of attributes and criteria.**
- Examples of practitioner PDs are **Doctor of Education (EdD), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf), Doctor of Engineering (DEng)** (Jones 2018).

Higher Education: valuing practitioner research

Learning oriented toward lifelong and professional studies can be found in many subject areas and across the university landscape



International practitioner researchers exist in many sectors in the workplace (paid and unpaid) within a global society and economy



Practitioners work on many levels - managers and executives - and all levels of education (employees as they progress)



Focus is on 1. individual 2. team 3. cohort 4. organisation 5. sector or field (workforce/learning development) including skills and knowledge, behaviours (independent studies) and outcomes (new knowledge toward products and services)



The research thesis or project report identifies findings and activities that show career-based learning as well as professional impact

New world expectations - UN's sustainable goals and University themes = impact

Aims and research question an ongoing exploratory project

Rationale - misaligned or differing expectations from researchers, supervisors or examiners may pose problems for coming to an agreement about Post-grad research (PGR) examination outcomes.

Supervisors and examiners accommodate differing styles of knowledge review as each thesis has unique attributes, but they are also professionally tasked to assess the achievement of standardised doctoral characteristics even within a broadened form of scholarship (Porter, 2021).

Aim - to consider ways of facilitating the critical and contextual review for practitioner-research degrees.

Research question - What approaches are seen as most effective for framing contextual knowledge and mapping literature for practitioner research and professional doctorates?

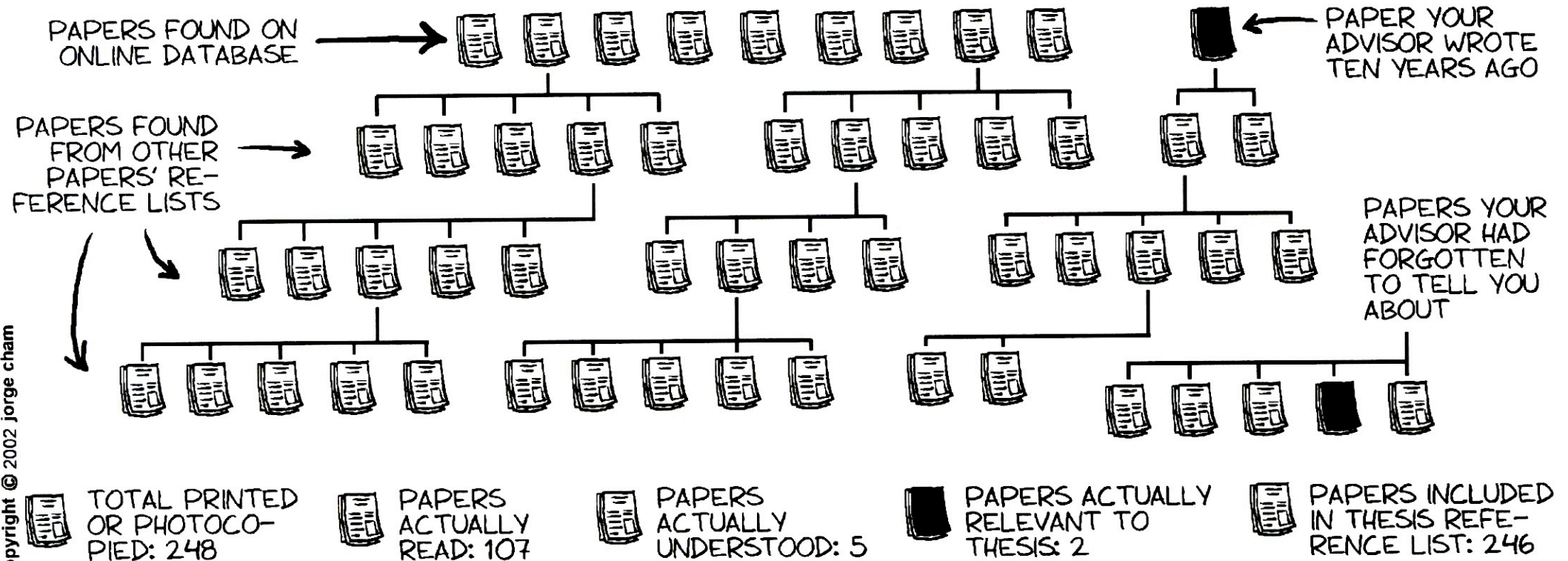
Sources for the inquiry:

- a review of literature that used an initial conceptual framework followed by a systematic keyword search and themed analysis;
- engaging the author's context and experience as a supervisor and examiner;
- evaluating a small number of published theses focused on social science (education) and healthcare.

