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Humanising pedagogic research in higher education: A reflective commentary on a university-wide special interest group

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we provide a reflective analysis of an institution-wide special interest group (SIG) on pedagogic research. Initiated by the Academic and Learning Enhancement at the University of Greenwich, the SIG serves as an interdisciplinary and collaborative space for the university community to develop skills and practice in this area. We discuss our practices around the structure and sustainability of the Pedagogic Research SIG, which are characterised by values such as openness, transparency, inclusion, and equity. In the current neo-liberal climate of higher education, we advocate for the humanisation of pedagogic practice through a recognition of staff agency, endorsed by a compassionate community of practice. As an antidote to the commodification of academic practice, we suggest a more holistic and developmental approach to academic development with an emphasis on authenticity, personal fulfilment and community building. In the context of the Pedagogic Research SIG, we envision impact as a multidimensional and layered construct, that recognises the many processes involved in pedagogic research as well as the outcomes. Our work makes a significant contribution to the scant scholarship on special interest groups in higher education with broader implications for academic development and practice.

Keywords: alienation, impact, pedagogic research, professional development, special interest group

Introduction

Special interest groups (SIGs) are common in educational associations as a means to create supportive networks for academic and professional practice. The American Educational Research Association member SIGs (AREA, 2023), for example, are forums for practitioners sharing "a common interest in a field of study, teaching, or research when the existing divisional structure may not directly facilitate such activity." Similarly, the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2023) promotes 37 SIGs on diverse topics and issues related to education as of September 2023.

In the context of UK higher education, there are also good examples for special interest groups at an institutional level. At the University of Birmingham (2023) for example, The Academic Programmers Special Interest Group brings together "IT staff, technical officers and academics who program." The Newcastle University Qualitative Special Interest Group "offer students and academic researchers with an interest in qualitative research a supportive and positive environment to learn and collaborate" (2023). As these examples demonstrate, special interest groups provide collaborative and often multi-disciplinary spaces for members of the academic community with different skills, knowledge and backgrounds. Skills and values such as "collaboration" (Newcastle University, 2023), "creativity and innovation" (University of Birmingham, 2023), "dialogue to expand knowledge" (University of Greenwich, 2021), "networking" (University of

Warwick, 2022) and "mutual support" (Imperial College London, 2023) are typically celebrated in such groups.

Considering the interest in SIGs in UK higher education, there is surprisingly limited scholarship in academic practice on the processes of these networks, related challenges and the potential impact of them on academic communities. However, the literature on communities of practice, faculty/academic development, and networked learning is helpful to establish a theoretical and critical perspective on SIGs, some of which we use in our discussion. Open educational resources on SIGs such as institutional websites and reports also provide useful insights and entry points for discussion. Beech (2012), for example, report a cross-institutional SIG on spirituality in higher education, which "welcomes members from all levels and sectors of the higher education system, from all disciplines and subjects, and from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds" such as "students, lecturers, research staff, academic managers and policymakers alike" (p. 221). Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Google are used for SIG activities and broader inclusion. Similarly, Eteokleous- Grigoriou and Ktoridou (2016) highlight the potential educational value of social networking sites in creating and sustaining SIGs for students. Abed and John-Smith (2016) demonstrate how SIGs can impact institutional cultures by introducing and promoting new disciplinary practices; in their case, evolutionary psychiatry. These examples show how such initiatives can cross physical and disciplinary boundaries of higher education institutions and support cultural change.

