THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight

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THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This is the 2020 volume in the annual series *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, which we launched in 2013 in the belief that there was a need to provide a forum specifically for higher education researchers to discuss issues of theory and method. So far, we have published around 100 chapters.

This volume has a somewhat greater focus on theoretical issues. Some chapters address both theoretical and methodological themes. Farenga combines co-participation theory and artful inquiry method and Hofmann discusses cultural-historical activity theory and combines this with methodological perspectives on finding differences and similarities in data.

Amongst the chapters focusing primarily on theory, Hasted and Bligh address relational working, Sakr applies Deleuzian theory to the student experience, Horrod combines Bernstein's theoretical insights with critical discourse studies, Lam analyses the use of the concept/theory of framing in higher education and O'Shea combines the perspectives of Sen and Bourdieu to investigate participation and persistence.

In terms of method and methodology, contributions consider *talanoa* as a research methodology (Hindley et al.), the use of instrumental variables (Orosz et al.) and corpus linguistics (Alsop et al.). The latter two contributions focus on quantitative methods.

Two contributions are of a slightly different nature. Tight reviews the literature on quality assurance and management in higher education and Papatsiba and Cohen analyze the epistemic contents of Research Excellence Framework impact case studies.

Interestingly, in this volume, authors from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds are overrepresented (UK, New Zealand and Australia). Two papers are written by authors based in continental Europe.

Anyone interested in contributing a chapter to a future volume is invited to get in touch with either, but preferably both, of the editors.

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Jeroen Huisman
Malcolm Tight
Series Editors

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THEORISING PRACTICES OF RELATIONAL WORKING ACROSS THE BOUNDARIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Catherine Hasted and Brett Bligh

ABSTRACT

Higher education research is replete with discussion of boundaries imagined as structural constraints in need of removal or circumvention. But, while fore-grounding national–transnational frameworks, leadership strategising and institutional structures, the scholarship is subdued about how boundaries are actually dealt with at ground level. How do practitioners come together, day by day, across higher education boundaries; and what is required for desirable practices to be nurtured? It is on this issue, and in particular the theorisation of this issue, that this chapter will focus.

This chapter presents and develops a relational working framework*, based on the work of Anne Edwards. We highlight three core concepts (common knowledge, relational expertise and relational agency), disaggregating each into constituent features. We then apply the framework to reinterpret previously published empirical studies, to demonstrate its broad applicability. We argue that the framework usefully conceptualises how practitioners work with others across boundaries; that it helps us to notice how many boundaries are, in fact, routinely permeated; and that it usefully highlights important aspects of local practices that are easily obscured.*

Keywords: Relational working; boundary-crossing; higher education; boundaries; common knowledge; relational expertise; relational agency; research agendas

INTRODUCTION

Examine how university institutions are discussed in policy and mass media debates, and before long you will come across an iconic pejorative: the 'ivory tower'. In this telling, universities are strongly bounded, separated from the 'real' world and grossly deficient – lacking adequate engagement with societal problems, political stakeholders, diverse student demographics, market pressures, economic development plans and research commercialisation (Bok, 1982; Georgalakis, 2017).

The 'ivory tower' concept is but one example of how higher education 'boundedness' is vilified, with not only institutional perimeters but also 'internal' boundaries coming under fire. Academic disciplines, for example, are seen as prim guardians of inert knowledge production (cf. Spelt, Biemans, Tobi, Luning, & Mulder, 2009), while 'siloed' campuses are criticised for restricting the flourishing of student communities (cf. Bligh, 2019). Negative value judgements are pervasive: 'boundedness' is deep-rooted, systemic and problematic; and overcoming it is a priority concern – for 'consumers', employees, policymakers, institutions and the sector as a whole.

