

EXPLORING PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER IDENTITY: A PERSONAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY THROUGH POETRY, METAPHOR AND KNOWING

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ABSTRACT:

The [*Once Upon a Narrative*](#) professional practice fellowship employed qualitative longitudinal research to explore academic librarians' lived experiences of practitioner-research. The project adopted narrative inquiry and repeated in-depth interviews to discover participants' research journeys. Poetic inquiry was used to re-present participants' stories, as it conveyed the emotionality of their experiences, and facilitated collective reflection on broader sectoral issues (Faulkner, 2009). This chapter presents a personal narrative inquiry of my professional practice fellowship. It explores my storied experience as a novice insider researcher and seeks to answer the question: What are the key factors influencing the development of my identity as a Library and Information Studies (LIS) practitioner-researcher?

Personal narrative inquiries are autobiographical and employ an individualised approach. Personal data collection included a reflective account of my prior learning experiences, social media posts, poetic stanzas and metaphors from my research journal, a workshop transcript, and reflective conversations. Data analysis was an iterative process guided by a synthesised framework, occurring concurrently with the crafting of poems.

Five narrative poems, accompanied by contextual notes, reveal the factors shaping the layers of my identity as a practitioner-researcher. A creative approach to data representation facilitated a deeply individualised approach to knowing. Through writing poetry, using metaphor and reflexivity, I made sense of the complex emotions arising from my insider research and my boundary-crossing role as a practitioner and researcher. Personal narrative inquiries enable researchers to share their own storied experiences, poetic approaches can embody their emotions and facilitate collective insights from their lived experience.

KEYWORDS:

1. Personal narrative inquiry
2. Practitioner research
3. Academic librarians
4. Insider research
5. Poetic inquiry
6. Creative methods
7. Reflexivity
8. Identity

Introduction

Practitioner research involves the investigation or exploration of workplace practices, services and systems by individuals working within a professional field (Heikkinen et al., 2016). Two distinct forms of practitioner research are identified in the literature: academic-practitioner partnership and practitioner-led (Heikkinen et al., 2016; Shaw & Lunt, 2017). Practitioner-led research is conducted by practitioners and is driven by knowledge of local contexts; it can develop, evaluate and improve practices, solve problems and challenge power imbalances (Curwood, 2014; Mizrachi, 2019; Shaw & Lunt, 2017). In Library and Information Studies (LIS) practitioner-led research is centred upon professional practice and creating new insights and knowledge about that practice (Cundy, 2006; Fullington et al., 2020).

The gap between academic research and library practice has been well-established in the literature (Haddow, 2011; Haddow & Klobas, 2004; Hall et al., 2019; Matusiak et al., 2024; Nguyen & Hider, 2018). Practitioners face numerous barriers to undertaking research: lack of time, lack of funding, an academic-practitioner divide, structural or institutional divisions, staffing shortages, lack of motivation, lack of skills and knowledge, lack of reward and recognition (Clapton, 2010; Dishman & CILIP LIRG, 2024; Evidence Base, 2021; Nguyen & Hider, 2018). Despite this, in a recent UK survey, 63% of LIS practitioners reported that they would be interested in taking part in research in the future (Dishman & CILIP LIRG, 2024). In the UK, pathways to catalyse practitioner-led research have been recently established to narrow the research-practice gap and enable practitioners to move from supportive roles to become research partners and leaders (RLUK-AHRC, 2021a, 2021b). These pathways (a Research Enhancement Programme and grant funding for Professional Practice Fellowships) present a valuable transformation of the sector.

Once Upon a Narrative was a qualitative longitudinal research project in which I explored four academic librarians' experiences of practitioner-research. In my Professional Practice Fellowship, I defined LIS practitioner-researchers as individuals working in a library setting conducting a piece of research about their collections, their services, their users or their wider professional context. Using a narrative inquiry approach, participants' research journeys were discovered through repeated in-depth interviews. The findings from that project have been published elsewhere (Scott, 2026). This chapter presents a personal narrative inquiry which explores my storied experience as an insider, novice practitioner-researcher and my use of poetry and metaphor to make meaning. In the next section, I discuss the literature around professional identity, researcher identity and insider research in the context of LIS practitioner-research.