In this article, we provide a reflective analysis of an institution-wide SIG on pedagogic research to draw implications for wider practice and identify areas for future inquiry. Our work contributes to the scholarship on SIGs by providing a conceptual debate on the structure, processes and impact of the Pedagogic Research SIG in the context of academic practice. We argue that any special interest group is a social network and, therefore, how this network is formed—organically and with intentional approaches—needs to be carefully considered along with shared values and visions, member roles and participation patterns. In addition, we explore the tension between process and product-oriented approaches to pedagogic research. We argue that these do not need to sit in opposition, but there needs to be more space in higher education to approach pedagogic research from multiple angles and recognise different forms of impact. We see SIGs as a possible pathway towards open scholarship and inclusion in HE in general and argue that the potential impact of the Pedagogic Research SIG needs to be broadly conceptualised, going beyond demonstrable or outcome-oriented measures. In the current neo-liberal climate of higher education, we advocate for the *humanisation of pedagogic practice* and suggest a holistic approach to academic development and practice with an emphasis on authenticity, personal fulfilment, and community building. As this argument is intertwined with how pedagogic research is viewed in general, we explore the impact of the Pedagogic Research SIG and pedagogic research in relation to one another. This conceptual work is the first step of a broader research project aiming to examine implications for practice (i.e. pedagogical, social, personal etc.) based on empirical evidence.

Next, we describe the Pedagogic Research SIG at the University of Greenwich, followed by a discussion on humanising pedagogic research in higher education. We conclude with implications for wider practice and directions for future research.

Pedagogic Research Special Interest Group

We define pedagogic research as the study of theoretical, conceptual and practical aspects of teaching and learning processes, experiences and outcomes. Pedagogic research involves a rigorous investigation of teaching and learning practices (Evans et al., 2021), leading to the (re)development of curricula, policies

and education processes (Fanghanel et al., 2015).In higher education particularly, pedagogic research involves a systematic and evidence-based study of student learning (Felten, 2013), often through quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method research projects or action research. More importantly though, it encompasses critical reflection and reflexivity on current teaching and learning practice, which leads to the development of new and innovative knowledge. Pedagogic research allows educators to examine their own practice, reflect on successes and challenges, and share experiences in partnership with other colleagues and students, improving education more widely and supporting an institution-wide community.

The Pedagogic Research SIG was initiated by the authors of this paper in 2023 to create a space for critical discussion on pedagogic research and help colleagues move forward in their journeys in this area. Two of us (Suzan Koseoglu and Angeliki Voskou) are currently the coordinators of the Pedagogic Research SIG. Upon reflecting on our roles and positionality within the Pedagogic Research SIG, we envision our role as *coordinators or facilitators* rather than co-leaders, as this better corresponds with our vision and the inclusive and democratic values that guide this SIG. Our vision is to support multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and practitioner research on teaching and learning across higher education; encourage collaboration among staff and students across disciplines; support staff to reflect on, develop, and improve their pedagogic practice; and generate original ideas and projects on pedagogical research (see Figure 1).
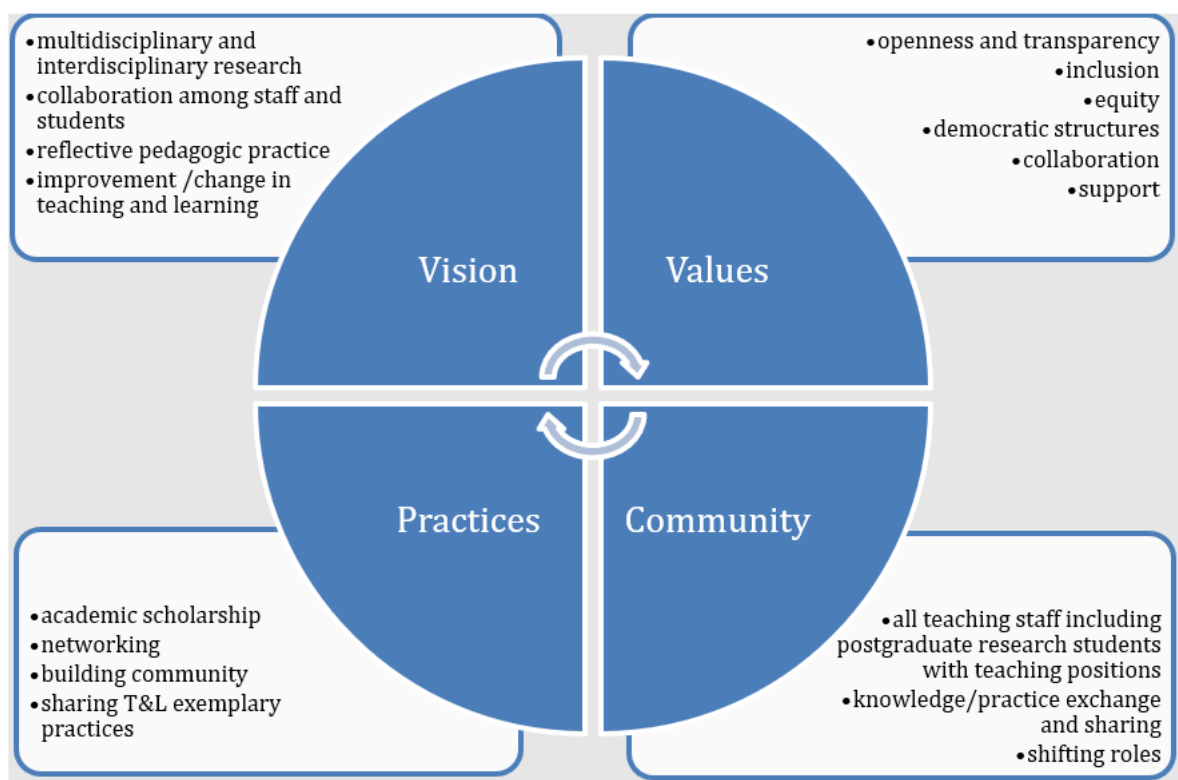

