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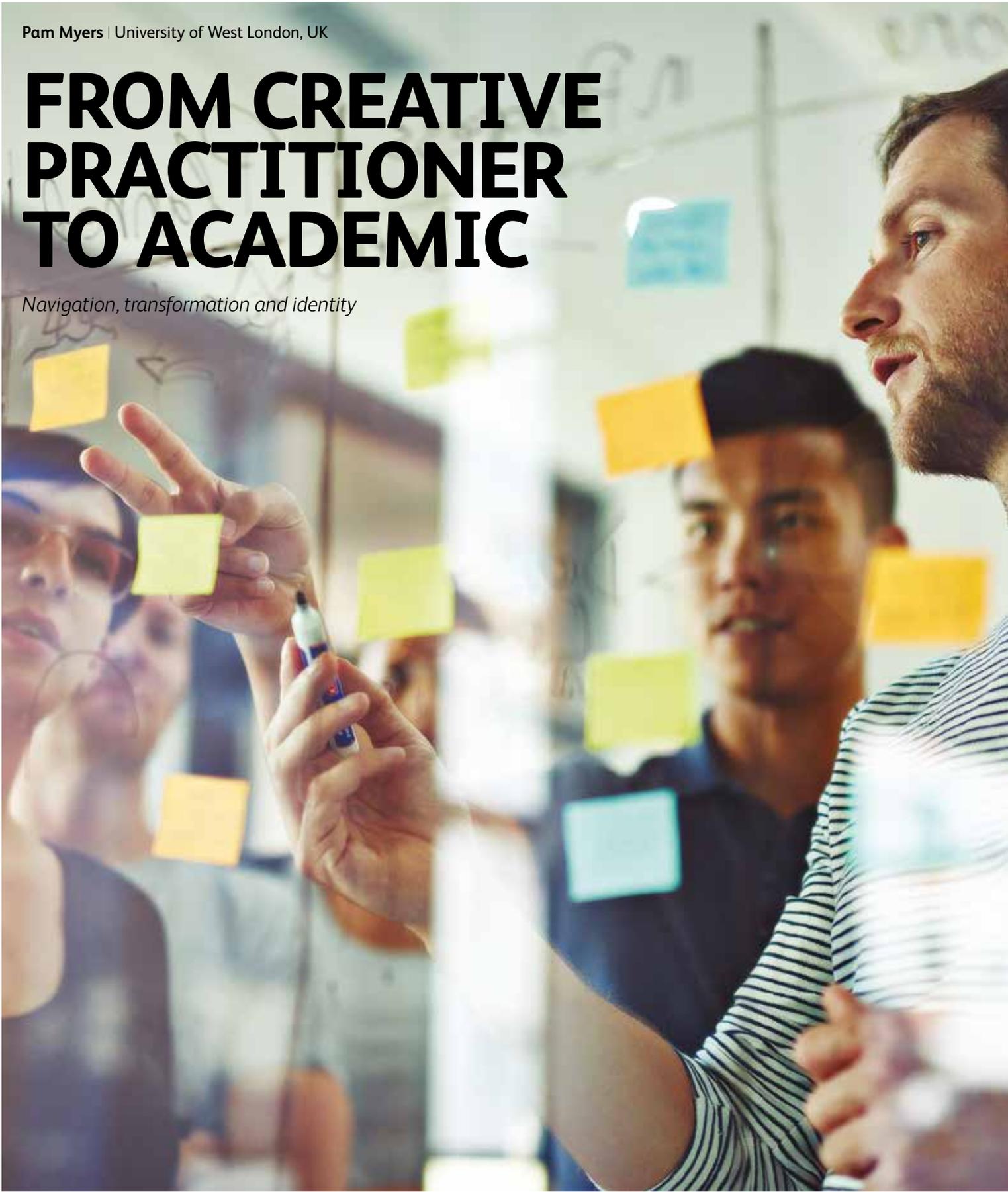
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# FROM CREATIVE PRACTITIONER TO ACADEMIC

*Navigation, transformation and identity*





*As universities increasingly seek to embed employability and entrepreneurial skills within their academic programmes, it could be argued that the opportunity to create organic relationships with industry through the employment of experienced practitioners is of clear benefit*

**T**ransitioning from the creative industries to academia brings a unique set of challenges and opportunities for both new academics and their institutions. How can the paradoxes of academic-practitioner relationships be effectively addressed? For industry professionals, the decision to enter academia is exciting and daunting in equal measure. As universities increasingly seek to embed employability and entrepreneurial skills within their academic programmes, it could be argued that the opportunity to create organic relationships with industry through the employment of experienced practitioners is of clear benefit.

