

## **TITLE: RESEARCHING THEIR OWN PRACTICE (II)-THE COMPETENCIES REQUIRED BY PRACTITIONER RESEARCHERS**

<sup>1</sup>Annette Fillery-Travis\*; Middlesex University, UK

Emma Tyrrell; The Coaching Centre, Cape Town, RSA

\*corresponding author

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### **ABSTRACT**

Practitioner research has a specific role to play in the development of a profession. It can be argued that it is often at the start of the development of knowledge of an emerging practice. This research, produced by scholar practitioners, is highly 'situated' within the practice environment and at its best is not restricted to the evaluation within practice of existing models and theories but can through critical engagement with others lead to the development of new knowledge. To date, however, there is little literature concerned with the competencies required of practitioner researchers in general. Clearly this does restrict the evidence base for professional development in this area and the provision of resources to support this valuable activity. This study seeks to engage in an initial exploration of these competencies through the consideration of a small case study and the use of grounded theory for data collection and analysis.

The case is a community of executive coaching practitioners brought together to undertake practitioner research as part of the Rainbow Convention, a conference held in Cape Town in May 2011. The community was unusual as all the self selected practitioners were trained in action learning and research methodologies and overseen by research supervisors but were not required to undertake a university course nor complete a research degree. This allowed the competencies required to carry out practitioner research to be considered in isolation from the competencies required for academic study. Through focus groups and interview the participants identified the competencies they considered most useful to the development of their research. The results are compared to the competencies required of professional researchers and the degree of agreement is of interest to those seeking to provide research training for senior practitioners either through research degrees or as part of their professional development.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Annette Fillery-Travis, Director of Programmes (DProf), Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University, London NW4 4BT, t: 02084115689, e: a.fillery-travis@mdx.ac.uk

## **1. Introduction**

There is little in the literature concerning the support of senior practitioners who wish to research their own practice. The scientist –practitioner model of psychology is perhaps closest in function and is itself well referenced but in general the discussion concentrates on the practitioner as an informed and critical user of research rather than a producer of new knowledge.

Within this paper we report upon a small case study, using grounded theory for data collection and analysis, to explore the competencies required by these practitioners as they take their first steps to researching their own practice.

The practitioners are members of an emerging profession namely executive coaching. We argue here that practitioner research has a highly appropriate role to play in the development of a professional body of knowledge within an emerging field. Specifically the maturation of a professional literature will encompass a number of phases all of which are enhanced by the practitioner perspective.

The intention of this research is to inform the creation of a research competency framework for coaches, so that those who wish to conduct practitioner research are adequately informed, supported and prepared for the process. Such a framework would be a valuable contribution to encourage research and the growth of the coaching body of knowledge; a critical factor in the development of coaching as an emerging discipline with its' own knowledge base rather than one that drawing disproportionately upon other disciplines .

The paper starts with an exploration of; coaching as an emerging profession, the potential contribution of scholar practitioners to the developing coaching literature and how the dangers of the academic-practitioner divide are being avoided. It then moves on to consider the competencies identified by the practitioners themselves within the case study.

## **2. Coaching's emerging body of knowledge**

Coaching has been with us for some time –coaching research can be traced back to 1937 when the first study of coaching's impact on manufacturing was published by Gorby . The study, while limited in its methods, signalled the potential of coaching as a development tool within organisations. However the literature quickly became silent on coaching again until the 80's and 90's and the work of writers such as Kilburg , Diedrich , Lowman and others.

In the 1990's coaching research papers became a more common occurrence in the literature with 41 papers and PhD's cited by PsycINFO and Dissertation Abstracts International for the period. The focus of the papers starts to widen, with a recognition of the role of coaching in enhancing feedback , the contribution that coaching can make to both leadership and management . One of the most interesting and rigorous studies during this period was a triangulation and psychometric based study of coaching efficacy . The PhD research found that participants improve by about .85 standard deviations in overall effectiveness as a result of their coaching programs.

In common with other emerging professions there is a distinct perception that coaching practice is out-reaching coaching theory and this is mirrored in the type of studies being undertaken. Specifically the focus on case studies has allowed the identification, and to some extent validation, of what coaching is being used for 'out there'.