REFERENCES

MAKING SURE NO ONE HAS ALREADY WRITTEN YOUR THESIS

phd.stanford.edu
JORGE CHAM © STANFORD DAILY

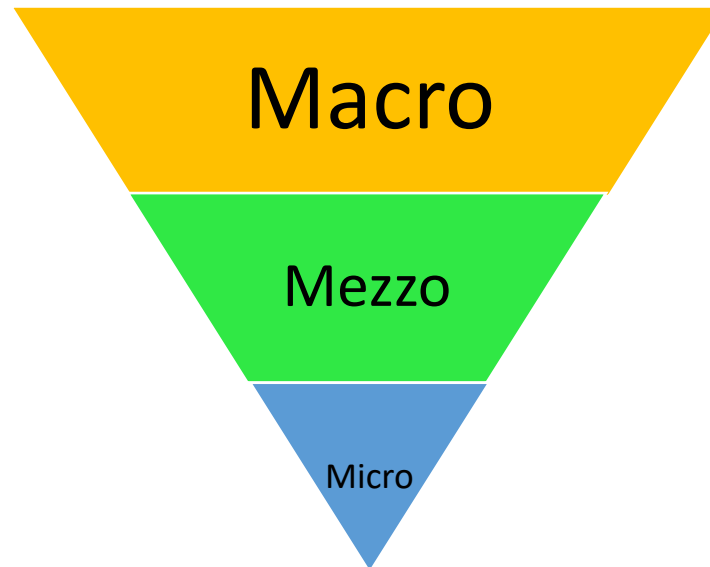


Critical and contextual knowledge

- The context and literature is about how practitioners tell their research story...
- A review critical & contextual knowledge sources means adding grey literature and **a wider range of sources** to address live wicked research problems

Google's AI overview

While no single person "invented" the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of analysis in sociology, the concepts emerged from the work of various sociologists, with George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman being key figures in the development of microsociology, while Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber laid the groundwork for macrosociology.



Google's AI overview

The terms "micro," "meso," and "macro" in the context of analysis and levels of organization are not attributed to a single inventor, but rather emerged as a way to categorize different scales of analysis in various fields like sociology, economics, and social work, with Kurt Dopfer, John Foster, and Jason Potts being key figures in developing the micro-meso-macro framework within evolutionary economics.

Critiquing knowledge to establish its value – making sure it all lines up

$$\mathbf{E = mc^2}$$

equation

$$\Delta\tau_i = \frac{x_i - m_i}{\varepsilon * \varphi * m_i}$$

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Apples, oranges, a couple of cashews divided by 10 by 4 (Tuchman, 2025).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c93gq72n7y1o>
<https://www.britannica.com/science/E-mc2-equation>
<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/03/business/video/peter-tuchman-new-york-stock-exchange-trader-floor-tariffs-digvid>

Tacit or implicit disciplinary influences are a part of practitioner-research knowledge...
practitioner-research can include **disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary solutions** to research problems

e.g. Gestalt design / Bauhaus

the whole before the parts

Arnheim, Rudolph (1969) *Art and Visual Perception A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press Berkeley

