**SLWG on Practitioner Research Ethics – Final Report for Carnegie Faculty Research Ethics Committee – May 2014**

**Members of the Working Group:**

Dr David White (Chair); Dr John Connell; Jamie French; Christine Hines; Dr Jacqueline Stevenson; Howard Stones; Louise Sutton; Susan Waltham

**Introduction**

This short-life working group sought representation from across the Carnegie Faculty. However the contributors came only from the fields of teaching, training and coaching. This perhaps reflects the position that practitioner research is neither widely practiced nor widely understood outside of a narrow range of fields (principally education, health and social work).

In consequence the issues discussed by the group focused on the application of practitioner research to the field of education (broadly understood).

It was not the remit of the group to produce a code of ethics for practitioner research. Such codes already exist (e.g. BERA Ethical Guidelines 2011). Instead we took a problem-solving approach to specific issues we face either as supervisors of student research projects, or reviewers of ethics applications.

It is worthy of note that practitioner research flourishes in those fields where the relationship with a service-user is fundamental to ‘practice’. These relationships are governed by professional codes of conduct and by social norms and expectations about what constitutes good professional behaviour. This has led some to argue teaching is inherently a moral undertaking; and that in practitioner research “everything is ethics” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2007).

The upshot is that traditional, deontological approaches to research ethics may be inappropriate. The research culture will overlap with the professional culture. ‘Practice’ is simultaneously ‘research’. ‘Evidence’ is ‘pedagogy’. Research relationships are professional relationships.

As a group we might have explored the possibilities of this new form of ethics – but we would never have produced a report for FREC! Or at least, we would not have done so on time. Instead we applied the idea of two contrasting cultures to our lived dilemmas, and explored ways in which they might interact.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (2007) *Everything’s ethics: practitioner inquiry and university culture*, in Campbell, A. and Groundwater-Smith, S. An Ethical Approach to Practitioner Research, London: Routledge

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**1. What is practitioner research?**

Practitioner research is systematic inquiry carried-out by a practitioner into the work he or she does, with the aim of learning, understanding and improving the outcomes of that work.

For example, it would include members of our faculty staff who research their own pedagogic practices; or our students enrolled on courses leading to professional qualifications, or personal and professional development (CPD).

‘Action research’ is one common understanding of practitioner research.

Practitioner research becomes problematic because the researcher is intimately involved with the field being researched. This close relationship with participants upsets application of the four conventional ethical considerations – harm, consent, withdrawal, confidentiality.

For example: practitioner research both explores and changes a situation (issues with ‘harm’); the researcher will know participants (issues with true consent; ability to withdraw); there may be asymmetrical power relationships (issues with harm; confidentiality); the researcher *wears other hats* e.g. manager/ teacher (issues with harm; consent; confidentiality). And so on.

**2. The presumption of beneficence**

Some professional practices are inherently beneficent. Those considered by the working group included: education (an ‘educational’ ethic); social care and non-medical therapy (the ethic of ‘care’); and social work (commitments to human rights and social justice). We suggest in these cases the beneficence of practitioner research derives from the professional ethic.

For example, if a research project aims to improve an educational practice, there is a presumption the research will be beneficent. This is in fact a truism. If the practice were not ‘beneficent’, it would not be ‘educational’. But it alerts us to how we should test for beneficence; we must ask the question “Is the practice *educational*?” The measure of what is ‘educational’ is located within the professional culture.

The process for researching a practice must be consonant with the practice.

Practitioners have privileged access to service-users to conduct research; and the inherent beneficence of practitioner research respects that position. It is important we do not abuse our right of access to conduct research which should be judged by other measures of beneficence. This is not to say other forms of research would be precluded, only that they would not be considered ‘practitioner research’.

**3. The power asymmetry and ‘true’ consent**

Any researcher needs to consider how prospective participants can give ‘true’ consent, free from pressure or influence. Time and space for thinking and decision-making are prerequisites.