Literature review

Professional identity in LIS

Educational theorist Etienne Wenger considered learning a process of social participation whereby individuals construct their identity through the practices of social communities (1999). Our sense of self, our internal thoughts and our feelings are shaped by our participation in multiple social groups and the ideas, norms and values which belong to those groups (Wenger, 1999). Identity, according to Wenger (1999), is:

- negotiated through the layering of social experiences;
- constructed through membership of a community and competence in its practices;
- a trajectory of learning which is ongoing and situated temporally;

- shaped by membership of multiple communities and across the boundaries of those communities;
- the interplay between local-global practices and contexts.

For LIS practitioners then, professional identity is continuously constructed through their roles within their organisation, their engagement in professional associations, through their wider professional networks and through their online communities. In these socially rich settings, knowledge and experiences of the practice landscape are shared with community members.

The LIS profession is perceived to be in a period of transition due to the rapid pace of change in the digital environment; professional identities continuously evolve in response (Fraser-Arnott, 2019a). In their review of librarian professional identity development, Pierson et al. (2019) identified that librarians' experience multiple identities due to the different aspects of their practice (e.g. teaching, collection management, promotion) and that these identities existed on a continuum and developed over time (Pierson et al., 2019). In recent research with 40 public librarians in Aotearoa New Zealand, Pierson (2024) found that LIS professional identity was a dynamic and complex process of negotiation. As LIS practitioners navigate new contexts, they may experience a layering of identities which can contradict their established perspectives and result in feelings of tension and dissonance.

Professional identity is situated within a landscape of practice which involves boundaries related to discipline and competence (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Campbell-Meier and Hussey (2019) examined LIS professional status through the three lenses of Becoming, Doing and Relating. They surveyed over 700 LIS students and practitioners; 'Becoming' a member of the LIS community was perceived to be a process of socialisation through formal education and then securing an appropriate LIS role within the field. Thus, knowledge of the discipline and competence are developed firstly through higher education. 'Doing' involved responsibilities for organising information and facilitating access. 'Relating' was a process of collaboration and engagement with users. The 'Doing' and 'Relating' domains were interrelated with LIS practitioners commonly adopting the role of facilitator and cultivating users' skill development in the information landscape. This suggests that competence is demonstrated through information-related activities as well as through interaction with users. However, the focus on information organisation and user engagement in LIS practitioner definitions of professional status rather than evidence-based, research-informed or data-driven approaches could suggest that these types of activity are at the boundary of the landscape of practice. This view is supported by evidence suggesting that LIS practitioners perceive academic research to lack relevance to their practice (Haddow & Klobas, 2004; Jamali, 2018).

As outlined in the introduction, lack of research skills and expertise are perceived barriers to LIS practitioners conducting research (Clapton, 2010; Evidence Base, 2021; Nguyen & Hider, 2018). This suggests that becoming an LIS practitioner-researcher requires individuals to cross the boundary between professional competence and research competence. The embodied knowledge of their landscape of practice may enable practitioners to develop meaningful research questions. However, some LIS practitioners may encounter resistance or a lack of understanding from managers regarding the value of undertaking research (Simon, 2022). The unfamiliar research landscape may result in an uncomfortable and alienating experience as practitioners may need to develop new competencies, specialist terminology, values and perspectives. The successful crossing of

boundaries requires an understanding of the value of practice to each context (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Practitioner-researchers must be able to imagine the practical applications of their research and envision its potential impact on their professional work. They must leverage their existing competence in information literacy and digital literacy and transfer this competence to new contexts while also actively pursuing the development of new skills and knowledge. Wenger (1999) argues that imagination is a core aspect of identity development enabling individuals to see themselves in new ways. It is the intersection between boundaries which offers the potential for innovation, insights and learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Thus, a successful crossing of boundaries for LIS practitioner-researcher may lead to synergies between research and practice.

