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# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

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**ABSTRACT:** The York St John Research Into Professional Practice in Learning and Education (RIPPLE) network meets monthly, in a pub, to discuss ‘research as a form of critical engagement with our professional practice’ (York St John 2016). *PubMethods* has fostered a creative and radical community; typified by thick democracy, where ‘...a range of voices...[are] heard, not only through the narratives of learning, but also through the leveller of laughter and the eagerness of exploration’ (Fielding and Moss 2010: 158).

*PubMethods* is a multi-disciplinary informal space where people share and explore methodological dilemmas, and articles or books of interest; there are no presentations or keynote addresses. In this symposium we will explore how *PubMethods* enables a distinct opportunity, one which we have come to reflect upon as radical because we “re-see” each other as persons rather than role occupants’ within our university setting (Fielding and Moss 2011: 79).

We will reflect on our personal meaning-making from *PubMethods* including:

- 1) ‘A range of voices’: an exploration of a democratic research community (Matthew Clarke)
- 2) ‘The leveller of laughter’: reflections on positioning and identity within a research community (Charlotte Haines-Lyon)
- 3) ‘An eagerness of exploration’: the development and sharing of expertise (Jane Rand).

### **Jane Rand - An eagerness of exploration: the development and sharing of expertise**

**My reflection** focuses on the ‘*eagerness of exploration*’ (Fielding and Moss 2011: 158) within *PubMethods* and my personal meaning-making in relation to the concept of expertise - and how this is developed and shared within *PubMethods* and *because* of it.

**To explore** is to ‘travel through an (unfamiliar) area’ or to ‘look at (something) in a careful way’ in order to learn about it<sup>1</sup>. So, the *PubMethods* community are methodological travellers. We are *careful*, rather than careless; we attach importance, and take special care with, our travels. And we are eager; our interest is keen. We are enthusiastic to travel; you might say we are ‘hungry’ to travel... in the pub at least, there is certainly an eagerness or desire that could be described as a ‘thirst’!

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<sup>1</sup> oxforddictionaries.com; merriam-webster.com

But what are we thirsty for? A democratic research community? The leveller of laughter? Yes, to both of these; and for me, the development and sharing of expertise.

**So, what is expertise?** The Oxford dictionary (Hawkins, 1991) tells us it is ‘expert knowledge or skill(n)’, where *expert*, as an adjective, is: ‘having great knowledge or skill’. So expertise is understood to be about being knowledgeable (well-informed), and skillful (having great ability); we might call it “know-how”.

The word expertise stems from the Latin: *experiri* ...to try (and later *expertus*). In the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century its use denoted the state of being *experienced* or, more relevant to this conference, being *practiced*. **The term also appeared, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, in a legal sense; in defining a:**

person who, by virtue of special acquired knowledge or experience on a subject, presumably not within the knowledge of men [sic] generally, may testify in a court of justice to matters of opinion thereon, as distinguished from ordinary witnesses, who can in general testify only to facts. (Harper, 2016)

So we might define expertise as being distinctly experienced or practiced in comparison to what is ordinary; whatever that means!

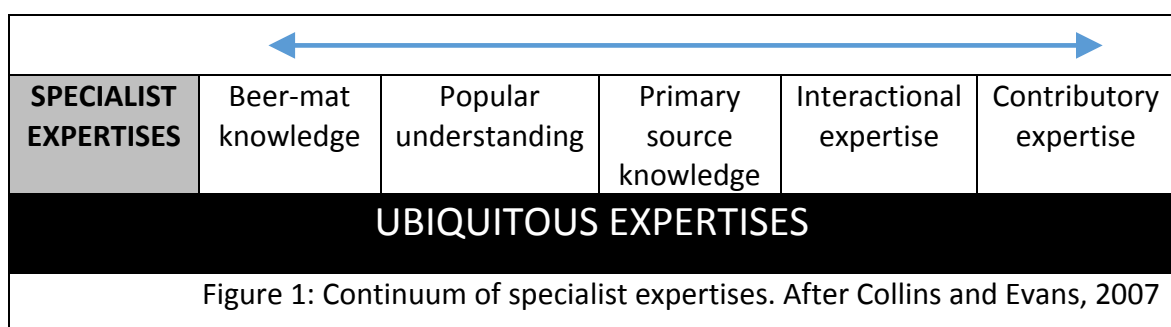
For me, expertise is difficult to determine in specific terms – it is better considered as conceptual, relational, or positional, and I will explore it today through the work, from the 1960s, of Michael Polyani, and through Collins and Evans’ (2007) more recent perspective.

**Collins and Evans (2007:2)** describe the sociology of expertise as being concerned with ‘what it is to know or not know what you are talking about’. They argue that expertise is acquired (or learned) through enculturation: ‘socialisation into the practices of an expert group’ (2007: 3). They define expertise as ‘genuine understanding’. They argue that it requires a form of knowledge that is tacit: that which ‘cannot be easily formalised and put into exact words... [yet] has a sweeping presence in the world’ (Polyani, 1966: x), and argue that it can only be gained through ‘social immersion in groups who possess it’ (Collins and Evans, 2007: 6).

**To return to my definition** then, the *PubMethods* community are careful methodological travellers; thirsty to become distinctly experienced, or practiced, through a genuine understanding that comes through social immersion in a diverse, good-humoured, democratic community. But whilst *PubMethods* is a space in which we explore ‘research as a form of critical engagement with our professional practice’ (York St John, 2016), I would argue that we do not ‘possess’ expertise in the sense of owning, or controlling, it; rather it is a community *from which* and *through which* expertise is developed, and shared.