<https://gestaltcentre.org.uk/what-is-gestalt/>

Graphics

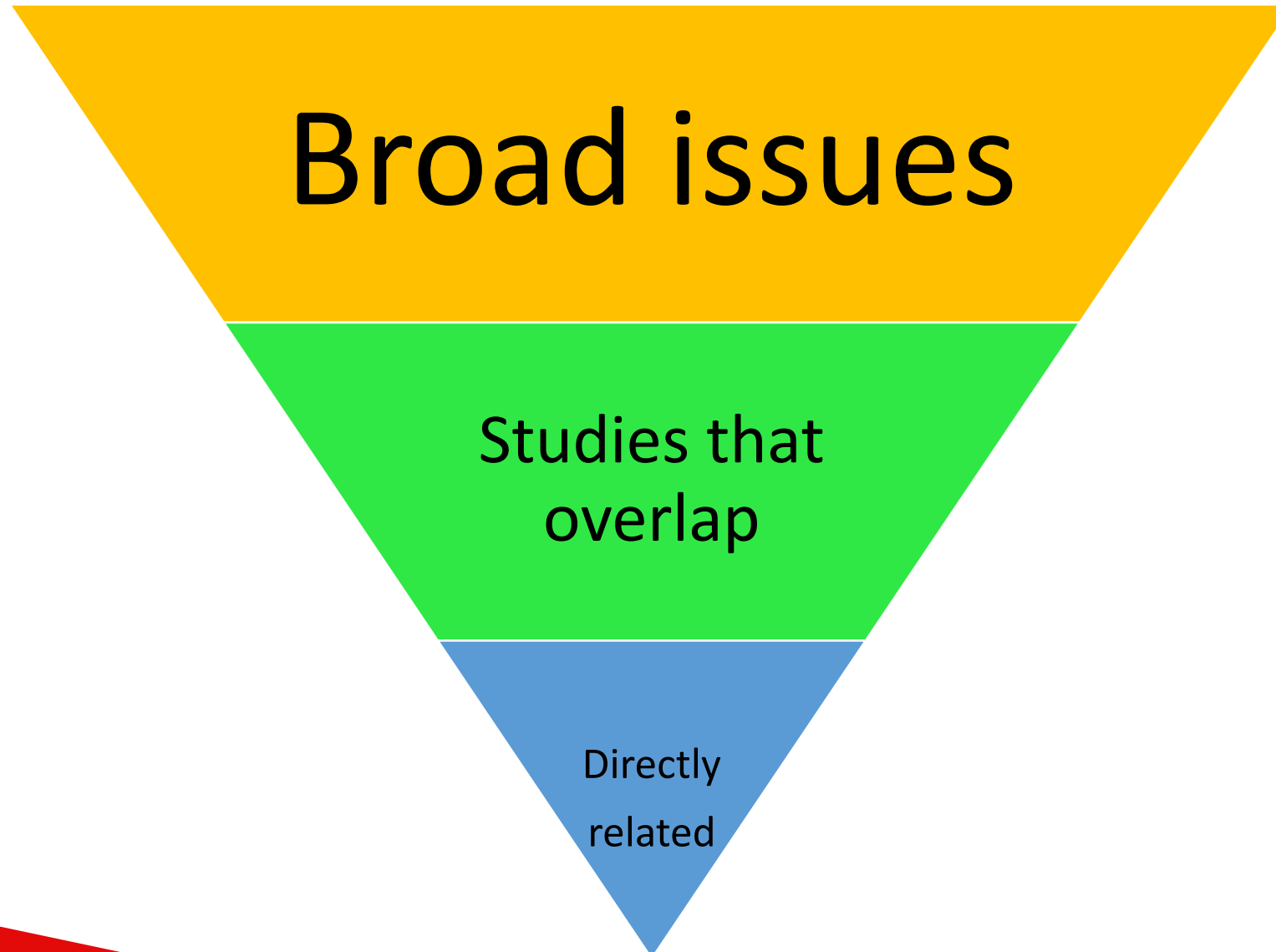


Staatliches Bauhaus, by Joost Schmidt

Joost Schmidt produced what is probably the single most recognised Bauhaus image for a Bauhaus exhibition in 1923, when still a student. It incorporated the Bauhaus logo created by Oskar Schlemmer in 1922 and displayed functional hallmarks but was also highly experimental and eye catching.

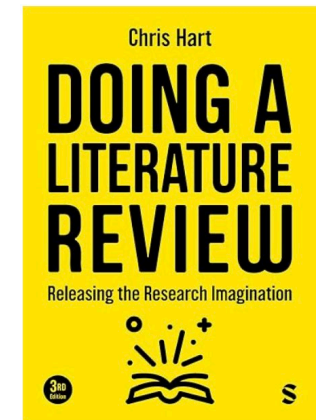
Schlemmer's logo depicts a figure, or a face, which is deliberately ubiquitous, impassive and generic. His work was often concerned with figures displaying both a geometric and human quality.

The research funnel – where do you start?



Defining the literature review – mapping knowledge

‘a systematic search of the accredited, sources and resources’ and as ‘the analysis, critical evaluation and synthesis of existing knowledge relevant to your research problem... In your analysis, you are selecting from different texts, concepts, theories, arguments and interpretations that seem relevant to the development of *your* particular, theoretical frame of reference and/or use of a particular methodology’ (Hart, 2018, p. 3).



There have been some lively background debates for doctoral research.

Boote and Beile (2005, p. 13) describe the dilemma they saw where many literature reviews were poorly written and not systematic enough.

Maxwell (2006) argued that a more conceptual framework is central to the purpose of the review and its positioning within the thesis saying.

The relevancy of practitioner research doctoral degrees have been in discussion for some time, but now that their use is more widely spread, the discussion has turned to effective implementation.

Lunt (2018, p. 8) argues that ‘... the changed context, structure and nature of the PhD is demanding a greater integration of **different forms of knowledge**, and different pedagogies and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.’

Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2012. p. 191) identified practitioner doctorates should have key factors in the programme that developed the **self**, engaged in **community** and following a curriculum that led to **‘transformation in perspective and worldview.’**

Should this not be a part of the mapping of knowledge and literature review?

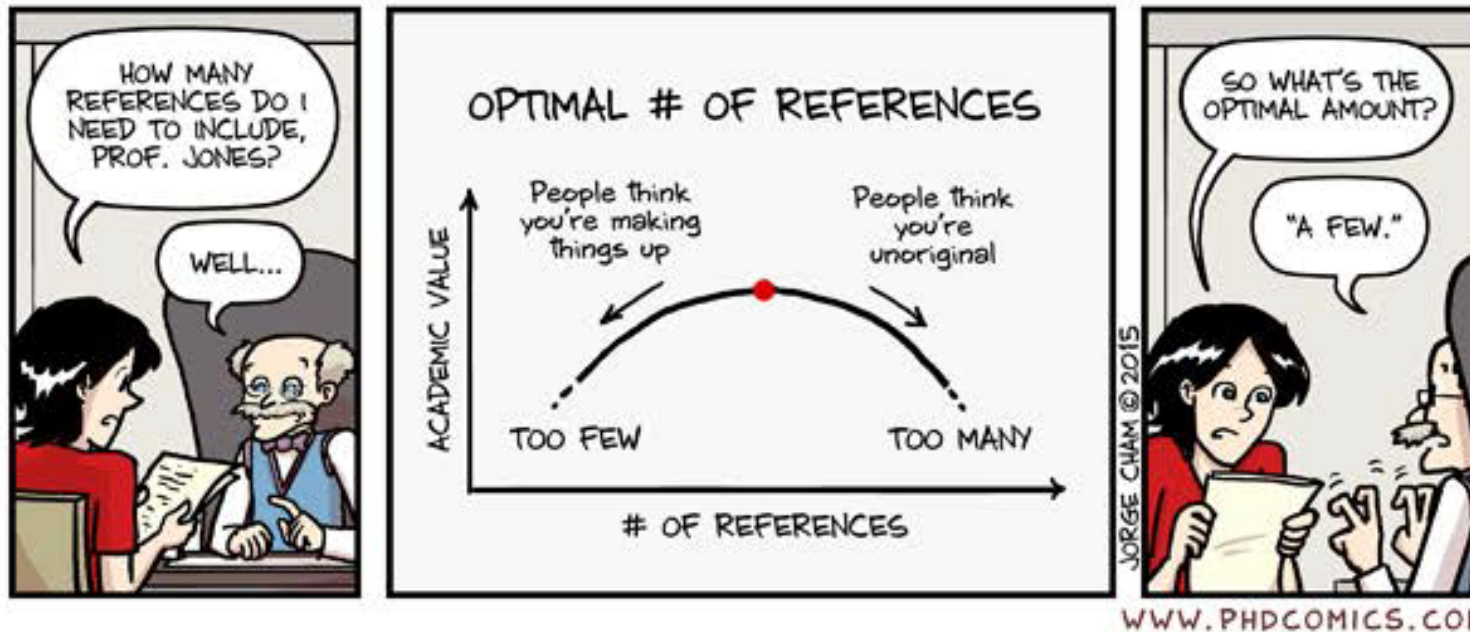
Bettany-Saltikov and McSherry (2016, pp. 5-7), who have a professional focus on nursing, distinguish that the review has specific goals for conducting systematic reviews with a hierarchy of evidence where **‘Distinctions are therefore made between “evidence” and “experience”’**.