Fraser-Arnott (2019b) explored the identity formation of 20 LIS professionals working outside of libraries and subsequently developed the theory of Personalizing Professionalism. Fraser-Arnott (2019b) argued that LIS professionals who follow alternative career paths developed their identities through an internal appraisal of self and an externally expressed identity. It was a process of personal reflection, clear goal setting and an ability to think abstractly about their skillset, and then communicate it effectively to others, which enabled them to pursue a trajectory outside of libraries. The transition into adjacent fields is not without challenges. For example, workplace friction can arise between individuals when activities span-boundaries due to conflicting ideas about what constitutes practice within a profession (Fraser-Arnott, 2019a). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2014) argue that the boundaries between communities of practice are 'not necessarily peaceful or collaborative'. Thus, the process of identity construction involved in the crossing of boundaries is highly emotional (Fenton O'Creevy et al., 2014). It can be anticipated then that LIS practitioners who span the boundary between research and practice may experience tension arising from their dual roles and potentially experience conflicting values and perspectives from membership of these different communities.

Researcher identity

Castelló et al. (2021) present an overview of perspectives on researcher identity; they grouped commonalities among different empirical meta-theoretical frameworks into four clusters:

- Researchers transition between socially constructed multiple identities
- Researcher identity is singular, dynamic and socially constructed
- Researcher identity developed over time was individually driven by action
- Researcher identity is unique and stable

These differing theoretical perspectives indicate the complexity in defining researcher identity. Chen and Liu (2022, p. 46) assert, in their autobiographical narrative inquiry, that "identity is more of a perspective than a fixed concept" and is developed through a process of self-searching and self-affirming interaction within rich cultural surroundings. This suggests that librarian-researcher identity is something which is actively pursued and enriched through engagement with, critical reflection on research evidence and professional practice. Doucette and Hoffman's (2019) study of librarians and archivists' conceptions of research found that it was multifaceted: it was considered a shared experience, which facilitated professional growth, and was influenced by personal and workplace experiences. Yet participants did not consider research conducted by librarians to be "real" research. The notion that practitioner-led research lacks legitimacy may suggest that librarians' researcher identities are underdeveloped or influenced by a wider academic narrative which position librarians as support staff.

Using metaphor, Kram et al. (2012) explored scholar-practitioners' perceptions of their roles in academia and industry contexts; they found different conceptualisations between research and practice. Metaphors for the role of the scholar indicated that it was associated with knowledge production, a slowing of time and a focus on deep, narrow thinking. Whereas the practitioner role was associated with a forward motion, rapid pace and the usability of findings. The dual role of the scholar-practitioner was described as a *Connector* and *Translator* with metaphors focused on connecting abstract concepts to real world issues and bridging the divide between the two different worlds. The scholar-practitioner role was also conceptualised as cyclical with each role being mutually beneficial and informing, inspiring and building on the other. The work of the scholar-practitioner demonstrated the synergy between the two roles and provided opportunities for wider impact in their profession. However, in institutions where this role was less valued or understood identity struggles ensued (Kram et al., 2012). Some early career researchers encountered internal conflict and confusion when balancing their dual role, and this appeared to be influenced by institutional culture and expectations (Kram et al., 2012). A recent Higher Education Policy Institute Report found that university systems lack readiness for third space professionals' involvement in research and that this potentially undermined the ability to translate academic research into societal benefit (Grant & Kennie, 2024). Thus, LIS novice practitioner-researchers may struggle to develop their researcher identity if they are excluded from institutional processes and systems of support for researchers. Further, this could position LIS practitioner-researchers as outsiders in the research community, situating them on the periphery and limiting their opportunities in the research landscape.