Against this backdrop, what we might call a *boundary-crossing agenda* has increasingly suffused the academic scholarship on higher education. Correctly highlighting the need to better understand existing boundaries' manifestations and implications, predominant scholarly narratives are, like their popularly-oriented counterparts, predictably normative: particular boundary types – cognitive, physical, organisational, geographical, technological (Teichler, 2000) – are positioned as troublesome; solutions are proposed, typically involving their permeation, circumnavigation or forceful removal; aspirations to replicate those solutions elsewhere are implied.

Our aim, in writing this chapter, is to resource the emergence of a different narrative: one recognising and comprehending the *relational working* already happening across higher education boundaries. Our ontological contention, by contrast with the above picture, is that higher education boundaries are *routinely permeated* by many practitioners, uncelebrated, in *everyday practice*. From that contention we infer two epistemological principles: that it is valuable to understand *what enables those practitioners* to do so; and that the absence of a *common analytical vocabulary* restricts that understanding. For us, the concept of *relational working* – based on work by Edwards (2017) – provides a suitable starting point for formulating such a vocabulary, one whose utility we wish to explore.

Relational working, Edwards (2010) acknowledges, occurs across *boundaries* – 'social constructions' occurring where different systems of communication, meaning value and time meet (p. 41). Indeed, it utilises those boundaries, bringing resources together to expand how tasks are understood. But, Edwards argues, analysing boundaries themselves is insufficient, and too often occludes 'the spaces at the boundaries where the intersection of practices actually occurs' (p. 41). Edwards (2010) advocates a 'relational turn in expertise', attending to not only (infra)structures, boundaries, practices and subjectivity but also the complex relations between them. Edwards suggests the necessity of understanding how

relational working occurs in different ways, including where structurally sanctioned or where responding to the failure of top-down approaches (p. 43).

In this chapter, we scrutinise how practitioners work *relationally* with others across higher education boundaries. We outline a theoretical vocabulary that, we contend, can usefully illuminate how work across boundaries is accomplished *in practice*. Subsequently, we apply that vocabulary to reconceptualise findings from a disparate range of published, empirical papers that examine higher education boundary work. The exercise provides an immediate opportunity to highlight aspects of practice that existing analyses downplay. Yet we do not suggest simply that relational working is a normatively 'better' lens; all theoretical frameworks, including relational working, are partial, serving both to highlight and obscure. Our intention, instead, is initially to highlight different and useful interpretations of phenomena.

More ambitiously, we also wish cumulatively to demonstrate the value of those different interpretations: how our use of the same vocabulary to analyse ostensibly separate phenomena can highlight conceptual links obscured or fragmented in current scholarship. What, we thus explore, might be the benefits of an alternative *relational working agenda* for higher education research?

RELATIONAL WORKING THEORY

Pioneered by Anne Edwards (2005, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2017) in a series of projects focussed on school-community links, collaboration across Children's Services, and interprofessional working in healthcare, relational working has been imported into higher education scholarship only recently (Hasted, 2019). Undergirded by activity theory, Edwards (2005) defines *relational working* as the 'basis of a conceptual framework to explore the relational aspects of knowledge work at the boundaries of intersecting practices' (Guile, 2011, p. 59). Atypically for activity theory approaches, the focus of interest is primarily on *subjects* – the people involved and the forms of expertise they develop and mobilise.

Edwards (2017) suggests that understanding *relational working* involves interrogating three core concepts, which together highlight the issues at play if ground-level collaboration across practice boundaries is to occur (p. 8):

(1) *common knowledge*: how the different motives of those involved are mediated;
(2) *relational expertise*: how the problem posed is jointly interpreted by those involved; and
(3) *relational agency*: how those involved align their action.

Importantly, the concepts are interrelated and dialogic in nature (Hopwood, 2017) – mutual dependencies in their written formulation deliberately reflect how the abilities they describe arise, within practice, in mutually reinforcing ways.

Some time ago, we wished to understand how people *came to work together* within a particular research intervention (Hasted, 2019). Yet our initial attempts

to apply *relational working* concepts were stymied by the fragmented nature of their discussion across Edwards' oeuvre, so we worked to condense relevant discussions into a single framework, based on an exegesis of Edwards' writings. That condensed version, hereafter called the *relational working framework*, forms the basis of our subsequent exposition.