In natural science systematic reviews such as PRISMA are recognised as ways to standardise the review process (Page et. al., 2021) in order to approach generalisability issues and to ensure **consistency for the knowledge production** produced in the thesis.

What about the search and mapping for practitioner research?

Piled Higher and Deeper by Jorge Cham

www.phdcomics.com



title: "Optimal Number of References" - originally published 9/16/2015

Go away and read – conceptual, narrative and systematic

*The classic advice is to **go away and ‘read’ broad issues** but post-graduate researchers (PGRs) need to be able to communicate their exploration/mapping of the literature in the thesis.*

Practitioner researchers can use a variety of review methods and tools.

Alternatives – conceptual  **systematic to find the areas of knowledge that need mapping**

‘conceptual framework’ or ‘narrative’ approaches using the research problem and research questions as well as be able to explain how undertaking a review

that then adapts some of the convincing **‘systematic review’ of your area of practice or field** that relates to a body of knowledge within the practitioner research creates the basis for how you can approach your original or distinctive contribution to knowledge.

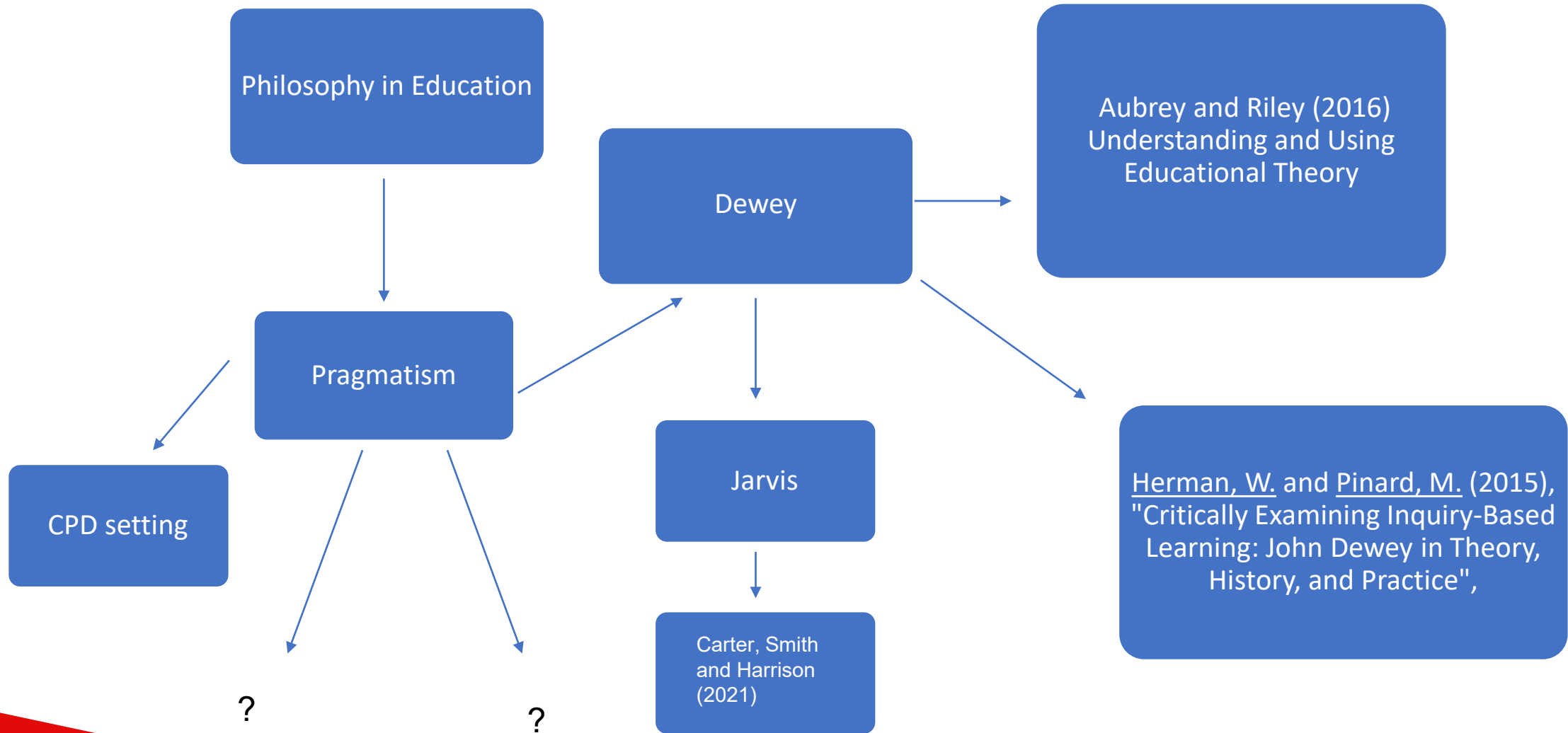
Conceptual framework and narrative approaches for mapping literature focus on problems or research questions

“... as your literature review has been developed, the synthesis of the research findings **should be organized around a viable, theoretical and conceptual framework**. The review and critique of existing literature **should build a logical framework** for the research, justify the study by identifying gaps in the literature, and demonstrate how the study will contribute to knowledge development. Development of this framework, which follows the literature review, posits, new relationships, and perspectives, vis-à-vis, the literature review, thereby, **providing the theoretical or conceptual link between the research problem, the literature, and the methodology selected for your research** (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019, p.163).