Figure 1. The Pedagogic Research SIG is driven by a vision to promote pedagogic research that enhances and transforms pedagogic and academic practice, develop academic scholarship, collaboration, networking and dissemination of new knowledge and exemplary practice. The SIG is guided by inclusive and democratic values based on the idea of a diverse community of practice.

In the context of academic practice, the Pedagogic Research SIG can be viewed as a social network, a community, the working relationships of a group of colleagues with shared interests, or perhaps all these together (Figure 1). Drawing from Jarche's (2016) work on networked communities and the scholarship on

Communities of Practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1994; Wenger, 1998), the University of York (2023) offers an insightful definition which aligns with the inclusive and community driven organisational structure we envisioned to initiate and sustain the SIG:

> A SIG is a group of people who come together around a shared interest and a passion to share knowledge and improve research and/or practice. They often cross geographical and professional boundaries and are self-managed by members of the community. Special Interest Groups can take different forms, either being more informal or more structured and either having a particular goal or focus or being more open and opportunity-driven.

Through the lens of the communities of practice, the SIG can also be viewed as a place where "sustained learning partnerships" are built "among people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The idea and practice of *coming together* is perhaps the most rewarding aspect of our work on the SIG, as well as the dynamic nature of ongoing interaction and sharing. As of January 2024, membership in the SIG has grown to 118, including lecturers (permanent staff and hourly paid), senior lecturers, principal lecturers, heads of schools, teaching assistants, post-doctoral teaching demonstrators, teaching fellows, associate professors, academic leads and coordinators, representing all four schools and four professional services at the University of Greenwich (see Figure 2). With such a large and diverse institutional network, it is essential that careful thought and attention is given to its organisational structure. A decentralised and distributed organisation (see Figure 3) was envisioned for the SIG for long-term sustainability and to create an equitable space for all staff.
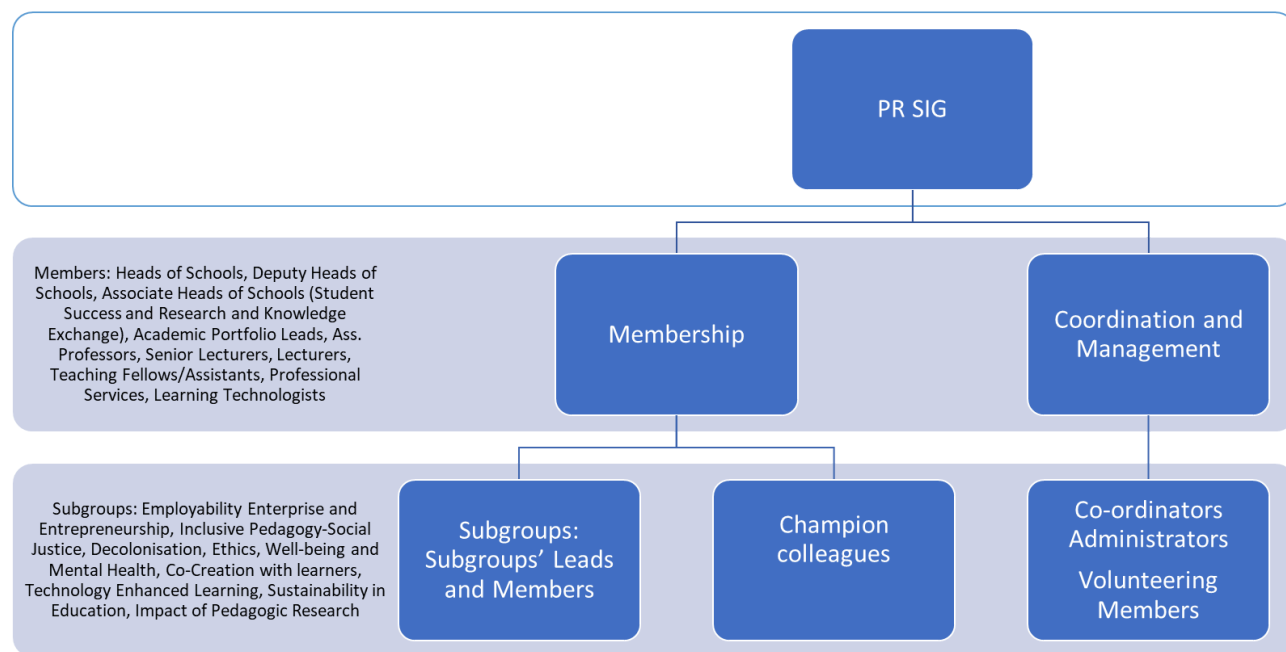

Figure 2: The Pedagogic Research SIG includes a diverse group of members with different roles and responsibilities across various disciplines, backgrounds, and levels of experience. Members can move between the subgroups of the Pedagogic Research SIG and undertake shifting roles, for example Pedagogic Research champion, subgroup lead/co-lead, subgroup member, or seminar facilitator/presenter. The Pedagogic Research SIG coordinators and