If we consider the evolution of other disciplines we can draw lessons from how a body of knowledge evolves. As a new area evolves it passes through several phases prior to maturation. Initially it tends to focus on defining what it is concerned with. This involves a process of exploration and sharing of the phenomena and what is experienced by practitioners. This first exploration phase helps to shape and identify what is understood of the field from experience and what can be considered within the field of enquiry and what cannot.

After the exploration phase, attention shifts to theory, methods and measures. Researchers seek to develop and test new interventions, products or protocols. The initial part of this phase is often marked with case studies and small qualitative research. This gradually shifts towards theory building and random control trial studies with large sample sizes, and finally to Meta analysis. A third phase is characterised by concern with exceptions and variance to the theories. One theme within this is the question: Which groups or issues benefit most from which approach?

Each phase requires different methodologies and instruments. As a result we would expect to see a maturing of the research undertaken in a particular field and a shift from exploration through survey and case studies to theory development using grounded theory and similar qualitative techniques to quantitative studies using random control trails and ultimately to meta-analysis studies.

We can see such a pattern developing in the coaching literature as the research questions have started to change and theory is being developed. But from the start there has been a perception of a deficit in the literature in regard to empirical ‘proof’ or return on investment as perhaps first identified within the seminal review by Kampa Kokesch & Anderson . This highlighted some real limitations in the research methods used in the relatively few studies published at that time. Inadequate sample sizes, poor designs and studies where the claims made were not fully supported by the data were all present in the published literature with a paucity of robustly designed controlled trials on coaching efficacy.

### **3. The contribution of practitioner researchers**

Poor research work and reporting is a waste of everyone’s time and detrimental to the development of good practice but the prevalence of more qualitative and small scale research studies is not problematic in itself and as identified above is to be expected in a developing literature . The process of maturation in a body of knowledge is driven by the gradual revelation of the factors and prerequisites that are acting upon the phenomena in question allowing a move from the identification of issues within the specific context to the expectation of a generalisable result. The symbiotic roles played by practitioners and academics in the evolution of such a literature or body of knowledge is clear but it is of note that the potential benefit of such a dialogue is rarely realised fully even within the applied professions .

In contrast to the academic researcher who sits outside of practice, the practitioner is an ‘insider’ researcher, witness and participant in the full complexity of organisational/practice life . They can be less concerned with generalisability of research results and more interested in their usefulness within a specific context. They may also see conventionally rigorous but disinterested methodologies as irrelevant or unhelpful to them preferring more collaborative or change orientated methodologies. This rigor- relevance dilemma is at the centre of work based learning approaches to inquiry and has been part of the ongoing exploration of practitioner methodologies . It is such considerations that have led to the call for a *relational scholarship of integration* .

As an emerging profession coaching has a less pronounced divide as many coaching academics have a coaching practice of their own. Practitioners are also undertaking the role of knowledge producers or researchers as they seek to share their own reflective practice explored and shared within professional supervision. Thus it can be identified that advanced practitioners are operating at the interface between academia and practice as they seek to develop evidence for their practice and explore its efficacy. This throws them into the realm of the scholar practitioner, scientist practitioner or practitioner researcher as identified within psychology .

‘We suspected that the scholar–practitioner could best be understood as a *continuum of roles*, rather than just one identity where pure scholar and pure practitioner anchor each end of the continuum.’ Wasserman & Kram (2009:15)

So in summary the advanced practitioner has much to offer the developing body of knowledge of an emerging profession. The question remains as to the most appropriate way of supporting such practitioners to enable their outputs to be of use to the profession.

#### **4. Developing the practitioner researcher**

The more established professions have an appropriate respect for the case study carefully prepared and submitted for publication to esteemed journals by practitioners in the field (see for example the author’s notes in *The Lancet*). But practitioner research is not restricted to case study and indeed practitioner involvement in inquiry has fostered the development of change orientated methodologies such as Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry in Education and Nursing to name only two . There are competency frameworks available for academic researchers but the literature is relatively silent on the competencies and skills required of practitioner researchers.