Clark et al. 2022, p. 84) define the **narrative approach** as “examining and outlining the theory and research relating to your field of interest, and using this to frame and justify your research question(s)”.

“...the **narrative review** is a strategic document; in it not only do you need to demonstrate **thorough understanding of the literature relevant to your study and the key debates in the field**, but you also need to guide the reader from the broader-based to the specific gap that you address in your research.”... (Denicolo, Reeves and Duke, 2018, p. 74)

Mapping authors to include relationships of ideas and debates

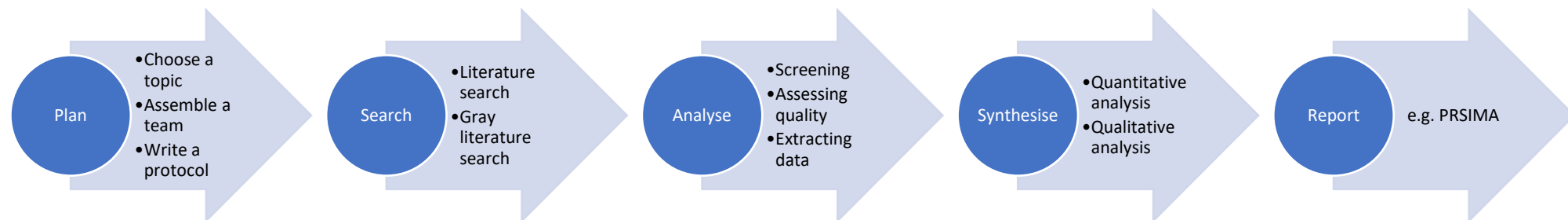


link to practitioner contribution to knowledge

Alternatively - systematic review can be used from previous models or used in conjunction with a conceptual framing

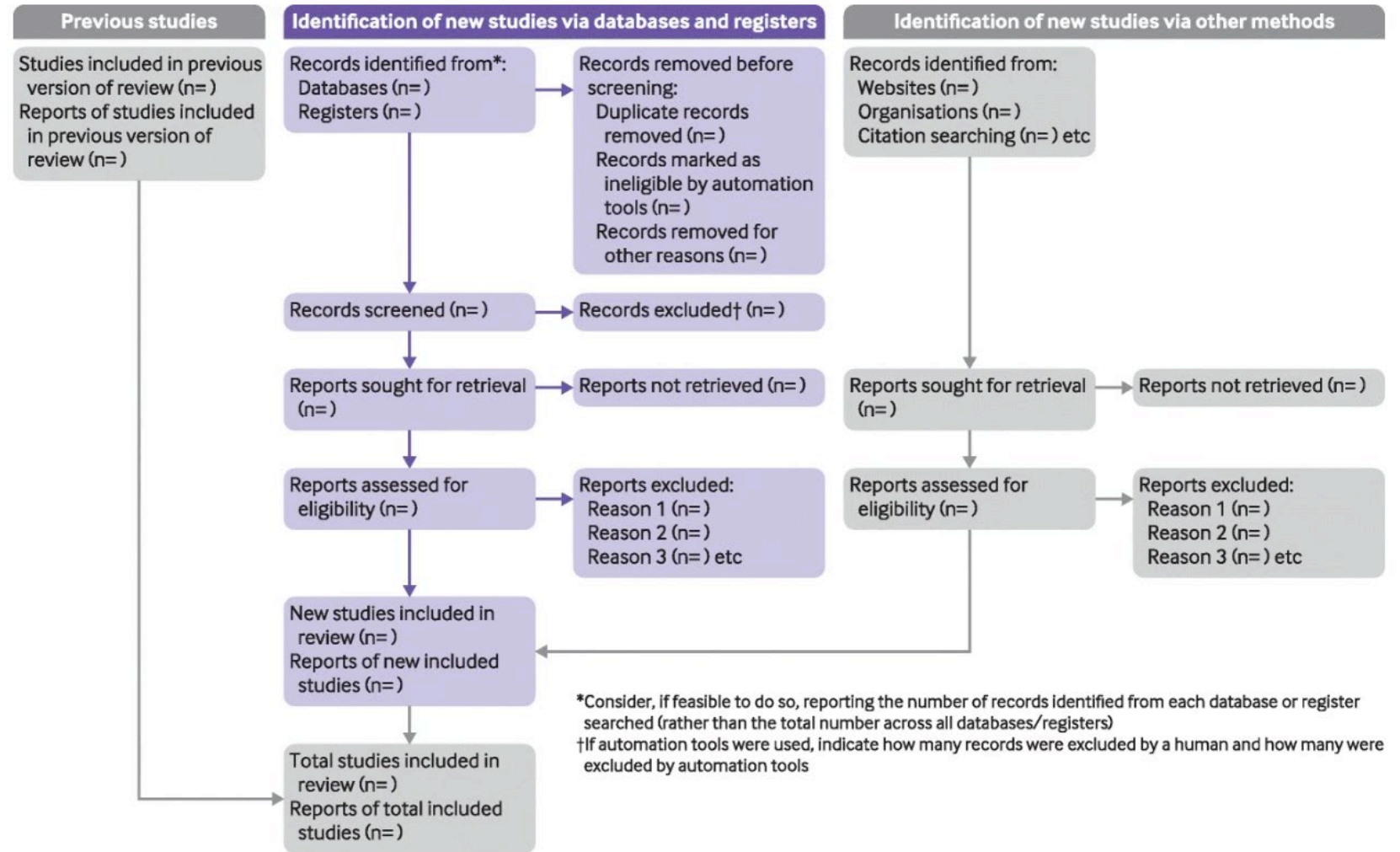
The descriptions that identify a **systematic review** (Clark et al. 2022, p. 90) address similar patterns albeit the systematic follows more specific procedures that are replicable and support “unbiased and comprehensive accounts of the literature”.