administrators are responsible for the coordination and facilitation of activities, sustainability and overall management of the SIG.

Figure 3. Also called ego networks, centralised networks (left) are not sustainable without individual leadership. A decentralised model (middle) was envisioned for the SIG for sustainability and to promote equitable working structures, with an openness to distributed models (right). Image by 1983~enwiki at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=53526868

As the SIG is open to everyone at the University, the journey of conducting research on pedagogy will no doubt be different for each of our members. Some members, for example, bring to the SIG a wealth of experience in conducting educational research. They are interested in joining the SIG not only for pursuing their research; they are ready and willing to help others with similar interests. Some other members have no formal experience and would like to begin thinking about how to conduct research in the context of their teaching or at the university. To address this diversity, and based on colleagues' feedback and input, we created SIG sub-groups on specific issues related to pedagogic research and areas of inquiry, such as *Funding Opportunities, Conducting Pedagogic Research, Technology Enhanced Learning, Well-Being & Mental Health, Inclusive Pedagogy & Social Justice, Ethics in Pedagogic Research* and *Impact of Pedagogic Research*. As these sub-groups have different aims, they work in diverse ways leading to different processes and outcomes. For example, members of the *Inclusive Pedagogy & Social Justice* group have decided to meet regularly to share ideas informally in a safe space and for scholarly networking. The *Ethics in Pedagogic Research* group aims to support rigorous pedagogic research with the highest ethical standards. One example of this would be the group's work on developing ethical guidelines in practitioner research, designed to aid the university's ethical approval process. We have also more discipline specific engagement via the work of our *champion colleagues* (this role was created upon the suggestion of one of the SIG members), who serve as points of contact for pedagogic research in their department or school at the university and provide knowledge and advice on disciplinary pedagogic research. Thus, with all these diverse roles, members' participatory engagement and active involvement are encouraged in the SIG. These roles may shift or fade away as members engage with different aspects of pedagogic research within a community of practice.

