

A Graduate Student Perspective on Creating a Stronger Culture of Practitioner-Based Scholarship

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community practice

graduate programs

intentional educational ecosystems

Mentorship

practitioner-based scholarship

Professional Identity Formation

A strong culture of practitioner-based scholarship (PBS) begins in graduate programs, where students should learn about and actively participate in it. This involves developing an identity as a practitioner-scholar and engaging in a community of practice where they are mentored by faculty, alumni, and peers. Graduate programs must purposefully design and implement the environments and experiences necessary to cultivate this culture of PBS.

Introduction

I have two very different graduate school experiences and have experienced the impact of program culture on practitioner-based scholarship (PBS). The first graduate school experience was a Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the second was a Master of Science in Learning and Instructional Design Technology (LIDT), which

was the first stage of a doctoral program. My experiences suggest that the design of graduate programs can either foster or fragment a culture of PBS. Purposeful design of educational ecosystems and experiences can shape professional identity and collaboration readiness within the community of practice.

Practitioner Experiences

TESOL M.A.

In my TESOL M.A., PBS was not just discussed in theory—it was lived. Every student was required to teach at least one class each semester in the Intensive English Program (IEP), a lab school where teaching, curriculum design, and research intersected. Faculty, alumni, and students collaborated on projects such as curriculum development and tutoring. Participation in PBS was expected, modeled, and mentored, and the department fostered a nurturing, inclusive, collaborative culture.

Vignette

A group of peers and I joined the IEP curriculum committee, where we dove into issues of student placement and program efficacy. After learning about cohort models for class placement in one of our courses, four of us proposed and piloted this approach in one proficiency level at the IEP—completely outside of coursework or thesis requirements. We coordinated weekly, gathered feedback from ESL students, and met regularly with program administrators. At the semester's end, we presented our findings to the IEP administrative board, leading to adoption of the cohort model across all levels. We also presented our work at the international TESOL conference, extending our community of practice. Experiences where practitioner-scholarship sparked meaningful conversations and change were common in the TESOL program.

LIDT M.S.

The LIDT M.S. program also valued PBS and encouraged participation, but the approach was markedly different. The program had two tracks and students had to choose which track to pursue—research or design, not both. The research track students seemed to have more opportunities for collaboration with faculty, more conference presentations, and more respect from the university. Design track students often felt second-class. PBS opportunities were typically optional and siloed, not integrated as a shared experience. The department culture felt fragmented, like a patchwork of communities that did not always connect.

Vignette

I joined a small, grant-funded team to develop a textbook for a faculty member's course. Team members left to pursue research, the faculty member's role shifted, and within a few weeks, only two of us remained. We handled every aspect of the project, eventually recruiting a third design student to help us meet the deadline. Though we completed the project and presented it at an online learning conference, we still lacked a sense of community practice. Freire postulated that our interpretation of an experience is more important to identity development than the experience itself (1970). We felt isolated. This pattern recurred for other students in the program.

Discussion: What really matters in creating a stronger culture of PBS

To discover the cause of the difference in paradigms in these two graduate programs, I conducted an autoethnographic comparison of my experiences, guided by Cooper and Lilyea's (2022) principles for evocative and analytical autoethnography

and Keleş's (2022) criteria for evaluating quality in autoethnographic research. Three important themes emerged: identity, community, and design.

Identity: Becoming a Practitioner-Scholar

Professional identity forms through real-world, collaborative experiences (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1997). In TESOL, required participation in the IEP fostered both formative and transformative experiences, helping students develop as practitioner-scholars. In LIDT, formative experiences were present, but transformative, identity-shaping opportunities were rare. A culture that supports PBS actively models and mentors this dual identity, rather than leaving it to chance (Daza et al., 2021; Kreber, 2022).

Community: Beyond Learning Communities to Communities of Practice

Graduate programs often support learning communities that help newcomers acclimate (Tinto, 1997, 2003). However, communities of practice go further by situating learning in shared, real-world projects with ongoing mentorship (Wenger, 1998; Thorpe & Partridge, 2024). In TESOL, the IEP functioned as a required, shared community of practice, while in LIDT, the lack of a common third space led to fragmented experiences. The difference was clear: communities of practice offered transformative, identity-building experiences, not just formative ones.

We need both learning communities and communities of practice.

Design: The Power of Intentional Educational Ecosystems

The structure of the educational ecosystem—curriculum, physical spaces, and organizational culture—shapes student engagement (Cheers, 2017; Berglund, 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bryant, 2024). The IEP was a third space (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024) that connected theory to practice, while also fostering a reciprocal relationship between coursework and fieldwork. In contrast, the absence of intentional, shared structures in LIDT resulted in uneven engagement and opportunities for PBS. Some students received more attention and opportunities, and others felt lost during the program. My experience on the textbook development team illustrates this. Purposeful design of environments, communities, and experiences is required to create the culture we want to perpetuate (Asino et al., 2017; Berglund, 2024; Shah et al., 2023).

Suggestions for Graduate Programs

PBS culture is unlikely to emerge organically. It requires intentional design, resources, and commitment. Without this, students with more time, confidence, or support are more likely to engage in PBS, while others may be left behind. This uneven preparation perpetuates the divide between researchers and practitioners. Based on my experiences, I suggest three strategies:

- Integrate PBS throughout the program: Move beyond linear course models by embedding collaborative, practice-based experiences as a core part of graduate study (Cheers, 2017; Bryant, 2024).
- Create and require participation in third spaces: Establish environments where PBS is lived, not just discussed, and make these spaces integrated with the program (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024; Daza et al., 2021).
- Sustain communities of practice: Build a visible, supportive PBS culture of ongoing mentorship from faculty and alumni who treat students as collaborators (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This alignment makes PBS visible, normalizes it as part of graduate study, and treats it as central to professional identity. Of course, implementing changes requires consideration of faculty workload, accreditation requirements, and resource limitations. Programs may not be able to adopt all strategies equally, but small shifts can foster PBS culture without overburdening faculty. Different program formats may require wildly innovative approaches.

Conclusion

A strong culture of practitioner-based scholarship does not emerge by accident. It takes purposeful design, intentional communities of practice, and attention to identity formation. When graduate programs make PBS visible, expected, and mentored, they prepare practitioner-scholars who are ready to shape not only their workplaces, but the broader educational landscape.

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