



Fostering staff engagement in investigating practice: a journey through pedagogic research

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Presentation abstract

Curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, academic support, technology integration, and professional development (PD) are important aspects of learning development. Some learning developers have great ideas but may hesitate to put them into practice. Others might have experimented with their innovative ideas but are unsure if such practice should be continued. These imagined scenarios highlight a common yet fundamental question: Will my practice work? Or has my practice been effective? It can be elusive to determine the extent to which what is effective, under what circumstances, and for whom (Lin and Lam, 2025b). Therefore, developing research-informed practice becomes necessary to clarify important issues, spark conversation, promote change, and ultimately enhance the process of student learning (Nisbet, 1974; Stenhouse, 1975).

This presentation outlined two teaching and learning projects that support learning developers, specifically targeting academic staff across disciplines, to engage in pedagogic research at a university in Hong Kong (Lin and Lam, 2024). The projects initiate a range of PD support, encapsulated as 'The Octopus', to cater to teachers with various pedagogic research needs (Lin and Lam, 2025a). Examples of support include workshops, sharing sessions, and periodic consultations. Drawing from a larger study examining staff involvement in researching practice, this presentation highlighted three perceived learning development needs collected from 105 survey responses. Using reflexive thematic analysis to examine an open-ended question (Braun and Clarke, 2019), we identified the needs for scaffolding, knowledge exchange, and opportunities for networking and collaboration. Based on these needs, the team subsequently expanded its PD support to

organise writing retreats and pilot scaffolded PD workshops that consist of pre-workshop reading groups, main workshops, and post-workshop group consultations. We also work on international partnership to bring in global perspectives. The presentation concluded by discussing the value of pedagogic research, operational challenges, and possible solutions regarding how to address diverse needs.

Keywords: pedagogic research; teachers as researchers; professional development; higher education; Hong Kong.

Community response

During the academic year 2024/25, multiple higher education institutions in the UK instigated restructures in efforts to reduce costs. On occasion this has involved reframing student support arrangements including learning development. Therefore, in addition to the importance of teaching and learning practices being evidence-informed, there is also a growing urgency for learning development teams in the UK (and potentially beyond) to be able to quantify their reach, value, and impact on student learning and outcomes. Therefore, how best to develop the necessary research skills will be at the forefront of many learning developers' minds.

This was a wide-ranging presentation that looked at several different aspects of learning development work. The two teaching and learning projects discussed ran in the triennium 2022-25 and it would be useful to know whether they seem likely to lead to the establishment of more permanent forms of support for academic staff. Learning developer practices vary across the world and if there are global trends emerging, the view from Hong Kong can be pivotal in understanding that.

The authors position that learning development practitioners can be hesitant to undertake and disseminate pedagogical research resonated with session attendees. A number of personal factors might be attributed to such hesitancy, including lack of confidence or experience. However, for those who are research minded, it was also recognised there may be very real institutional barriers such as a lack of dedicated pedagogical research support and/or time that inhibit such activities. This can be exacerbated for those learning developers employed on 'non-academic' or 'professional service' contracts.

The practical support for aspiring researchers shared by Lin and Lam was commended and attendees left rethinking existing approaches at their own institutions:

I found this session really interesting and have been thinking about how I can use the ideas in my work. The sessions made me reflect on how we run writing retreats, how they can be improved – based on this presentation. The idea of making more use of the sessions, by introducing matchmaking workshops into the writing retreat is something I will try. Currently we do these completely separately, on different days. I do need to spend more time developing my thoughts on this, how we can adapt for our undergraduate students, and improve this provision. This session will benefit my practice going forward, very enjoyable learning.

Next steps and additional questions

A number of questions were posed for the authors:

- Are there additional tentacles that could be added to the Octopus in the future?
- Has student co-creation been considered in terms of the ‘collaboration’ tentacle?
- You mention international partnerships too – how is that work currently developing and evolving?
- The pedagogic research consultations undertaken (280+) clearly supported staff but was there any feedback specifically on how much these helped colleagues to enhance their teaching, for example, any particularly inspiring success stories where student results or engagement dramatically improved?
- The survey on enablers and blockers for engaging with pedagogical research clearly produced a rich data set. Was it clear that the respondents had a shared understanding of ‘pedagogic research’ itself, and of what knowledge or skills they might need to acquire (besides time) to engage with it more deeply? You noted that writing retreats and scaffolded workshops were designed to address some of the challenges reported in the survey, so it would be very interesting to know whether this has enabled more colleagues to engage, and how it has supported their personal and professional growth and development. Time is a constant challenge for pedagogical (and other forms of) research, but to become part of the culture it also needs to be valued by the wider institutional community. Was this already the case, or did you need to explain the value of this research to colleagues?