Openness and transparency, inclusion, equity and democratic structures are central values that guide our practice in the SIG (see Figure 2). We are reminded of Jarche's (2011) argument that open structures of practice may nurture "transparent knowledge sharing" and "innovation through diversity." The open structures of working via tools like Teams chat and channels, Padlet and Mentimeter help the group share knowledge and ideas not only effectively, but also in a way that is transparent to everyone. We hope that this approach in return will encourage inclusive practices and more openness in pedagogic scholarship.

Humanising pedagogic research

As the network grows, the potential the network holds for contributing to the university's pedagogical practices grows too. Expanding staff engagement is a strategic aim for the University of Greenwich, with a target of 25% of staff engaged in this work by 2030 being a core aim of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy (2021). On one hand, we might interpret the institution-wide interest in pedagogic research as a reflection of such institutional aims and strategies: staff with diverse roles are increasingly expected or encouraged to conduct research with impact regardless of their contract types, and, therefore, there is a need to develop skills and knowledge in this area to reach institutional and national benchmarks of academic practice. Academic precarity may also have a role, as many early career academics (e.g. postdoctoral, teaching or research fellows) on temporary contracts feel the pressure to engage with research (i.e. conducting original research or developing skills in this area) on top of their workloads to secure a position in an increasingly competitive higher education environment (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Characterised as "non-academic citizens" (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019, p. 463) who are often denied "ownership over or credit for their work" (p. 472) and "the most vulnerable group within the academic ranks" (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023, p. 2), it is particularly important to acknowledge the interest to the SIG from this group.

On the other hand, we can also interpret the interest in the SIG as a demonstration of *the humanisation of pedagogic practice*. In our work in academic practice, we take the position that teaching is a critically reflective practice: we do not become good teachers by a mechanical or technical application of theory into practice. We need to have the values of connection, empathy, compassion and the *will* to make sense of teaching in higher education, question assumptions, and engage in deep critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017). Pedagogic research, by nature, requires educators to become critically reflective practitioners. Nevertheless, there are significant barriers to practice as we subsequently discuss next within the wider context of neoliberalism in UK higher education.

Challenging alienation in pedagogic practice

Initial work on the SIG clearly demonstrates that many staff at the University of Greenwich want to have the space and the freedom to engage with pedagogic research, yet there are significant challenges staff face such as heavy workloads, rigid pathways for progression, dominance of subject specific disciplinary research, lack of, or limited, support, mentorship and guidance, and difficulties in attracting funding. Another significant challenge—which we will focus on in this discussion—is evidencing the impact of pedagogic research for institutional recognition and promotion.

The personal challenges we noted above are, in fact, a reflection of wider socio-political structures imposing significant pressures on UK higher education. It is well-documented that in the current neoliberal climate of UK higher education, staff increasingly find themselves in a transactional culture of teaching and learning (Jones, 2019). Cuts to central government funding and the privatisation of education mean institutions struggle with surviving, unless their "values, structures and processes" reflect that of "private sector management" (Radice, 2015, p. 408). This is also reflected in the vocabulary and practices of academic development, as the idea of *development* typically centres on "individual performance, and not collective purposes" (2015, p. 407). Individual performance is then, to a great extent, measured by quantitative and demonstrable targets (2015), such as providing evidence for research outputs and cases, with measurable, documented, and/or evidenced impact, as defined by the Research Excellence Framework