- **Systematic reviews are a type of literature review of research which require equivalent standards of rigour as primary research**
- They have a clear, logical rationale
- Often used in research and **policymaking** to inform **evidence-based** decisions and practice
- **They differ from traditional literature reviews**



PRISMA

Literature review seen specifically for sciences to set standards
To determine the quality of evidence
To avoid risk of biases



Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M. *et al.* The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *Syst Rev* **10**, 89 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-021-01626-4>

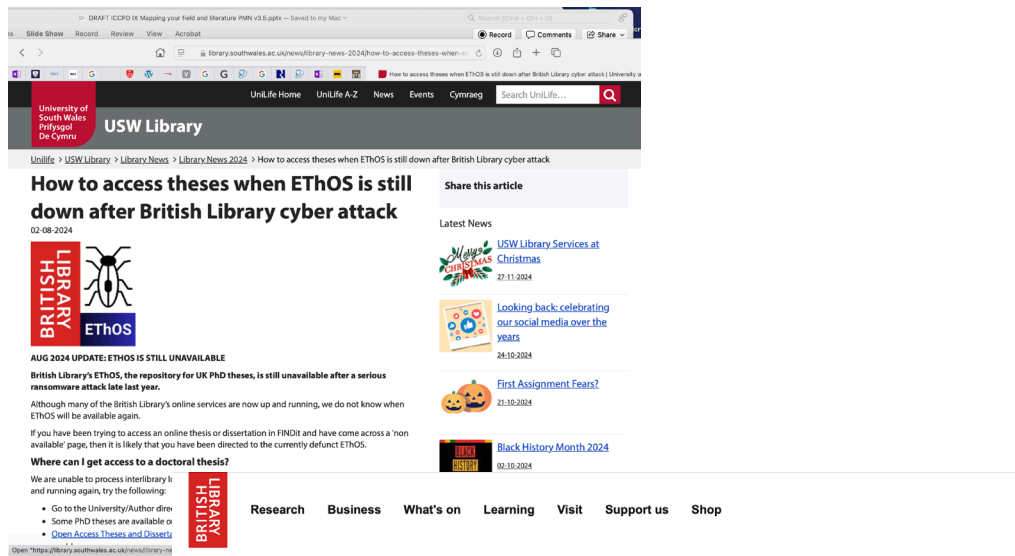
Three thesis examples British Library (2023)



Thesis examples were chosen using the **British Library Electronic Theses Online Service (EthOs)** (British Library, 2023) and were chosen from a keyword search based on the type of degree, and then for their explanation within the abstract introduction and literature review chapter.

Cyber-attack recovery ...

Started project summer 2023 – then back again after years of disruption – key word searches for Ethos included terms like EdD, PhD higher education and professional doctorate



British Library / Cyber Incident

Cyber-attack recovery update

In October 2023, the British Library experienced a significant cyber-attack that disrupted many of our services. We are working to restore full functionality.

While we continue to restore our services, [we have published this guide](#), which provides the latest service availability so you can make an informed choice before you visit.

In March 2024, we published a paper about the attack and its impact, [introduced in this blog](#) by our former Chief Executive, Sir Roly Keating. Its goal is to share our understanding of what happened and to help others learn from our experience.