#### **The birth of the pracademic**

Posner (2009) uses the term 'pracademic' to describe the dual identity of an experienced practitioner who continues to remain active in their field while simultaneously developing an academic career. Suggesting that a healthy relationship between academics and practitioners is vital to the success of both, Posner notes that exposure to each other's disciplines can offer fresh insights and perspectives on both theoretical and practical issues. For Posner, 'the world of practice serves as the centre point of the academic compass for most professional programmes' (Posner, 2009: 2); he suggests that the development of professional centres within institutions has a role to play in the cultivation of rich relations between practitioners and academics. Using the field of public administration as an example, Posner proposes an academic-practitioner hub structure premised on a client services model in which problematic industry issues are addressed through academic research. Posner argues that the provision of tested findings and ideas could help practitioners, while academics might benefit from wider dissemination in the field.

According to Gates and Green (2013), practitioner-academics are in a unique position to provide insights into the tensions between industry and the institution, thus bridging the cultural gap between the university and the outside world. Referring to them as 'inbetweeners', Gates and Green align with Posner to suggest that practitioner-

academics are critical to practice-based education, that is education that embeds work-related knowledge and skills. However, as both note, this is predicated on the concept of industry as 'real world' and higher education institutions have traditionally been concerned with mainly theoretical and abstract matters. This has changed significantly over the past few years, and there is now a significant concern (and a degree of pressure through government policy trends) to nurture the 'economic' capital of students and engage them with the world of work. This suggests that the tension between the perceived value of professional experience and the core academic functions of teaching, researching and publishing may be receding. Thus it is possible that a new approach to practitioner-academic relationships, which takes account of the unique value of each, could enhance the personal experience of academics, and add substantial value to the student experience.

#### **Crossing boundaries**

Modern universities, with an increasing focus on delivering quality work-relevant knowledge alongside an academic education, may have a particular need to recruit experienced practitioners to contribute to teaching and research. In the context of the creative industries in particular, with its reliance on personal contacts and networking, students can reasonably expect to benefit from having such practitioners involved in the design and delivery of the course.

However, for the practitioners coming into the institutions, their experience can be culturally challenging. There is an array of push/pull factors which come into play when crossing the symbolic and physical boundaries of an institution, and one of the most complex is reflecting upon what it means to be either an academic, or a practitioner. Both labels function as a descriptive term which, while having a certain shorthand usefulness, are too reductive to meaningfully express the complexity of the experience on either side.

There is an enduring assumption that academic labour, the process of teaching and research, happens in an institutional vacuum concerned with only theoretical and abstract matters. As noted earlier,

## *Academics from the practice world can be valuable within the University, especially as gatekeepers of the relationships between the University and the outside world*

this is not a true reflection of the higher education institution. Wilson *et al.* (2014) point out that newly transitioned academics often express surprise at the stress, pace and workload of modern institutions. Adopting the entrepreneurial attitude of their previous lives is, for some, a useful coping mechanism for the constant need to balance teaching, administrative and publishing or research requirements. Wilson *et al.* argue that academic practice is directly comparable to professional practice, representing the transference of knowledge, skills and competencies to undergraduates who will in turn have an impact on the world in very real ways. In this sense, the perceived gap between the intellectual landscape of an institution and the experiential territory of practice seems very small. Yet their research identifies culture shock as a common experience of newly arrived academics; where they may feel secure in their own practice, they may feel daunted in the face of what appears to be an impenetrable hierarchy.