Insider research

A researcher can be considered an "insider researcher" if they are a member of the group or organisation under study (Greene, 2014). The advantages of being an insider researcher are:

- Knowledge and understanding of the group and its culture (Chavez, 2008)
- Ready access to the group and ease of building rapport (Chavez, 2008)
- Emotional connection with participants (Ross, 2017)

The role of an insider researcher is rarely "problem-free" (Collins & McNulty, 2020). The risks associated with insider research are:

- High levels of impression management may be required by the researcher (Chavez, 2008)
- Researcher bias (Greene, 2014)
- Assuming shared understanding may limit follow up (Bulk & Collins, 2024)
- Emotional work and emotional labour (Bulk & Collins, 2024)

Collins and McNulty (2020) argue that the identity of an insider researcher should be understood as tentative and dynamic. As Chavez (2008) explains, the position of insider is fluid and complex as individual or subgroup differences may lead participants to move the researcher to an outsider position at different points in the study. A researcher may share identities with participants based on personal characteristics, for example, ethnicity, caring responsibilities, disability. However, as the research unfolds, new differing characteristics may become apparent (such as variations in workplace contexts, socioeconomic background) and these may alter the dynamic between the researcher and participants. Bulk and Collins (2024) argue that it is not shared characteristics that impact insider research rather it is multiple subjectivities of connection and thus ongoing reflexivity is essential.

In longitudinal research, it is anticipated that a researcher's identity may be transformed by the experience as their relationship with participants may strengthen or weaken over time (Collins & McNulty, 2020). Therefore, it is likely that insider researchers will experience complex emotions arising from their relationship with their participants and their shifting identities. Banks' (1998) cross-cultural typology of insider / outsider researchers focuses on ethnicity and race but is applicable to other status groups. In the context of LIS research, I consider myself an "indigenous-insider" (Banks, 1998):

- I broadly share the values and perspectives of the professional community.
- I am considered a legitimate member of the group.
- I have been socialised into the culture of the profession.

Chammas (2020) recommends that researchers identify their insider position in relation to the subject, their participants and their research context. At the outset of the research, I identified my position as an academic librarian in a UK university, sharing my participants' experiences as novice researchers. My personal characteristics and interests were also shared identities with some participants: mid-career librarian, identifying as female, low socio-economic childhood background, interest in creative and feminist research methods. However, some characteristics differed: I have undertaken professional roles in multiple library settings (schools, health and then universities), my undergraduate degree was in English with Sociology and thus, I approached my research from a social science perspective.

The literature review has identified several interrelated considerations for LIS practitioner-researcher identity development. Firstly, tension can arise between the roles of practitioner and researcher from crossing boundaries in discipline and competence. Secondly, it is likely to be an emotion-laden experience which may be intensified by researching as an insider, a position on the periphery of the research community and limited institutional support. Thirdly, to harness the potential synergies between research and practice, novice practitioner-researchers will need to actively pursue their research identity, engage in reflexivity and develop a supportive network. In the next section, I outline the method used in this personal narrative inquiry to explore my developing practitioner-researcher identity.

Methods

Personal narrative inquiry

Narrative researchers are interested in "how people narrate their own versions of reality" (Taylor et al., 2015). Central to narrative inquiry is the understanding that experience is personal, relational, continuous and social (Clandinin, 2013); but most importantly, experience is viewed as a storied phenomenon (Caine et al., 2019). In the *Once Upon a Narrative* project, I anticipated that the flow between research and practice and interconnectedness of experience would shape the stories of LIS practitioner-researchers. Further, that the stories that academic librarians told about themselves, about their research ideas and their journey to become a practice-led researcher would be continually shaping and constructing their understanding of the world. Richardson's (1990) seminal paper on sociological narratives explains how individuals' stories are subject to wider socio-cultural-political narratives, demonstrating that these larger narratives frame and influence our experiences and maintain existing power structures. It is important to recognise that our stories do not unfold in isolation but rather in a particular time and place.