The approach, methodology and instruments used by practitioners are however highly sensitive to the context of the individual’s practice and these constraints provide a specific challenge to research design and execution. At the core of it is the ‘situatedness’ of the practitioner their environment, context and resources that dominate the conduct of the inquiry. In this research we explore the competencies practitioners need to bring this research mode to fruition.

#### **5. Project context and activity**

In 2009 a group of South African coaches undertook to host the Global Coaching Community Convention in Cape Town in 2010-11 ( with an unconventional conference vision:

- marginalised sectors within South African society should benefit from coaching as a result of the Convention,
- practitioner research should enable the achievements of this coaching to be shared with the rest of the coaching community,
- the worldwide body of knowledge of coaching should be expanded as a result.

Bringing such a vision to fruition took over two years and involved significant unpaid effort from a number of coaches and COMENSA members. The Convention design, however, provided an almost unique opportunity to study the development of scholar practitioners undertaking practitioner research for the first time . Their leaning journey, developmental requirements and experience could be explored without the added, and potentially, obscuring influence of fulfilling academic requirements unrelated to the conduct of research.

In late 2009, coaches volunteered to conduct practitioner research projects within their area of interest, in projects teams known as ‘Pods’. The Pods included individual researchers, or groups of

researchers, and each Pod had a 'Pod Leader', the principal researcher. A programme of professional development was organised to train participants in research through workshops held in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. The two day research workshops covered conventional research design, methodology and instruments with specific reference to research ethics. After the workshops those wishing to participate as Pod Leaders created Research Proposals which were reviewed by the Research Advisory Board. Once agreed and identified as ethically sound the projects were started under the supervision of a Research Advisor, who was available to the Pod Leader throughout the process.

## 6. **Research approach and methodology**

A small case study approach was used including a grounded theory approach for data generation and analysis. The case in this instance was a group of practitioners undertaking research into their own practice for the first time supported by appropriate and specific professional development but not studying for a higher degree. The case was instrumental taking an idiographic perspective.

The question to be explored was: what are the competencies identified by practitioners as necessary to undertake research in their own practice?

The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire at the start and end of the process and upon completion of their research they attended a focus group discussion to explore their experience. Within this paper we report of the results of the initial questionnaire and the focus group discussions.

The initial questionnaire asked the participants for their demographical data such as age and dominant professional practice. They were then asked to identify the relative importance of a list of competencies to their work as practitioner researchers. These competencies were a mixture of those identified by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council for the practice of coaching and those required for the completion of an academic Master research degree. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gauge the initial expectations of the coaches of the requirements for research work. The analysis of the questionnaire was by simple descriptive statistics.

Grounded theory in an abbreviated form was chosen for data collection and analysis of the focus groups and interview for two main reasons: first the researchers wished to begin the process by engaging directly with participants' experience and to centre on this exclusively at this particular stage of the research. There was relatively little literature available on this issue and the majority arises from investigating appropriate teaching of research methods to undergraduate and just-qualified professionals, not advanced practitioners in the field. Secondly, the researchers were involved within the Convention support team and wished to distance themselves as much as possible from their own perceptions, particularly in the initial data gathering and analyses phases.

All focus groups and one interview (for a participant who could not attend one of the focus group sessions) was recorded and professionally transcribed. Initial open coding was undertaken by each researcher separately based on the loose interview/focus group structure, i.e. why they joined the programme (motivation), what competencies did they need to undertake the research (process) and what was the outcome for them (impact). The second stages involved a series of reviews of the themes using memo writing and creating links between items and refining the coding system. The third stage involved grouping these codes into conceptual codes. The fourth stage involved checking for appropriateness and consistency with the other author. After comparison and

discussion the final agreed competencies were produced within a framework. Finally, this framework was checked for consistency with the original transcripts as a whole.