2021 in the UK (i.e. "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia", UK Research and Innovation, 2024). It is not within our expertise and the aims of this reflective analysis to further elaborate on REF. We also acknowledge that the scope of impact in REF in recent years has been broadened to include diverse types and indicators of reach and significance (Malan, 2023). However, our point is that, the traditional, or standardised, view that research with high impact needs to be measurable and with demonstrable reach beyond academia (i.e. the view that the wider impact is, the better) leads to a view of research as a product, a university asset with national and global market value. In their critique of the "commodification of scholarly information, research outputs and academic discourse," Lawson et al. (2015, p. 3) discuss "how scholarly knowledge in this [neo-liberal] system has become merely a product and a form of capital" (p. 4), which creates a history of, and raises the issues of, "complex labour processes, human hierarchies, discipline, sometimes bizarre management regimes of control and motivation, conflict, awareness, and often suffering too" (Willis, 1999, p. 142 as cited in Lawson et al., 2015, p. 19).

As such, the commodification of academic scholarship and rationalised or marketised perceptions of impact may position pedagogic research as a *hostile* exercise. Consider Brookfield's (2004) Marxist critique of alienation in higher education as a thinking exercise to see how the products of research may become hostile:

> When labour is objectified, something peculiar happens to the workers' emotions. Workers feel more and more disconnected from their work which itself starts to be thought of as something separate from themselves, something outside their sphere of influence (p. 155). … The worker puts his life into the object, and [their] life then belongs no longer to [themselves] but to the object which sets itself against [them] as an alien and hostile force (Marx, 1961, p. 96; as cited in Brookfield, 2004, p. 155).

To better understand this alienation, perhaps there is a need to look at an alternative context of pedagogic research which recognises the developmental process of conducting pedagogic research as much as, or perhaps more than, the outcome. Drawing from Brookfield (2004), we can argue that when higher education practitioners have the space to engage with pedagogic research *wholly and authentically*, the processes of research may be diversified, and outcomes could be multifaceted. This diversity in processes and outcomes challenge dominant—or at the very least, persistent—value systems in academic scholarship; for example, good academic scholarship can be, and is, much richer than the publication of journal articles in high impact journals. Products of scholarship may not necessarily have quantitative exchange value; that is, measurable and quantitative in market value terms.

Authenticity is evident in the "consistency between values and actions," "genuine relationships," and in meaningful engagement with research (Cranton, 2006, p. 71-72). It "develops in relationships, through dialogue, and in a social and political context" (2006, p. 72). A broader view of academic scholarship together with an emphasis on authenticity help us envision a model of impact for the Pedagogic Research SIG. If impact, as the United Nations Development Group (2011) states, "implies changes in people's lives" (p. 7), then, in the context of our work in academic practice, and more specifically in pedagogic research, impact can be viewed as a multidimensional and layered construct operating differently at different levels. These include the macro context of the institution, the meso context of the discipline or departmental practices, the micro context of teaching and learning practice, and the nano content of the whole person, a person with agency, emotions, values, and identity (Figure 3), as we discuss next.