Our *relational working framework* also augments Edwards' work in two ways. Firstly, we more explicitly delineate the specific features comprising common knowledge, relational expertise and relational agency. Edwards does occasionally discuss that issue: for example, discussing 'features of boundary practices' as 'foundations' of common knowledge (2010, pp. 44–45). Yet we enumerate those 'foundations' more systematically and deploy the term *features* more definitely: referring to distinctive attributes collectively necessary where common knowledge, relational expertise or relational agency are achieved. Secondly, we broaden the scope of the *subjects* we conceive as engaged in relational working. While Edwards' mainly concentrates on service providers, others have expanded that focus to emphasise relational working *with* service users (Hopwood, 2017). We concur with that interpretation, especially since demarcating 'service user' identities (cf. 'students-as-consumers') in higher education is contentious. Thus, while the direct quotations we reproduce from Edwards might use terms such as *practitioners*, our own formulations will deliberately emphasise *subjects*.

Common Knowledge

Edwards presents *common knowledge* as the bedrock for cultivating relational working. In keeping with the emphasis on subjects, Edwards (2017) defines *common knowledge* as subjects' knowledge about each other – their 'respectful understanding of different professional motives' (p. 9). Nurturing knowledge about motives creates a powerful resource for collaboration. Yet activity theory highlights that motivation, counterintuitively, has external, situated origins (cf. Leontyev, 1977/2009). To some extent, therefore, understanding the motives of some subject implicitly but necessarily involves comprehending the social situation within which they undertake their labour (cf. the vernacular saying: 'I can see where you are coming from').

Our *relational working framework* draws attention to five features of *common knowledge* (cf. Edwards, 2010, pp. 44–45; Edwards, Daniels, Gallagher, Leadbetter, & Warmington, 2009):

(1) *Knowledge of own value*: how subjects reflect on their historically accumulated expertise and values.
(2) *Knowledge of others' value*: how subjects develop awareness of the need to work relationally and strive to become responsive to doing so.
(3) *Knowledge of intelligible expression*: how subjects make their motives explicit and accessible to others, becoming more 'professionally multilingual' (Edwards, 2010, p. 44).
(4) *Knowledge of shared purposes*: how subjects recognise shared motives and deploy that recognition when collaborating.

(5) *Knowledge of purposes*: subjects' understanding of how others' motives influence their interpretation of the problem being confronted.

Importantly, since *common knowledge* is the ability to *develop* recognition of motives to undergird *future* working (Edwards, 2011), it requires particular conditions to develop and establish (Edwards, 2017). Firstly, since it emerges *within* practice, rather than springing into existence fully formed, common knowledge requires time to become established. Secondly, since it is a mediating resource for collaborative action, there is a need for active engagement at the intersection of practices. *Common knowledge* is not a synonym for hybridising roles or a vehicle for organisational 'rationalisation', but instead invokes dynamic interactions centred on shared, common objects of activity. Thus, *common knowledge* will likely develop alongside *relational expertise* – the capacity for the joint engagement of subjects with particular objects.

Relational Expertise

Relational expertise is defined by Edwards (2017) as follows:

> A capacity to work relationally with others on complex problems. Crucially, it involves the joint interpretation of the problem as well as the joint response. The object of activity needs to be collectively expanded to reveal as much of the complexity as possible. (p. 8)

Relational expertise is thus a distinct capacity mediated by a shared, complex problem; or, in other words, relations between subjects as mediated by some object of activity. Relational expertise extends beyond practitioner-specific (or disciplinary) forms of expertise, while drawing on them as antecedents.

Our *relational working framework* highlights three features of *relational expertise* (cf. Edwards, 2017, pp. 8–9):

(1) *Capacity to interconnect expertise*: how subjects relate subjects' different expertise (i.e., their own and others') to the complex problem – recognising their different applicability.
(2) *Capacity to contextualise motives*: how subjects relate subjects' motives and values to the complex problem.
(3) *Capacity to align motives*: how subjects interpret the complex problem in the light of subjects' different motives when formulating a response.