This is particularly the case for practitioner researchers. Pre-existing relationships with people in their ‘field’ will mediate the channels through which consent is obtained.

If a prospective participant is to be given a genuine choice, the researcher must be honest with him/herself about what opting-out would entail. In other forms of research it would not normally be necessary to think through the alternative; but where the researcher is so intimately involved in the practice, we have to be sure that what non-participants do afterwards is a viable option and no less beneficent.

We suggest an ethics application should address the question “What will non-participants do?” Practitioner research should not affect service-users’ experience of the beneficence of the practice.

**4. Differentiation**

Our concern with service-users’ experience of a practice suggests care is needed with research designs which differentiate between service-users (participants and non-participants), or which provide different experiences for different groups (e.g. experimental designs).

The practitioner is responsible for providing a service to all users. It will be noted how a service-user may opt-out of participation in the research, but will still participate in the practice (e.g. when a teacher makes a change to her pedagogy). The service-user could be both participant and non-participant.

We must research what is being practiced, not practice what we want to research.

It would be unethical *practice* to choose a group for an intervention based on willingness to participate in the research; here the research would be creating practice. Professional practice would demand each service-user has a right to be considered for involvement in the intervention – whether or not they wanted to be participants in the research.

It would be unethical *practice* to choose a group for an intervention based on what would be good for the research. Professional practice would demand there be a practice rationale for any differentiation of experience between individuals or groups.

This does not preclude the possibility of an experimental (or pseudo-experimental) design. However, where two groups receive different interventions, both interventions should be justifiable by the standards of professional practice. If the intervention were wholly a question of research design, it would not be ‘practitioner research’.

**5. Roles and role conflicts**

The practitioner researcher will have multiple roles in the work situation; this is inherent in the conjoining of the two terms ‘practitioner’ and ‘researcher’. The inevitable overlap of research and practice cultures entails the possibility of competing rights and responsibilities. Promises made in the role of researcher may not be sustainable in the role of practitioner.

The researcher must think-through the potential conflicts of interest within the ethics application. It would be unethical for an LREC to approve a project where the researcher had not considered the potential risk of such professional/ethical dilemmas. This should include the following:

1. Exploration of the limits of responsibility to an employer/ organisation/ profession;
2. Exploration of the limits of the promise of confidentiality to participants.

These limits need to be reflected in information sheets and consent forms for gatekeepers and participants.

When considering an application the LREC should not be satisfied with unqualified promises of confidentiality to participants. We would need to ask, “Is the promise *reasonable* given the risk and consequences of role conflicts?” If the promise is unreasonable and we approve the research, we are sanctioning the possibility of the breaking of promises to participants, or of placing practitioners in intractable professional dilemmas.

**6. Indirect involvement**

Service-users involvement in practitioner research often seems to be peripheral or ‘indirect’. Examples of such indirect involvement would be: (a) the keeping of a research diary reflecting only on “personal involvement” within the practice context; and (b) collecting evidence about the nature of the practice (i.e. independent of any participants). These are anomalies because whilst the research focus is ‘self’ or ‘practice’, service-users may be reflected-on ‘directly’ in data collection. Our question is: *how do we decide when consent should be required*?

We suggest the distinction between direct and indirect involvement is artificial because it ignores the essential reflexivity of action. ‘Practice’ both *acts on*, and is in turn *acted upon* by the other. Without other people there could be no ‘practice’.

We consider it *good practice* for any practitioner undertaking research or CPD in the workplace to ensure colleagues and service-users are aware of it. At the stage where activities become reported-on (in a research sense) we should ensure they have at least an opt-out opportunity from that element.

**7. Continuing professional development (CPD)**

The University Research Ethics Policy defines ‘research’ as “a form of disciplined enquiry which aims to contribute to a body of knowledge or theory.” It specifically removes “coursework assignments” from the general requirement for ethical approval. This definition suggests two separate criteria: (a) the enquiry is methodologically disciplined; and (b) the results are published. The second criterion excludes approaches to practitioner research where the outcomes are practical changes in social situations, rather than artefacts added to a store of public knowledge.