### Participants

There were 24 participants at the start of the programme with an average age of 52 years, the youngest being 38 years old and the oldest 71 years. Twelve had been educated to Masters Degree level with dissertation topics ranging from Chemistry, Economics, Industrial Psychology and 2 in coaching. Of the remainder two had no higher education degrees whilst the rest had completed an undergraduate degree. All identified that they had conducted research from a professional basis (evaluation of training, ROI etc) within their practice. All regularly conducted assessments within their practice but the list was diverse with no overall favorite. All but four of the coaches regularly consulted coaching journals. The participants contributing to the focus groups reported here displayed a very similar profile.

### Ethical Stance

The research was conducted under the research ethical framework of COMENSA and Middlesex University informed by EMCC ethics and professional standards. Informed consent was sought and received from all the Pod Leaders.

## **7. Validity of the approach**

The qualitative data provided from the questionnaire was a useful snap shot of the expectations of this particular group of coaches but should not be taken as indicative of the expectation of other professional groups nor for coaches from differing cultures that would have experienced other education systems and professional training programmes.

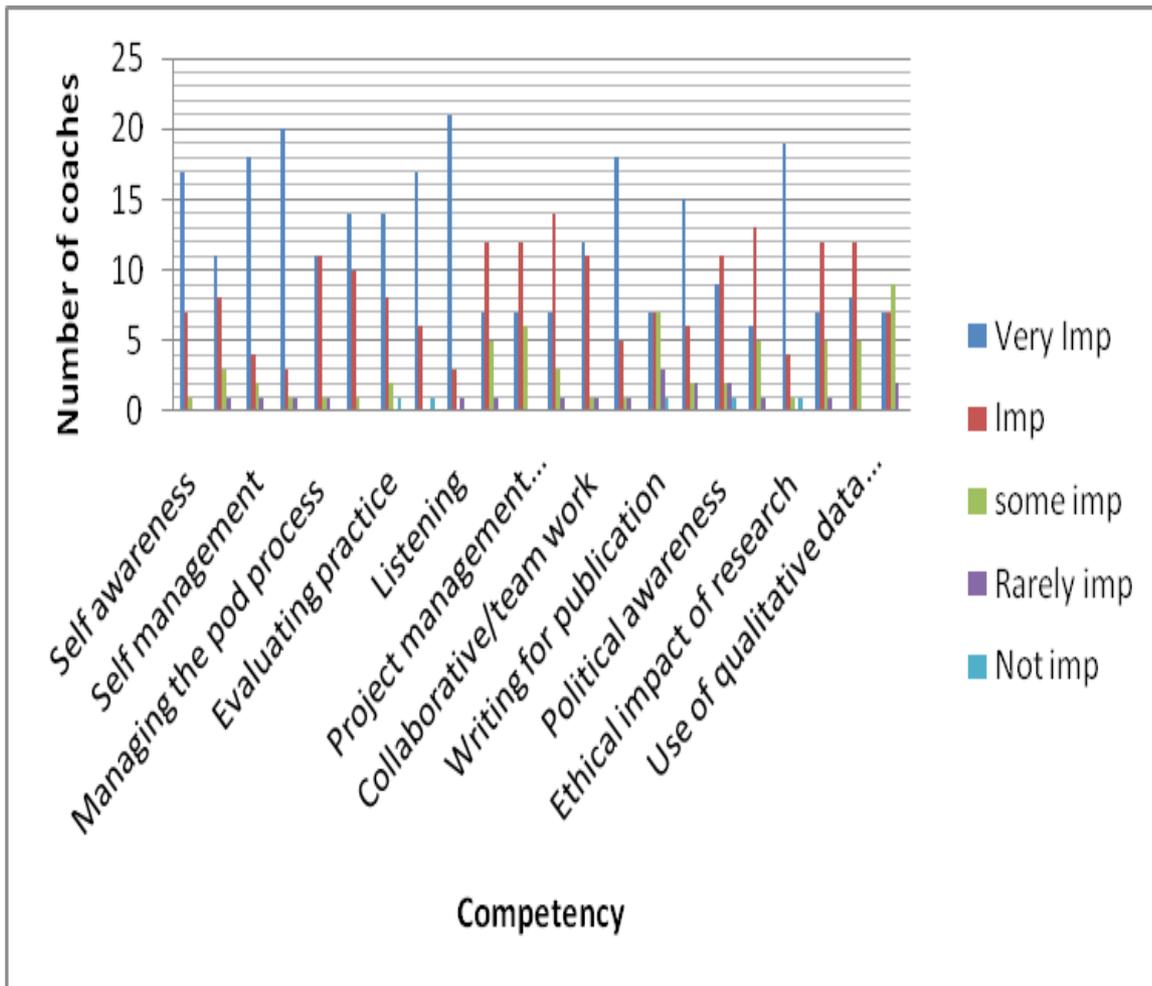
Using a qualitative approach such as this for the focus groups and interview placed the emphasis on richness of information from the participants within this particular case. We suggest this research meets the eight 'Big-Tent' criteria for qualitative research and specifically that it has a meaningful coherence between what it seeks to explore and the methods undertaken to achieve its aims. No claim is made as to the generalisability of the results as there are specific environmental and contextual factors at play. For example the sample is self selected from a specific community of South African coaches active within their professional body. This identifies them not as exemplars of the coaching community as a whole but of one sector of that community i.e. scholar-practitioners committed to the development of new knowledge from their practice .