Research question

The central research question of this personal narrative inquiry is: What are the key factors influencing the development of my identity as an LIS practitioner-researcher?

Data collection

Personal narrative inquiries typically employ an individualised approach to explore lived experience. Chen and Liu (2022) sourced their lived experience field texts from their picture book reviews, personal journals and social media posts for their autobiographical narrative inquiry into transcultural and transnational identity. Whereas Dubnewick et al. (2013) utilised a more embodied-sensory approach with the lead author documenting his experiences of community gardening in hand-written notes, then later expanding these into narratives. Yung (2019) employed a multifaceted approach to recall his experiences of private tutoring in Hong Kong, including in-depth interviews with his parents, analysis of childhood learning materials, and recordings of his own teaching lessons and materials.

Clandinin (2013) suggests narrative inquirers ask themselves at the outset of the project: Who are you in this narrative inquiry? This first stage of reflexivity allowed me to identify my insider research position. I wrote a 4000-word personal narrative prior to commencing the study, documenting memorable learning experiences in my storied world. A memory box was used to prompt recollections. This process of reflection allows the researcher to understand that they too are under study (Clandinin, 2013).

Other personal data sources included:

- Social media posts where I had used the #LISresearch and #NarrativeInquiry tags
- Reflective stanzas I wrote in my research journal to process my emotions and storied experiences
- A transcript of a workshop I delivered on narrative inquiry for a group of peers
- Sections of transcripts from interviews with participants where I was processing my “poetic turn”
- Emails to my mentor where I documented my progress
- Reflective conversations with my mentor about my emotions and experiences

Data analysis

Using the synthesised framework developed in the Once Upon a Narrative project, for analysing participants’ narratives (Scott, 2026), I focused on identifying the stories told within my own narrative data. Stories can be identified by their temporal structure; they have a beginning, middle and end (Polkinghorne, 1995). I close read the data multiple times and identified uses of emotive language, emphasis, questions and moments of significance. I examined the data for narrative threads which are evident in recurring stories over time. It was an iterative process which was interwoven with the drafting and revising of the poems.

Poetic re-presentation of stories

Storied poems are one method of re-representing personal narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Poetry is considered ‘a way of knowing and being and becoming’ (Leggo, 2005). Poetic knowledge is rooted in an emotional-sensory experience of the world which allows the individual to know from the ‘inside out’ (Taylor, 1998). According to van Rooyen and Pithouse-Morgan (2024), through the rhythmic use of language, imagery and symbolism poetry can communicate people’s experiences of the world beyond what is possible in traditional academic research publications. Poetic inquiry seeks to create a narrative connection between the reader, the researcher and the participant, convey emotion and evoke experience (Faulkner, 2009).

Arts-based approaches move beyond the “linear rationality of conventional methods” and allow the researcher to explore the “intersections between thinking, doing and writing” (Vanderwalt, 2024, p. 229). This was a creative, messy process which facilitated a reflective conversation (Eisner, 2002). Writing poems to reflect my own narrative journey was an opportunity to explore different poetic forms and poetic techniques (repetition, syntactic parallelism, anaphora) whilst ensuring that each narrative thread was preserved (Chisholm & Bowers, 2012). The process of undertaking academic research is emotion-laden and poetry can capture the messiness of researchers’ lives (Owton, 2017).