A process-oriented approach to impact in pedagogic research

The experience (e.g. practising a new methodology, developing reflexivity) and knowledge (e.g. a new perspective on teaching) emerging from pedagogic research may help practitioners look their everyday pedagogic practice differently with a potential positive effect on themselves, other individuals (e.g. colleagues, students), communities (e.g. student communities, departmental communities), wider institutional policies and practice, the society beyond academia and the non-human world. This perspective offers a different language than of neoliberalism, that of efficiency, effectiveness and measurable output to personal fulfilment and communal value.
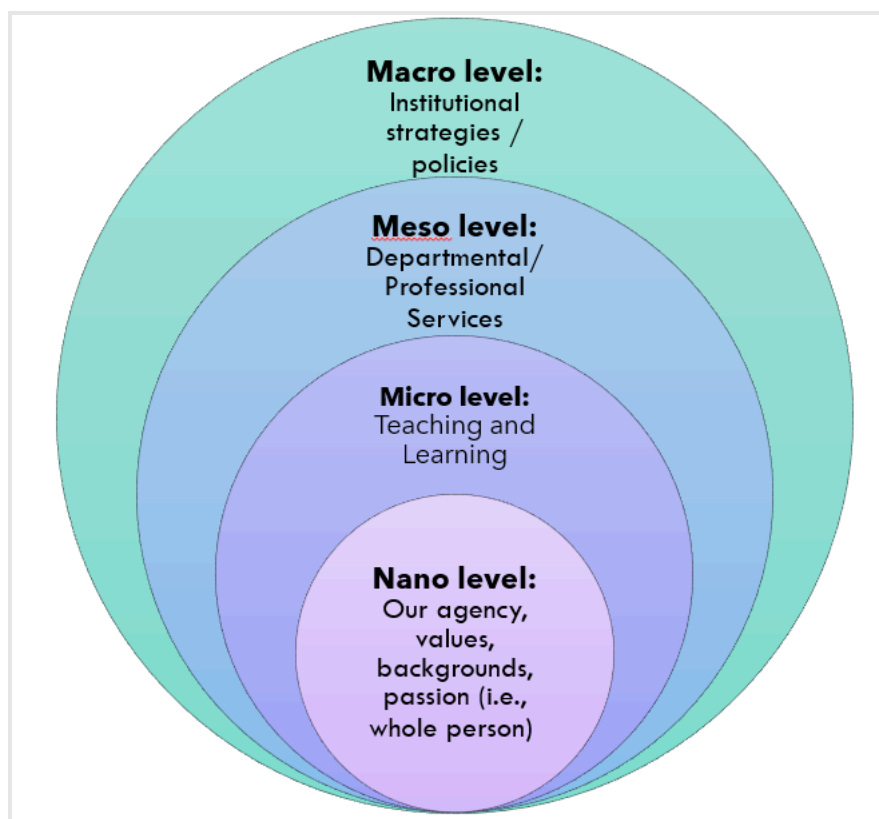

Figure 4. A view of impact as a multidimensional and layered construct in the context of The Pedagogic Research SIG.

At a *nano level*, pedagogic research has the potential to impact one's agency, together with well-being, self-efficacy, and interest and passion for the profession. When a practitioner can "control the pace and form of production" (Brookfield, 2004, p. 157) and have full control over the research process, the motivation, energy, personal skills, and creativity needed to successfully conduct research are celebrated, rather than consumed or used for transactional purposes. As a result, research can bring "happiness and fulfilment" (p. 164) on a deeply personal level, as the process is connected to one's life experiences and identity. The outcomes could be unpredictable or not immediately measurable. Lukes et al. (2022), for example, report how a regional community of practice for academic developers contributed to an unexpected outcome of "reduced feelings of isolation" as well as "increased sense of mutual expertise,

support, accountability, and intellectual inspiration" (p. 11). They also note a positive impact on self-efficacy, well-being and productivity (p. 6).

The changes experienced at a nano level impact changes at a *micro level*, the actual work of teaching, facilitating, mentoring and similar. Eventually, we would expect an effect on departmental and institutional practices (including aims and policies) in general, as in higher education we work in nested communities (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). These communities always impact one another, forging new connections and ways of working, but tensions and challenges are inevitable. The *meso level* of department or professional service is of particular importance here, as it may act as an intermediate level where individual practices enhance, challenge or transform larger institutional practices through departmental/team support, community and shared disciplinary practice.