Similarly they formed a community that was provided with appropriate research supervision support and this may have contributed significantly to the development of self-efficacy around research and masked other developmental requirements that a solo practitioner may need. The value of this work comes from the insight it gives to the development needs of the scholar practitioner; a role to which a number of senior practitioners aspire and as a first study into the needs of coaching scholar practitioners specifically.

To contribute to the safeguarding of the authenticity and trustworthiness of the results a criterion for appropriateness of a coding category was the presence of at least one significant statement from each of the focus groups and the interview. Thus a degree of multivocality was achieved even within such as small sample (two focus groups and one interview). In reality this was not an issue as the commonality of the categories across each of the data sets was marked and identified a degree of data saturation. Only in one/two instance did a category only contain statements from two of the three data sets and this one 'collaboration/communication' was therefore included within 'stakeholder engagement'.

## 8. Findings

The demographic data has already been reported above. In the graph below the rankings of the competencies are given in terms of number of coaches who identify the competency as Very imp=Very important, Imp=Important, Some Imp= of some importance, Rarely Imp=rarely important or Not Imp=of no importance. The graph is somewhat dense but does illustrate that the majority of participants have identified every competency as being either very important or important. This lack of differentiation in the response was, we believe, indicative of the lack of experience of research in the group and an expectation of significant complexity in the activity.



The focus groups and interview generated four hours of verbatim transcripts and 123 statements concerning competencies required for practitioner research. Through the analysis process identified above these statements were clustered into four themes. Table 1 shows the themes and the resulting competencies generated.

Theme	Competencies	Example significant statement
Achieving Impact	Obtaining commercial value	<i>'It can certainly strengthen your value proposition in the market'</i>
	Dissemination	<i>'My advantage to tell everyone out there that this is the research I am doing'</i>

	Using within practice	<i>'Research improves practice...it is a reflective practice'</i>
	Contributing to profession	<i>'It's a contribution you're making as a coach, to the bigger body of coaching'</i>
Research Knowledge	Designing coherent research	<i>'I think a good working knowledge of research methodology and I would encourage coaches to get to know grounded theory'</i>
	Skills – listening and observing	<i>'I think one of the competencies of a good coach is to be a real, thorough observer and as a researcher it's even more so'</i>
	Maintaining Credibility	<i>'The rigor in keeping records, in keeping them organized and updated and having those regular reflections'</i>
	Adhering to Process Discipline	<i>'The discipline of research has improved practice virtually with every,(sic) without fail, in every instance'</i>
Self Management	Self- awareness	<i>'One needed to be able to, you know, sail through uncharted waters'</i>
	Leadership	<i>'Strong leadership skills would have been more useful'</i>
Project Management	Process management	<i>'The value of planning what you're looking for before you do it'</i>
	Stakeholder engagement	<i>'It just quite difficult if you're working with external stakeholders and people that are quite professional in what they are doing to meet their expectations'</i>
	Maintaining practice focus	<i>'There's only so many hours in the day so it has to naturally fit in (to practice)'</i>

## 9. Discussion

This study has sought to derive from the data a set of implications that can usefully inform the work of professional associations, those educating senior practitioners in research methods for use within practice and senior practitioners aspiring to the role of scholar practitioner. The findings above provide a descriptive account of the experience of a group of practitioners researching their practice for the first time. In the spirit of grounded theory only after these had been collected was the literature in the area consulted to facilitate some conceptualization of the findings.