Equally, in the context of industry, practitioner is a term which can cover anything from working within a large public body to being a freelance individual. It may also occur at senior management level or as a solo entrepreneur.. Practitioners coming into academia cannot be seen as a homogenous body since they will bring with them the disparate work cultures, practices and identities acquired in their other professional context. As a result, the entry of practitioners in higher education can be uncomfortable to both practitioners and academics.

### **Brokering relationships across the divide**

It is not unusual for many uninitiated practitioners to feel a sense of otherness upon arrival in academia. Gates and Green (2014) suggest that understanding their experience of the transition to academia is crucial to successfully recruiting and retaining staff and to providing relevant staff induction and development; they suggest that there are three phases to the experience of transitioning. The first is a sense of loss of identity and confusion, the second is a reaction of adaptation and in the third practitioners get a sense of development and satisfaction. This research indicates that the forging of a new professional identity is problematic, and interviews with new academics refer to the issues of reinvention in which successful practitioners must come to terms with starting from the lowest grade of a second profession. As noted by Simendinger *et al.* (2000), leaving behind the status gained in successful practice can be a humbling experience.

Bartunek and Rynes (2014) challenge standard approaches to the academic-practitioner divide by suggesting that instead of considering the gap to be unbreachable, it would be more useful to acknowledge it and treat it as fundamentally





divide. Wilson *et al.* (2014) cite the example of a federal government lawyer transitioning to law lecturer, noting that this is an area where research and practice are already closely linked. They suggest that a linked community of academics and practitioners can share a combination of unique perspectives through meetings, conferences and informal discussion. They may also add value through their teaching, research and leadership alone. 'Pracademics' with deep exposure to both theory and practice are ideally positioned to make singular contributions to both endeavours. As an example, Posner (2009) suggests that academics with experience in public management or policymaking roles can potentially give their teaching more depth and credibility by enabling them to draw on a wide range of experience to support theoretical points. Their research can be informed by fresh insights from exposure to dilemmas and challenges facing practitioners, as envisioned by Posner in his concept of professional centres. Their experience serving different communities with disparate values and languages potentially enables them to reach students with different backgrounds. Drawing on their familiarity with multiple audiences, their written reports and articles may reach broader and more diverse audiences than traditional academic pieces. Helata (2015) challenges academics to stop limiting debate to their own institutional world, urging that they engage with external bodies and practitioners. Suggesting that academics should be incentivised to do so, Helata acknowledges that while publication in peer-reviewed journals is important, powerful ideas are too often hidden from real world view.

This rethinking of what it means to be identified as academic resonates with wider debates on the value of academic knowledge. Helata (2015) also argues that by looking outwards from the institution, academics not only gain an audience, but also enhance the depth and quality of their own scholarship and acquaintance with theory. By the same token, practitioners looking inwards into the institution may discover that academic rigour has practical value.

Exposure to literature analysing their field over time, and often across different nations or cultures, provides practitioners with important insights and fresh ideas for addressing a wide range of issues. For example, in my own field of audio production, there are new and interesting collaborations between institutions and industry bodies. Radiocentre, the industry body representing commercial radio, now routinely commissions and shares academic research in the field of advertising. This adds vigour and relevance to teaching which in itself feeds back into industry as new graduates begin their careers.

important in itself for scholarly research and theorising, and thus bridge building through academic process.

It can be argued that the tensions associated with academic-practitioner relationships reflect paradoxes of belonging, in as much as they identify individuals with membership of a particular tribe whose understandings of themselves differ from their understandings of the other.

Academics from the practice world can be valuable within the University, especially as gatekeepers of the relationships between the University and the outside world (including industry, workplaces and accreditation and professional bodies). For so-called 'pracademics', these adaptable actors fulfil the indispensable roles of translating, coordinating and aligning perspectives across multiple constituencies. Of course, in order to move across a real or imagined boundary, mobility is required and for the 'pracademic', assuming they have retained a presence in their field, this may be in either direction.