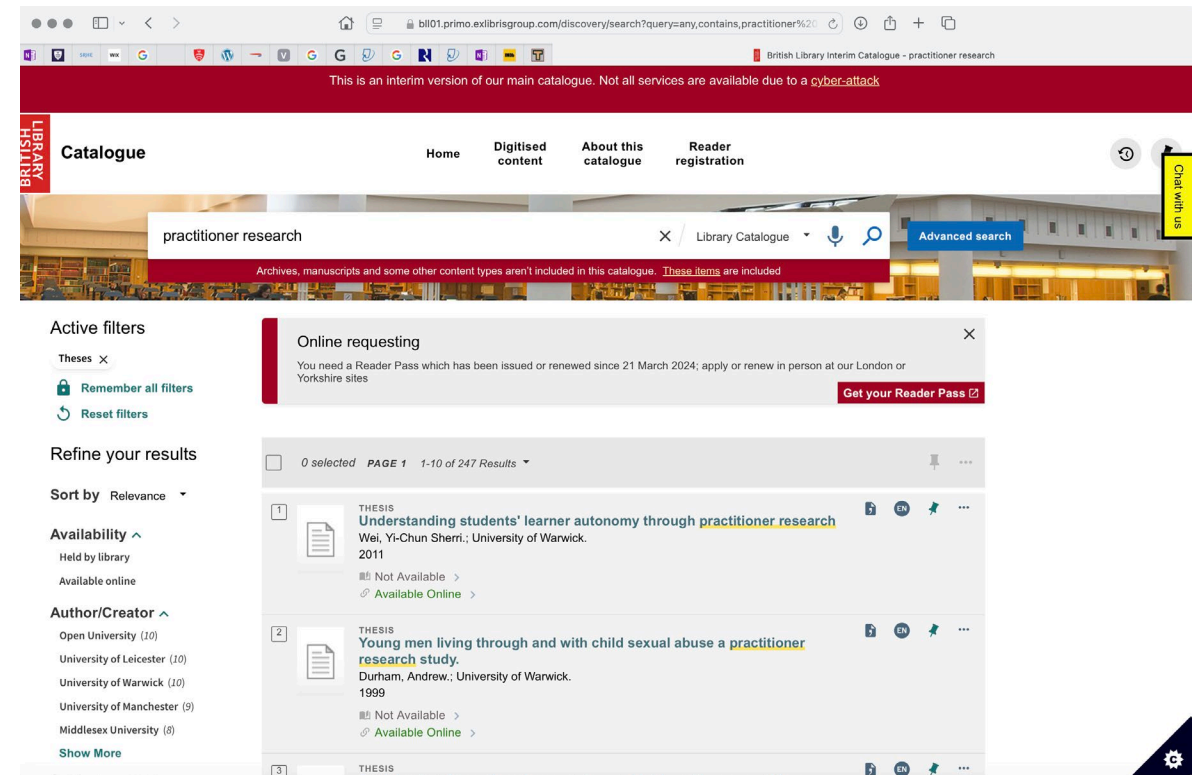
In November 2023, the attackers released some of our data onto the dark web including some personal user information. We've contacted our users to alert them to this incident and to offer advice from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) on how to protect themselves, including updating their passwords on other systems.

If you have any questions relating to your data you can email our Data Protection Officer at data.governance@bl.uk.

Because our systems were badly damaged during the cyber-attack they remain unavailable, so you can't change the password for our services. However, if you use the same password for non-British Library services, we recommend that you change it as a precaution.

The NCSC offers [advice](#) on staying secure online, including how to create a strong password, as well as [specific guidance](#) for individuals who may have been impacted by a data breach.

We're really sorry for the ongoing disruption to our systems and services and we'll provide further updates when we can. Thank you for bearing with us.



https://bl101.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?query=any,contains,practitioner%20research&tab=LibraryCatalog&search_scope=Not_BL_Suppress&vid=44BL_INST:BLL01&facet=rtype,include,dissertations&lang=en&offset=0

Emerging findings

The **published thesis samples selected to review** show that the critical and contextual reviews for practitioner research did follow patterns that relate to the approach needed for **the problem-solving focus of the projects under-taken** and the **integration of non-published workplace sources into the critical contextual framework used.**

The **two published professional doctorate** theses (Example 1 and Example 3) demonstrate that the **context and the research focus** were used to establish a conceptual framework from which **more systematic reviews were performed and presented.** The practitioner PhD (Example 2) had a practitioner-oriented purpose, this example was **split into two parts looking at context, more like a practitioner research project and then looking at the theoretical literature with a more systematic approach.**

Example 1

Lundgren-Resenterra, M.
2017. "Exploring the Impact of
a Professional Doctorate on
Higher Education
Organizations : A Critical
Realist Perspective." University
of Liverpool.

Education Doctorate (EdD) – professional doctorate

The critical realist paradigm offered a good basis to do this, **grounded as it is in the stratified ontology of a layered reality contingent on context, people's personal experience, and social structures.** The study addressed the following research question: **What are the mechanisms that influence the impact on a higher education professional's organization through the learning that arises from undertaking a professional doctorate in higher education?** This study has used a combination of grounded theory techniques with **critical realist retroduction to explore causal explanation about mechanisms.** Semi-directed interviews were conducted with 16 participants, five of whom were EdD students focused on the study of higher education offered by a UK university, and the remaining 11 participants were their work colleagues well placed to comment on organizational change.

Example 1 continued

Chapter 1 - Introduction to the research

1.1. **The researcher and the research context**

1.2. Initial researcher positionality

1.3. Research problem

1.4. Purpose and relevance of this research

1.5. Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 - Literature review

2.1. Introduction

2.2. Defining the professional doctorate, its characteristics and role

2.3. The professional doctorate in the UK

2.4. Situating the notion of the professional doctorate's impact

2.5. Defining impact in relation to the professional doctorate

2.6. Conceptualising impact within the critical realist perspective

2.7. Critical realism

2.7.1. Archer's morphogenetic approach

2.7.2. Archer's analytical dualism theory

2.7.3. Defining social structure and human agency

2.7.4. Reflexivity as the mediatory element

2.8. Conclusion

5.6. Contribution to existing knowledge

This study drew on **the critical realist paradigm to provide plausible explanations about the generative mechanisms that led to organizational change through EdD-derived learning.** The findings confirmed both existing perspectives on the impact of the professional doctorate on individual morphogenesis and current understanding of professional doctoral learning generating professional concerns resulting in projects that address these concerns. However, **this study added to the existing academic conversation about the impact of the professional doctorate by developing new insights into how individual morphogenesis can influence organizational morphogenesis through increased collective meta-reflexive deliberations supportive of social relations.**

Indeed, social relations are constitutive of how doctoral students engage with work colleagues leading to new actions tackling professional concerns (Archer, 2003; Donati & Archer, 2015). Therefore, social relations as the underlying mechanism impacts on organizational change according to how such a mechanism is constrained or enabled by countervailing mechanisms that relate to existing social structures.