The *contextualisation* and *alignment* of motives might be understood as closely analogous capacities with different directionality – proceeding, respectively, from *common knowledge* and from unfolding interpretations of the object (the relational working 'problem'). Like common knowledge, relational expertise is nurtured over time. That its features are each related to the object means that *relational expertise* develops as subjects come to understand that object through their actions – in other words, it develops alongside relational agency.

Relational Agency

Relational agency is defined by Edwards (2005) as follows:

> A capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others, in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations. (pp. 169–170)

Relational agency, therefore, is fundamentally about relationships between subjects and actions – the subordinate units, regulated by specific goals, into which broader activities are disaggregated so that they can be concretely pursued by subjects in time-bounded ways. In other words, relational agency concerns how subjects align, exert and advocate as relational working unfolds and they must repeatedly grapple with questions of 'how?'.

Our reading of Edwards (2010, pp. 62, 91) suggests the following features:

- *Engagement of shared responsibility*: how subjects negotiate and enact mutual responsibility for interpreting and responding to problems.
- *Engagement of mutual support*: how subjects offer and accept support from others to pursue goals.
- *Engagement of coordinated action*: how subjects understand what enacting change involves and means for those engaged in it.
- *Engagement of flexible responses*: how subjects deviate from standardised practice in response to contradictions in activity – bending rules, procedures and hierarchy relations.

This interpretation of relational working is the one we shall apply in the next section.

THEORY APPLICATION

In this section, we apply the *relational working framework* to reinterpret published empirical studies. Each investigates, in different ways, collaboration across higher education boundaries; yet none, as originally published, uses relational working concepts. Our intention is to engage with how boundary-crossing practices are prominently conceptualised within higher education, and to consider how the *relational working framework* might highlight different understandings.

We examine four distinct clusters of papers, each attending to different research objects: leading in a changing environment, producing societal knowledge, collaborating with industry and negotiating intrainstitutional identities. Those clusters were chosen for their spread across higher education research. Consider, for example, Tight's (2019) typology of the field (p. 10). *Leading in a changing environment* is a 'boundary' issue in Tight's category 'institutional management'; likewise, *producing societal knowledge* in 'knowledge and research'; *collaborating with industry* in 'quality' (particularly regarding ranking); and *negotiating intrainstitutional identities* in both 'academic work' and 'the student experience' (we analyse examples, below, relevant to both). The clusters were also selected for conceptual variety, allowing us to

demonstrate our framework's flexibility and utility in critically reanalysing work presented using concepts derived, respectively, from distributed and boundary-spanning leadership; mode 2 knowledge production; communities of practice and activity theory; and Bourdieusian and Butlerian practice theories. In each case, we examine the extent to which selected papers recognise issues corresponding to the three main concepts of *relational working* and highlight some of the specific analytical features implicated, using the terminology introduced above.

Leading in a Changing Environment

The first cluster of work we scrutinise investigates the *enhanced leadership practices* required where higher education boundaries are perforated. We examine two papers, chosen firstly, to reflect the emphasis on 'distributed' leadership in contemporary scholarship; secondly, because each is commendably explicit about its theoretical basis; and, thirdly, because each appears in a core higher education research venue (respectively, *Higher Education Research & Development* and *Studies in Higher Education*).

Each paper takes the changing environment in which universities operate as their departure point. For Prysor and Henley (2018, p. 2210), a 'perfect storm of external challenges and pressures' – changing regulatory environments, updated business models, internationalisation, external engagement, knowledge exchange, the impact of disruptive technologies – is radically broadening the range of *leadership skills* required across the sector. Likewise, for Sewerin and Holmberg (2017), the attendant '[r]eform initiatives in institutions of higher education and research currently emphasize the *role of leaders* as a key element for implementing change' (p. 1281, our emphasis).