Metaphor

I engaged my imagination to explore metaphor and imagery as well as play with intertextuality in the writing of the poems. Imagination allows us to see our mental recollections afresh and the engage in a process of creative transformation (Eisner, 2002). Metaphor can be defined as a “figurative expression, in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings” (Martin, 2012). Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) seminal work demonstrated that metaphor is not simply a poetic, linguistic device but rather a conceptual system which is fundamental to the way we think, act and experience the world. The reading of poetic metaphors is an emotional, sensory experience which according to Gibbs (2008, p. 217) involves a bodily reaction – that is the feeling of being ‘moved’. The interpretation of metaphors can provide insight into human thought both conscious and unconscious (Gibbs, 2017). The poetic qualities of metaphor and other figurative devices empower researchers “to pay attention to themselves and their world(s)”; by doing so, “not only is the knowledge changed, but so is the person who knows” (van Rooyen & Pithouse-Morgan, 2024, p. 258). In her autoethnographic narrative, James (2018) explains that metaphor enabled her to access her own inner world and make sense of her research experiences. In their discussion of poetry as a way to explore lived experience in applied theatre, Fitzpatrick and Mullen (2019, p. 92) suggest that the use of *dark metaphors* “are a powerful way to draw attention to negative experiences and problematic aspects of practice”. Thus, metaphor can be both a useful tool for researcher reflexivity as well as a poetic device to communicate complex emotions that arise from harmful or challenging experiences in professional practice.

Findings

In the following five poems, accompanied by contextual notes, I invite readers to connect with my lived experience of undertaking a personal narrative study of LIS practitioner research. These poems are presented in answer to the research question: What are the key factors influencing the development of my identity as a practitioner researcher?

Figure 1

Illustration of the spine poem You Are Here.

You are here

You are here
Narrative inquiry
Beginnings, middles & ends
Plot & structure
The search
A single thread
Inside out

Situated learning

The poetic form in **You are here** embodies the synergy between my research and practice. The first factor influencing my developing perspective as a practitioner-researcher was my narrative inquiry method. A narrative thread woven through my journey is that stories influence our sense-making. My storied experience is brimming with examples of how my practice and my research were mutually beneficial. My narrative data included stories where I positioned myself as researcher. For example, I tested an AI tool with authentic questions arising whilst writing up my findings. I was able to communicate the value of a browser extension and new creative software to researchers using examples from my own research journey.

Wenger (1999) argues that successful crossing of boundaries requires individuals to play, explore and make unexpected connections. This process of discovery was evident in my decision to use poetry to re-present practitioners' stories. As I moved through the academic landscape and explored the use of poetry in qualitative research, I became aware of spine poetry. I made the connection to an earlier workplace journal club session about low-risk academic library programming to increase student engagement (Eshbach, 2020). I then led the development of a spine poem competition for students and staff at my institution. At the intersection between research and practice, I felt inspired to create a spine poem centred on my developing narrative inquiry knowledge. This added to the layering of my identity as a researcher who enjoys innovative and creative approaches.

Mass stranding

I dream of orcas
Throng, thrash
Their bodies amassed
At the strandline.

I dream of orcas
Crushed, seared
Their bodies burned
Under the halo.

I dream of orcas,
Panic churning
Like the tide
Sudden understanding
This is what it means to be
Inside.

I grieve
I wail
I watch
I witness
A mass stranding.

I realise I cannot carry
The weight of water.

Mass stranding explores the second factor influencing my identity development as a practitioner-researcher: my position as an insider. This poem was inspired by multiple stories of experience which coalesced part-way through my project. In my practitioner world, colleagues and friends were experiencing professional inertia. Limited opportunities for progression, low salaries and staffing shortages were impacting their wellbeing. At the same time, the research interviews were revealing stories of toxic workplace cultures, an academic-practitioner tension and lack of employer support for research. I began to perceive mid-career librarianship as a suffocating environment. I experienced complex emotions, caring deeply for my colleagues, friends and participants and a feeling a weight of responsibility to influence change in the sector. My emotion surfaced through my dreams, and I dreamt about failing to save a pod of beached orcas. I realised my unconscious mind was communicating my feelings about this identity struggle. I entered a reflective dialogue with my mentor to discuss these intersecting stories and emotions. I wrote Mass Stranding to make visible this emotional struggle as an insider using the metaphor of librarians experiencing mid-career inertia as a pod of stranded whales. Through writing this poem, I evoke my feelings of responsibility and care.