To give an example for this conceptual argument and situate it in the context of the Pedagogic Research SIG, we go back to the two possible lenses in pedagogic research: a process-oriented approach to pedagogic research, which recognises the qualitative, unpredictable or not immediately measurable aspects of research activities, and an outcome oriented approach to pedagogic research which rigidly focuses on the measurable or demonstrable products of research. As we have noted above, pedagogic research is increasingly on the strategic agenda for the University of Greenwich, as according to the University of Greenwich Research and Knowledge Exchange Sub-Strategy 2022–30, by 2030 all staff on teaching/research or research-only contracts will be required to engage in measurable research (including pedagogical research), practice or Knowledge Exchange activity, and 25% of staff will be engaged in pedagogical research (University of Greenwich Research, 2022). In the context of this institutional sub-strategy, the outputs of pedagogic research will no doubt need to be clearly defined and evidenced, before any exercise determining their validity or impact. However, within the context of the Pedagogic Research SIG, as we focus more on the process of pedagogic research, rather than the measurable or demonstrable outcome, a view of impact from the same institutional lens or perspective is not always viable or desirable. Connections and relationships colleagues build and the gains from these—even if not immediately visible—are equally important along with the experiential knowledge one may develop. In addition, colleagues' engagement with pedagogic research may fit into the wider institutional discussions and strategies on pedagogic research, but also concrete experience may further shape such policies and strategies with departments/professional services acting as intermediaries (hence the interaction between the layers). As we noted, members of the Pedagogic Research SIG cross geographical and professional boundaries, uncovering an amalgamation of backgrounds, contexts, cultures, and experiences. Each member has a particular agency that is developed through an ongoing exchange of ideas and knowledge, which is where we begin to explore and understand impact.

Conclusion and implications

We have argued that the developmental aspects of pedagogic research do not always have the recognition they deserve in today's neoliberal higher education, which places heavy emphasis on productive, yet most efficient structures, and measurable outcomes. Many of the challenges staff members experience in pursuing pedagogic research—just to name a few, heavy workloads, not having adequate funding, space or the resources to conduct research—could be understood as symptoms of the neo-liberalisation of UK higher education. In response to this wider challenge, we offered a multi-layered view of impact in the context of a special interest group on pedagogic research by considering possible changes and transformation on the institution, disciplinary or departmental practices, teaching and learning practice,

but most importantly, the academic practitioner as a whole person. This multidimensional view of impact is a holistic and process-oriented approach to academic development, considering the political, social and personal dimensions of education, and always in connection to others: colleagues, students, the university community, larger society, and more-than-human. This perspective resists the neoliberalist narratives of efficiency and productivity by recognising the qualitative dimensions of academic practice, such as authenticity, personal fulfilment, and communal value, and, as such, could be expanded to other areas of academic development and practice.

However, it is questionable whether inclusion and personally fulfilling involvement in pedagogic research can be experienced by all staff in higher education, especially by those who are positioned as temporary workers or labourers in the system. It is our hope that the open and decentralised nature of the Pedagogic Research SIG will support all colleagues in their pursuit of professional development, however, there needs to be more research to look at potential barriers and experiences of academic staff on precarious contracts and positions, as well as empirical evidence corroborating, questioning, and challenging the conceptual arguments we provided here in other contexts.

An important implication of our work is on the role of open structures in higher education to support inclusion and meaningful professional development. Shared vision and values lay the foundation of open structures, which are then strengthened by technologies that support openness and transparency (e.g. Teams channels) and open educational practice (e.g. posting a message on a Teams channel which is then visible to all other colleagues in the SIG; inviting all SIG members to a small SIG subgroup meeting). Practically speaking, for colleagues considering establishing a SIG, whether relating to pedagogic research or not, we have the following recommendations:

- build openness into the structures from the initial stages to ensure sustainability of the group;

- ensure that engagement can be multi-faceted, multi-platform and flexible to recognise the barriers to potential participation.

The rapid growth of the SIG at the University of Greenwich suggests that there is a strong appetite for greater collaboration and resistance to competitive, product-focused approaches. But also, that this neo-liberal context need not lead to the inevitable defeat of endeavours that challenge their orthodoxy, if both practical and ideological challenges are anticipated at the outset.

Acknowledgements

Biographies

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Stuart Sims is the Head of Academic & Learning Enhancement at the University of Greenwich. Stuart has published on a wide range of education topics, including public schooling, the use of mobile devices in classrooms, evaluation frameworks, and staff-student partnership. He is an editor of the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* and convenes the Research & Evaluation Special Interest Group for RAISE.

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