Example 2

Waghorne, Joseph. 2021.
"Practitioner Researchers : A
Phenomenological Study
Exploring the Experiences of PhD
Students Researching their Field
of Professional Practice.
"ProQuest Dissertations
Publishing.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Abstract

This study explores the lived experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice. Traditionally PhD programmes were shaped around a normative understanding of what a PhD student is - someone who is young, professionally inexperienced, and studying full-time. **Broader societal and academic trends have caused a massification of doctoral education, bringing many new types of people to study at doctoral level.** To ensure the PhD programmes can support them, it is vital to understand the experience of non-traditional PhD students. While existing literature has looked at the student experience of doctoral study, there is little empirical research which explores the experience of professional practitioners studying for a PhD. **Current research focused on professionals is primarily focused on professional doctorate students, which has a different structure to the traditional PhD.**

Example 2 continued

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

Literature Review part 1

2.1 - Knowledge, Professionalisation, Practice and the PhD

2.1.1 - What is meant by professions and professional knowledge?

2.1.2 - Definition of Knowledge

2.1.3 - Knowledge Society and Economy. What knowledge is valued?

2.2 – Knowledge Production in the Knowledge Society

2.2.1 - Mode 1 and Mode 2

2.2.2 - Competing theories, critiques and Zeitdiagnose

2.3 - So where does the PhD fit into all this?

2.3.1 - The PhDs role in the world

2.3.2 - Changing PhDs and competing doctorates

2.3.3 - Professional Doctorates and other doctorates

2.4 - Part 1 Summary Literature review part 2

2.5 - Experience of doing a PhD

2.5.1 - Liminality, Threshold Concepts, and Identity

2.5.2 - Conceptual thresholds and doctorateness

2.5.3 - Communities of Practice and landscapes of practice

2.5.4 - Doctoral Curriculum and pedagogy

2.5.5 - The formal curriculum - intended and enacted

2.5.6 - Hidden curriculum and informal curriculum

2.5.8 - Doctoral challenges

2.6 - Summary of chapter

25

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant literature in the field. **As explained in the introduction, the PhD has evolved, no longer is it purely about the production of new knowledge, the emphasis has shifted to focus on the development of the researcher as well.** However, simultaneously, and almost paradoxically, PhD students are increasingly less likely to stay in academia, so the degree is further evolving to become a training programme of advanced knowledge workers for primarily outside of academia. Nevertheless, the long-held dynamic of it being an academic apprenticeship is deeply embedded in the culture and makeup of PhD programmes. Those who undertake a PhD in order to research their professional practice are typically trying to achieve a different knowledge outcome than those who are pursuing an academic career, yet they are undertaking the same degree programme. So to understand the experience of doing a PhD, **it is essential to understand its purpose and where it comes from and how it currently fits in the world of knowledge production, the professions, the academy, and broader societal trends.** Therefore, this **literature review chapter is split into two parts. The first part expands on some of the concepts** introduced in the previous chapter. It focuses on the context of why professionals undertake a PhD, what type of knowledge they aim to produce, and how changes to this context caused the PhD - and the experience - to evolve. **The second part focuses on the existing literature focusing on the experience of doing a PhD.**

Initial analysis from sample

- the layering within the bibliographic references set out to **capture complexity** (Boote and Beile, 2006).
- research project **aims determined what knowledge(s) needed to be communicated**, with the more **systematic in-depth knowledge** as needed to relate to **disciplinary/interdisciplinary** professional knowledge
- **Conceptual mapping** (Maxwell, 2006), **narrative review** and **narrative analysis** (Denicolo, Reeves and Duke, 2018) were evident in the **thesis author explanations** and articulation of the processes undertaken.
- conceptually framing the aims also featured as a way of explaining and documenting both the academic body of knowledge and project-related knowledges (unpublished) in use from the workplace (context)
- the **presence of the researcher in the writing** making choices about mapping knowledge and critical literature seemed more pronounced and acceptable

Practical suggestions from exploratory research

1. **It would be beneficial to share purposeful search and review approaches for PGR writing advice** specifically focusing on practitioner research could help to manage the expectations for doctoral candidates, supervisors, and examiners.
2. **Guidance needs to be structured and clear to show equivalent knowledge claims** to other doctoral level theses.
3. **Include explanations about remote and online digital literature practice such as** changes to publishing and analytics for sustainability and research impact.

Take aways and discussion points

- *Impact statements are now becoming more popular as university requirements – evidence of epistemic changes that we need to be aware of within our programmes of study.*
- *Practitioner-research may still be seen as problematic because the nature of the research projects and the aligned needs to develop ‘applied’ actionable results...*
- ***Even more reason to:***
- *Engage with PGR stakeholders – find out what others do in your institution and sector to firm up practical advice. The advice could have changed recently (e.g. AI and impact).*

Thank you ICPPD IX

‘The essential role of critical/contextual literature reviews in reimagining doctorates’

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