In our Faculty many modules and awards – particularly at postgraduate level – are designed as work-related CPD. Such coursework assignments fall outside the definition of research and yet may still have ethical implications.

An example of this is our PGCE in Special Educational Needs in which students (all qualified, practising teachers) develop case studies around particular children. The teachers are trained in the use of case studies to help understand and improve their practice. Whilst there is no intention to publish, it is unreasonable and unethical to ignore the participants’ rights.

The ‘made public’ criterion is a useful starting point. Where there is an intention to use material in a public forum (i.e. outside of an assignment or classroom discussion) it clearly demands full ethical approval. This includes any retrospective decision to use material already collected.

Where there is no intention to publish the material (i.e. CPD-use only) we suggest the following would be *good practice*:

1. Course design teams/ module leaders

Make a risk assessment of the dangers for both students and participants. Courses/ modules/ tasks should be designed to minimise the risk of such dangers. Handbooks and task instructions should provide considered guidance which, when followed by the student, will ensure no formal ethical approval would be required.

The extent of the guidance will depend on the nature of the student/ profession/ course/ task.

In the example above the course leader designed a form for the students to describe their proposed project. It asked them to list the sources and types of evidence, and their proposed uses. Course staff then ‘sign-off’ the list, having ensured no sources would require full ethical approval.

In some situations, for example a module task designed by staff and followed by the students, the task itself may provide sufficient guidance.

1. Students/ practitioner researchers

* Students undertaking a CPD enquiry should themselves participate in thinking through the ethics. This could take several forms: for example it might be part of the assignment or task; or it could be part of a taught input. Again, the nature and level of thinking would depend on the student/ profession/ course/ task.

There are several factors course teams could bear in mind while thinking through the appropriate level of guidance:

1. The context in which the research is taking place will determine ‘acceptable practice’.

For example, a school is an environment with a clear structure of rules and norms regulating relationships and practices. When parents leave their children at school there is an implied consent to their child’s participation in normal educational activities. On the other hand a coach working with young athletes at a sports club will be in a much less regulated environment.

Course staff should make practical judgements about what might be ethical practitioner research *in that context*.

1. Similar considerations would apply to the nature of the student’s profession. Some professions are well-regulated: e.g. codes of conduct/ practice; professional registration; behavioural/ competence standards; etc. Others may have only looser structures of social norms and role expectations.
2. ‘Practice’ is constituted by the range of activities which would normally be expected to take place there. The ‘normal’ expectation is the practice is beneficent.

For some professions (for example teaching) the professional is expected to be engaged in improving practice, so practitioner research is itself a ‘normal’ activity.

**8. First- and second-order research positions**

A contemporary activity for University staff is to engage in supporting and developing research amongst practitioners. It is particularly common in the field of education. For example the university academic is a second-order practitioner researcher in the sense she/he researches *the practice of* *facilitating the collaborative process;* the practitioners are first-order researchers of their teaching pedagogies.

The second-order researchers commonly emphasise ‘collaboration’, ‘partnership’ and ‘equal ownership’ in a project. This implies an extension of the ‘presumption of beneficence’ to cover the whole gamut of first- and second-order activities. It is a step towards establishing the new form of ethics mentioned in our introduction.

At the present time however, the philosophical groundwork for such a move is incomplete. Collapsing the first- and second-order distinction obscures the complexity of the research relationships and therefore the ethical clearances required.

Our advice is the first-order researchers would normally require individual ethical applications to research their practices – although situations where a joint application would cover the whole activity are conceivable. The second-order researcher would require a separate ethics application to research the second-order process.

The second order researcher is not a practitioner *alongside* the collaborators; so there should not be an automatic presumption of shared/equal ownership of the first order data. Use of the first order data would require a separate ethics application.

We cannot envisage a situation where first- and second-order research is so collaborative one ethics application could cover the multiplicity and multiple agencies of all the activities.

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