Sewerin and Holmberg (2017) wish to suggest that higher education leadership will increasingly operate within multiple, contesting *modes*; their study, correspondingly, unpicks four 'institutional logics' evident within 'key activities' of a technical university in northern Europe. Prysor and Henley (2018), meanwhile, examine the 'boundary-spanning' activities of institutional leaders, using as their research site a research-oriented UK university.

Prima facie, the papers exhibit several argumentational similarities. Both suggest that out-of-date leadership practices, reflecting stable, silo-based structures, remain prevalent in many higher education institutions. Each reinforces a need for institutions to support more fluid forms of leadership so leaders are better able to mobilise knowledge and resources. Both introduce an external, yet avowedly 'practice-specific', theoretical frame – 'boundary-spanning leadership' (BSL) and 'distributed leadership', respectively – and contemplate its translocation to higher education. Furthermore, both conclude by emphasising the necessity of particular 'contextual conditions' (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017, p. 1292) for their frame's adoption into higher education. Prysor and Henley (2018), for example, highlight in this regard 'the prevalence of particular forms of boundaries that the HE leaders identify as prominent'; and the breadth and degree to which 'BSL practices' are considered and applied by leaders.

With regard to *common knowledge*, our reading is that the papers consider 'knowledge' extensively, but in a highly one-sided manner. Both successfully emphasise participants' perceptions of how *they* relate to the boundary *types* they are expected to act upon. Reflecting the feature we have called the *knowledge of purposes*, Prysor and Henley (2018) emphasise how their BSL framework steers researchers and practitioners towards understanding leadership as the collaborative engagement of expertise around 'a common cause', rather than as an atomised skill set. Yet the responsibility for understanding others (their motives, their interpretation of the problem) is positioned as a core responsibility of the 'boundary-spanning leader'. Largely absent is recognition that 'becoming responsive' to stakeholder needs might involve working *with* them. Whilst Prysor and Henley deliberately select study subjects who engage with internal and external 'stakeholders' (university staff, external partners, parents and students) and acknowledge that stakeholder boundaries are those 'most commonly referenced by interviewees', that engagement remains examined only from the 'leader's' perspective. Sewerin and Holmberg (2017), similarly, specifically describe the perspectives of 'staff with potential for taking on more senior leader roles' (p. 2383). Theoretical references to 'distributed' leadership notwithstanding, the papers' emphasis on 'leadership' seemingly encourages the analytical isolation of leaders' knowledge.

That said, the two papers do helpfully emphasise the conditions under which *common knowledge* might be nurtured. For example, Prysor and Henley (2018) argue for the importance of providing time to clarify responsibilities, consider stakeholders' perspectives and negotiate 'shared values' – echoing our earlier discussion about the nurturing of *common knowledge* (in this case, the *knowledge of own value* and *knowledge of shared purposes*). Yet, once again, the analytical isolation of leaders restricts how the resulting knowledge products are problematised; developing and using jointly *owned* responsibilities and values, for example, goes unconsidered. A relational working approach to *common knowledge* would encourage a broader perspective: investigating the extent to which leaders work responsively *with*, and how they and their motives are understood *by*, other subjects – both the 'stakeholders' recognised in these papers, or other 'leaders' across some practice boundary.

The picture is also partial with regard to *relational expertise*. Both studies, notably, identify how successful leadership across boundaries necessarily *builds on* the interrelation of motives. For Sewerin and Holmberg (2017), such interrelation is axiomatic for distributed leadership, which involves

> …the ability to see and acknowledge other fields, to connect and build the platform and preconditions for satisfying mutual needs. (p. 1287)

Similarly, Prysor and Henley (2018) acknowledge the recognition of motives as a precursor to constructing a unifying 'group identity'. Such an interpretation, moving from elaborating common knowledge to discussing the purposes of its mobilisation, resonates with the *capacity to interconnect expertise*. Yet those purposes – building platforms, constructing group identity – remain specified