The UK organization Vitae (an organization sponsored by the research councils to champion the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes) has undertaken a wide ranging review of the

attributes, skills and competencies required of professional researchers (Vitae 2010). Their review of the literature relating to competency frameworks for professional researchers has led to the development of the competency framework summarised in table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of Competency Framework from Vitae (2010)**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Competencies</b>
Knowledge and intellectual abilities	Knowledge Base Cognitive abilities Creativity
Personal effectiveness	Personal qualities Self management Professional and career development
Research governance and organization	Professional conduct Research management Finance, funding and resources
Engagement, influence and impact	Engagement and impact Communication and dissemination Working with others

The first point of note in comparing the competencies listed in table 1 and table 2 is the strong overlap between the main themes/domains identified within each table although the titles given to them differ slightly; ‘personal effectiveness’ in the practitioner list is identified as ‘self management and research governance’ in the professional researcher list and again ‘organisation’ with ‘project management’. We suggest this reflects the difference in community vocabulary rather than a difference in content and meaning between the two. The similarity between the two lists identifies practitioner research as requiring a similar breadth of competency to professional research although clearly depth may differ (though not necessarily).

The differences between the two tables emerge at the level of the competencies required within each theme/domain. The professional research community is concerned with research funding and resources to enable their research to be carried out and this is reflected within the competencies of the research organization theme. Within the practitioner community the corresponding concern within the project management theme is identified as the need to keep the research focused on practice as this enables the professional resources of the practitioner researcher (time, authorities etc) to be brought to bear on the research. Similarly the professional researchers placed ‘working with others’ as part of the engagement, influence and impact theme whereas the practitioner community placed it within the project management theme as ‘stakeholder engagement’ perhaps indicating the ‘insider’ nature of the research undertaken by them as opposed to the more ‘outsider’ stance of the professional researcher

The competencies which didn't appear within the practitioner categories were ethics, creativity and professional conduct. This highlights the difference in maturity of the researchers within each of the communities. The Vita framework is aimed at the training of researchers within an apprenticeship model where the researcher does not necessarily have a separate professional practice/identity nor have worked within an organization in anything other than a research role. The competencies identified here for practitioners arise from advanced practitioners seeking to add research into their already established professional competencies. Professional conduct, ethics and creativity are established elements of professional practice and therefore may not have warranted explicit identification in relation to research.

The strong identification by practitioners with their professional community was seen through the inclusion of the category 'contributing to the profession' within in the 'impact' theme. This was in addition to 'dissemination' expertise – a competency that was shared with the professional researchers. Other differences were more superficial in nature for instance the theme research knowledge was broken down by the practitioners into several categories, all of which are included within the research management domain of the professional researchers.

## **10. Conclusion**

In summary the practitioner researchers identified a very similar range of competencies to those needed by professional researchers to conduct their inquiries. The 'situatedness' of the practitioner's research within their own practice however, provided some very real and distinct challenges.

These were:

- a difference in what enabled the research (resources vs. authorities); professional researchers identified external funding was a key enabler whereas for practitioner researchers the need to align their research fully within their practice was pivotal if they were going to have the resources to pursue it;
- the 'insider' position of the researcher requires specific consideration of such factors as stakeholder engagement throughout the research to allow it to occur within practice; and finally
- the explicit sharing of the research back to the profession was a key output required by practitioners themselves.

There is also the acknowledgement that the practitioner researchers were not 'novice' within practice merely within research and hence they brought significant competency in creative, professional and ethical practice to their research.

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