### **Transition, definition and dissemination**

To add a further layer of complexity to these transitions, these moves may vary in length of stay from temporary to short-term, to an almost permanent conversion, making it harder to fix points of belonging in either camp. Yet, in their state of tension, 'pracademics' can play many bridging roles. At times, they may serve as network brokers, creating new channels to enhance cooperation and communication across the academic-practitioner

### Knowledge sharing and networking

Posner (2009) suggests that a theoretical framework developed by Ikujiro Nonaka and colleagues – itself based on the seminal work of Michael Polyani (1967) on knowledge- provides a dynamic perspective on how academic-practitioner interaction can contribute to effective knowledge sharing. In Nonaka *et al.*'s model, two kinds of knowledge are postulated to exist: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic information that is shared in academic research papers and books; tacit knowledge is context-specific and rooted in personal insights, metaphors, and 'hunches'. Tacit knowledge includes the observations, anecdotes and examples of practitioners that help them interpret and simplify the complex welter of information and variables in organizational settings. New knowledge is created from the tension and conversion across these two very different approaches to information and meaning. The cycling between these types creates a 'knowledge spiral' (Nonaka *et al.* 1995) which facilitates a process of conversion and expansion. Posner also points out that the most effective way for the knowledge to be shared is via networking and forums that reach both industry and academia, noting that traditional journals will not necessarily reach a wide enough audience to promote cross-pollination of ideas.

### A new digital meeting point for academics and practitioners?

Given the relatively small amount of research on the move from industry to academic, and a younger generation of academics well versed with technologies now working in traditional institutions and industry, it is not surprising that social media and blogging are becoming an important space for interaction across the two worlds outside the teaching sphere. Alongside the 'pracademic' is the so-called 'blogademic', the academic blogger. Digital media is a shared space with a lot more scope than an academic journal; it provides a natural outlet for writing that goes beyond scholarly platforms. If academics are professionals engaged in the continuous development of a professional self, and choose to use social media, parts of the academic identity come in the public domain that might never have reached out previously. Academic blogs are sometimes a vehicle for the expression of frustration, but they also engage with the social processes of knowledge production, providing some partial ethnography of the academy. For practitioners crossing into academia, they provide an alternative, unfiltered view of the academy. Academic blogging is of course not universally regarded as having academic value. The lack of peer-review and objectivity is a hurdle too great for some academics to accept, but many corporate entities use blogs to connect and exchange ideas with both their staff and customers.



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### Induction, mentoring and socialisation

Having looked at the perceived division between academics and practitioners, both Gates and Green (2013) and Wilson *et al.* (2014) have proposed that an improved process of induction and mentoring might facilitate the process of transition and help develop strong working partnerships. Induction in this context may include not only training in academic practice, for example support in classroom practice and marking assessments, but also a wider process of socialisation within the academic context. Pointing out that adjustment of cultural paradigm is necessary for successful transition, Gates and Green suggest new academics be encouraged to recognise the value of interaction with peers, administrators, managers and, of course, students. Wilson *et al.* acknowledge that socialisation is a key part of becoming a member of any community, but equally propose a more flexible view of what transition actually is. Stressing the importance of partnerships, they suggest that encouraging flow in both directions between industry and academia could promote a more open dialogue between the two sectors. Referring to 'inter-domain' (i.e. inter-sectorial) partnerships, Wilson *et al.* echo the thoughts of Posner (2009) in not seeking to reshape either sector to be the image of the other, but rather to consider the higher education institution as a place in which to grow imaginative and creative capital which can then be adapted to outside practice. Merging discourse, opening the perceived boundaries and long-term orientation towards partnership between academia and industry are recurring motifs in current thinking.

### An agenda for future engagement

To conclude, I would argue that as institutions in the United Kingdom become increasingly dependent on the Research Excellence Framework (a national research assessment system), and potentially the new Teaching Excellence Framework (an assessment system for teaching quality), the pedagogical platform needs to embrace active, collaborative research across all specialisms. It seems that further examination of the critical role played by 'pracademics' is timely.

Their potential to improve the synergy between theory and research suggests that these kinds of non-traditional career paths should be encouraged by academic and creative employers alike, a form of intellectual cross-training that strengthens all the composite parts. Being resilient, work-ready and agile in one's thinking are desirable qualities for both staff entering the academic profession and students leaving their institution after graduation. Resilience and agility also need to characterize higher education institutions in today's challenging environment; these attributes may be the space where the actors involved converge.



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