- Which key sector imperatives might be cited to support the need for more dedicated pedagogical research support (such as developing evidence for the Teaching Excellence Framework and/or Access and Participation Plan)?

Authors' reflection

This conference provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on our two teaching and learning projects that have supported academic staff engagement in pedagogic research at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Such a reflection is timely, as funding for both projects has recently ended, and our team is now mapping future professional development support for staff participation in pedagogic research for the triennium 2025-2028. The community responses sparked meaningful dialogue and prompted us to explore both our past work and future directions. We draw inspiration from a structured feedback approach, namely 'Stop, Start, and Continue', (George and Cowan, 1999; Hoon et al., 2015) as a guiding roadmap to address fellow learning developers' questions and share some of our observations as well as feedback in this collaborative writing.

Stop

'Stop' refers to practice that should be discontinued. Throughout the project period, we hardly recall any feedback suggesting that we stop providing certain areas of professional development. Most, if not all, colleagues have been open to various forms of support. For example, we organised a range of pedagogic research workshops that encompassed different research stages and paradigms. However, we did receive some occasional feedback on the length of our professional development workshops. Specifically, some colleagues requested that we extend our usual 1.5-hour workshops, as more time would allow greater discussion. To address the issues of time and depth, we initiated a scaffolded workshop series using a sandwich approach, which comprised pre-workshop reading groups, main workshops, and post-workshop group consultations. This idea originated from Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work on the Zone of Proximal Development, as we believe that scaffolding fosters learning, and that mere attendance does not automatically translate into teaching practice. Research has shown that scaffolded professional development is significantly more effective than self-directed approaches (Kleickmann et al., 2016). Without additional expert scaffolding, issues with knowledge

transfer can arise, particularly when disciplinary knowledge, teaching and learning, and research traditions differ considerably (Boyer, 1990).

Start

'Start' indicates the new elements that should be introduced. While our current professional development, encapsulated as the Octopus, provided a variety of support for our colleagues at CUHK (Lin and Lam, 2025a), we ponder what else can be done and improved. It is interesting to note that the community raised a similar question, as to whether additional tentacles could be added to the Octopus in the future. We acknowledge that there is certainly a possibility of including other tentacles, as emerging or changing pedagogic research needs may arise with new colleagues joining or as the teaching and learning landscape shifts in coming years. However, the current tentacles broadly capture the professional development support we provide within our capacity. For instance, if a new area of service provision, such as student co-creation, emerges, it would still fall under the collaboration tentacle. Reflecting on future initiatives, it is crucial for us to *specify* investigative areas within pedagogic research and to *diversify* perspectives and practice through additional international collaborations.