**In *Rethinking Expertise*** Collins and Evans (2007: 13-14) argue for different expertises:

- i) *ubiquitous* expertises that every member of a society must possess in order to live within it : ‘things you just know how to do without being able to explain the rules for how you do them’ (ibid: 13), and
- ii) specialist expertises that range from ‘beer-mat knowledge’ through ‘popular understanding’ and ‘primary source knowledge’, to ‘interactional expertise’, and finally to ‘contributory expertise’ (See Figure 1)



‘Beer-mat knowledge’ might be described as ‘know-that’ – a rule, or explanation, characterised because it ‘does not enable the naïve reader to *do* anything’ (Collins and Evans, 2007: 19; emphasis added). For example, I know that  $E=MC^2$ ; and I know that I failed O-level physics!

‘Popular understanding’ is deeper than beer-mat knowledge. Moving away from the physics analogy to terms that may be more familiar to this audience, it is the type of understanding that comes from reading *about* an educational theorist’s ideas from a general text book. From this, we might graduate to reading the theorist’s original work, in order to gain ‘primary source knowledge’.

‘Contributory expertise’ accounts for those who are experienced and practiced, and who ‘contribute to the domain to which the expertise pertains’ (2007; p24); that is, those who bring about primary source knowledge. Some *within* the *PubMethods* community do actively contribute to the methodological domain through, for example, publication(s). *PubMethods* as a community, however, exemplifies ‘interactional expertise’: a space in which there is movement between ‘beer-mat’ and ‘primary-source knowledge’.

Collins and Evans argue that interactional expertise is ‘expertise in the *language* of a specialism in the absence of expertise in its *practice*’ (2007: 28). Communities, then, are linguistic, where linguistics are a ‘medium of interchange’ (ibid: 32). Interactional expertise relies upon ubiquitous expertises (Collins & Evans, 2007); for the *PubMethods* community these are of being careful, democratic and thirsty explorers, who attach importance to research methodologies. But becoming expert in the language of a specialism (the unique feature of interactional expertise) is progressive in nature. Interactional expertise is ‘slowly gained with more and more discussion...there is no sudden “aha moment”’; it is a ‘steady acquisition’ (ibid: 32-33). Interactional expertise is developed *from* ubiquitous expertises.

But interactional expertise as such, is not self-sustaining (Collins & Evans 2007); the space in which there is movement between beer-mat and primary-source knowledge can only exist through ‘interaction with[in] communities who have *contributory* expertise in that specialism’ (ibid: 35). Interactional expertise then, relies upon ubiquitous expertises and *requires* contributory expertise. Paradoxically, Collins and Evans argue that interactional expertise can be ‘latent’ (ibid: 36) in those

with contributory expertise – the very community members upon whom successful development of interactive expertise is dependent. They argue that realising interactional expertise requires a reflective disposition –our pub location seems to support this very effectively!

Returning again to my definition, we are careful methodological travellers, thirsty to become distinctly experienced, or practiced, through a genuine understanding that comes through social immersion in a diverse, good-humoured, democratic, reflective, community populated by those both with interactional and contributory expertise. It seems more complex than we might first have thought! It is more complex of course, because knowing is an art, rather than a science; knowing is relational: ‘...in an act of [tacit] knowing we *attend from* something ... *to* something else’ (Polyani, 1966: 10). There is a sense of connection.

In his lecture *A society of explorers*, Polyani uses the term ‘joint meaning’ to denote a relationship between that which is proximal and that which is distal (what we attend *from* and what we attend *to*). Within our *PubMethods* community, and by way only of an example, attending to constructivist grounded theory might be considered proximal to me as a methodological explorer, and distal to another.

Polyani argues that ‘...it is not by looking at things, but by *dwelling in* them, that we understand their joint meaning’ (Polyani, 1966: 18; emphasis added). Dwelling means to inhabit, or occupy. The discursive, diverse, and reflective nature of *PubMethods* uses language as a form of ‘verbal pointing’ (Polyani, 1966: 4) to help us occupy the distal; language is a way of signposting and orienting our travels.

*PubMethods* creates an opportunity to dwell, together, and to understand new joint meanings in a democratic mode where, in any one journey, we are variously interactional and contributory. The fact that we are variously, and variably, distal to each other’s contributory expertise in any *PubMethods* discussion is irrelevant. In Dewey’s words, ‘we all shape knowledge in the way we

know it' (1938: 20); so any dilemma, or interest, shared and discussed in *PubMethods* is explored through the joint (relational) expertises that are present at the point of exploration. In each journey we are differently contributory, interactional, proximal and distal.

This is, in Fielding and Moss' (2011: 79) terms, radical practice, where relationships are 'less bounded and more exploratory' than in the dominant, University, setting. But this is not simply a matter of physical location:

In a society of explorers man [sic] is *in thought*...placed in the midst of potential discoveries. (Polyani, 1966: 83)

*PubMethods* is a community characterised by being *in thought*, *in dialogue*, and *in relation*. This offers us a freedom beyond physical location. It offers us a freedom to develop and share interactional and contributory expertises, to reflect together in the absence of any dominant narrative. We "'re-see" each other as persons rather than as [University] role occupants' (Fielding and Moss, 2011: 79) but we also "re-see" potential discoveries 'not only through the narratives... but also through the leveller of laughter and the eagerness of exploration' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 158).

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6<sup>th</sup> International Value & Virtues Conference, York St John University – July 2016.  
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