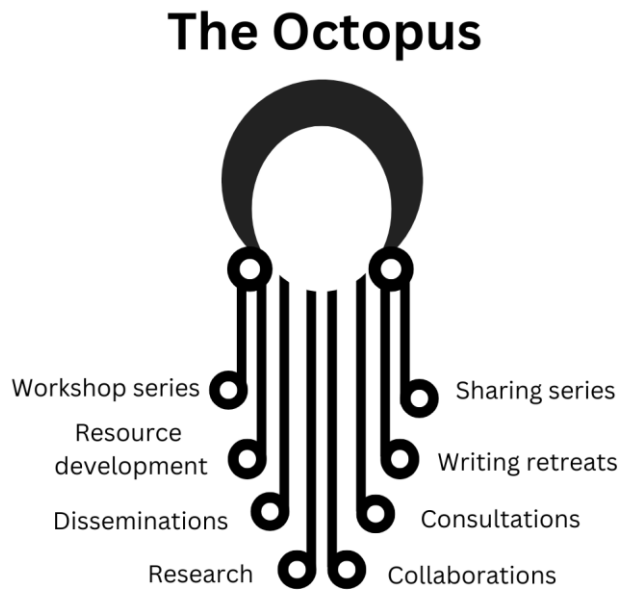
In terms of specification, we are exploring the establishment of a Pedagogic Research Community of Practice (Ped Res CoP), building on the strengths of our current Teaching and Learning Community of Practice (T&L CoP). The proposed Ped Res CoP will host a range of sub-communities of practice that cover teachers' various pedagogic research interests, be they technology-enhanced education, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, experiential learning, or student engagement. Specifying investigative areas within pedagogic research will provide useful lenses to explore opportunities and challenges pertinent to specific research topics, with the caveat that clear-cut boundaries between sub-communities can be elusive and that teachers' interests often overlap. In addition, we will facilitate a shared understanding of pedagogic research among staff. This is particularly important because our work is a university-wide initiative that supports academic staff across disciplines. Previous academic training will unavoidably shape how they perceive this form of teaching and learning research. Another support we plan to initiate is enhancing their understanding of essential learning theories in education, such as social constructivism, experiential learning, and dialogic education.

Regarding the diversification of perspectives, we are eager to expand our professional networks beyond Hong Kong and the United Kingdom to other parts of the world. Currently, we have established a formal partnership with the Centre for Innovation in Higher Education (CIHE) at Anglia Ruskin University by signing a Memorandum of Understanding. This partnership will enable us to share resources and initiate collaborative projects, whether in research or professional development. One example of this is our Pedagogic Research Knowledge Exchange Series, which pairs up a colleague from each institution based on the theme of the session. Similarly, we have initiated a Pedagogic Research Knowledge Exchange Series with the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Bath. Here is our project website: <https://www.cuhk-tlcp.net/>. If you are interested in collaborating, please feel free to get in touch.

Continue

‘Continue’ suggests features that should be maintained. As discussed earlier, our professional development support has been positively received. We plan to continue our Octopus approach (see Figure 1) to enhance academic staff capacity for pedagogic research, sustain learning through consultations and collaborations, and cultivate a sense of the community across disciplines (Lin and Lam, 2025a). Due to limited space in the writing, we would like to use our facilitated writing retreats as an illustrative example of how we fostered a sense of belonging among staff.

Figure 1. The Octopus (Lin and Lam, 2025a).



In our facilitated writing retreats, we created tailor-made writing retreats that featured talks, workshops, pedagogic research match-making sessions, alongside uninterrupted focused writing sessions. Precisely, we aimed to make writing retreats social events, which stemmed partly from survey data indicating that staff face challenges with cold calling for collaborations, and partly from our concern about whether staff would be interested in coming together to write due to individual preferences. To make explicit our intention, we created the slogan ‘CRAFT YOUR CRAFT, BREW AND BOND’ for our retreats. Additionally, we specifically designed retreat artefacts (see Figures 2 to 5) for our participants, which they could take away as memorable mementos of their participation.

Figure 2. A reusable lanyard provided for each participant.



Figure 3. Here are two sets of notepads featuring selected quotes as reminders of why education matters.



Figure 4. Motivational cards were used to serve as reminders of why pedagogic research is important (drawing reference from cards received from the South West Doctoral Training Partnership).



Figure 5. Networking cards for taking note of participants' details (instead of recommending the use of name cards).



Based on our observations and conversations with participants, they appreciated these structured opportunities for writing, networking, and learning. For example, they no longer have to cold call for collaboration, as the matchmaking sessions provided the very space for them to share their work and make connections in real time. Other colleagues commented that we carved out the space for them to pursue the work they love. Otherwise, they would be preoccupied with phone calls or easily distracted instead of focused on writing their pedagogic research or teaching grant proposals. They need the head space to think. These structured opportunities highlighted that they are not working in silos.

Moving forward

Inevitably, the success and continuity of our projects will depend on our ability to secure funding for the work we did. Funding is a finite resource, a reality not only in Hong Kong's higher education system but also worldwide. However, we recognise that pedagogic research is valuable as a crucial form of professional development for our academic staff, as it has the potential to address the ever-changing global educational landscape and create inclusive and equitable learning experience for all students (Lin and Lam, 2025b).

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