Mythic Journey

You ride in an arc
Alongside Artemis
While the dusk-born stars align

You swoop over the canopy
Alongside Athena
While the boughs swell their golden fruit

You plunge into the depths
Alongside Persephone
While the abyss carves a new fissure

You step into the labyrinth
Alongside Ariadne
While the silken thread guides ahead

You gaze into the lake
Alone in this place
Find some truth of what remains

Mythic journey portrays my transformative learning through the lifecycle of the research. Using imagery and syntactic parallelism, I play with my earlier experiences as an avid reader of Greek myth. The poem represents Ettarh's (2018) concept of the vocational awe. The sense of wonder and glory that surrounds practitioner research within the LIS profession - a feeling that I shared at the beginning of the project. Research funding is highly competitive and requires the LIS practitioner to overcome numerous institutional barriers. I felt this created an other-worldly, almost divine feeling surrounding it. As the continuous motion of my experience unfolded alongside my participants, research manifested not as something biblical or divine but rather one rooted in the everyday practice of work. I began to think differently and recognised the burden placed upon LIS staff to deliver research in addition to

their practice often without time or support. Practitioner-research can be a professionally enriching experience when appropriate support is in place. The newly established Professional Practice Fellowships which enabled this project are evidence that academic libraries, universities and partner organisations can work together to provide funding and support for practitioner-research (RLUK-AHRC, 2021a).

You call me sunshine

You call me sunshine
On this Friday afternoon
I call you wisdom

You call me sunshine uses the haiku format to depict a single moment in time (Poetry Foundation, 2024). It represents the emotionally rich mentoring relationship which was woven throughout my Professional Practice Fellowship. My mentor was a key character within my storied landscape. She nurtured and challenged me to pursue my own creative path through my project. Early in my research journey, she was a gatekeeper and enabler contributing to my application for research funding. As the project progressed, our relationship grew around shared values of equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education. I did not feel the relationship was pupil/ teacher or supervisor/supervisee. This more equal balance of power gave space for open, honest discussion of my ethical dilemmas, my uncertainty about my career progression and my complex emotions resulting from my insider position. We often used metaphor, imagery and story to unravel the ebb and flow of qualitative research. Through this positive relationship, I progressed my sense-making and strengthened my self-identity as a creative, narrative researcher.

Uncertainty confidence

Let's do this thing!	But how to start?
Write story-poems!	But how exactly?
Be messy!	Ok, that I can do.
Be creative!	Ok, yeah that too.
Reach a new milestone!	Find the flow.
Productivity has gone up!	Where did it go?
Share this learning!	But how exactly?
Select the poems!	But the word limit?
Push the boundaries!	How about peer review?
Bring it on!	Ok let's see what they do.

The final poem presented in my personal narrative is **Uncertainty confidence**. The form was inspired by what Fitzpatrick (2017) named as a shadowy poem. I wanted to convey the duality of my experience. The tension between undertaking a narrative data analysis as a novice, wanting to develop my skills and enjoy creative activity, whilst also meeting disciplinary expectations. The high level of exclamation, surprise and excitement expressed in my social media data indicated the thrill of learning something new. Conversely, the frequent questioning of my approach (evidenced by excessive use of question marks and doubtful language) suggests my uncertainty. Within my landscape of experience, earlier stories around being “too descriptive” and dissertation advice on focusing on LIS rather than education literature foregrounded this uncertainty. Several factors influenced my progression through these fears. Firstly, research funding enabled me to develop my analysis and creative outputs without having the pressure of formal assessment. Secondly, the process of

analysing my own narrative data heightened my reflexivity. I was able to draw on my practitioner identity where I frequently encounter doctoral researchers seeking reassurance for their chosen methodological approaches. As a witness to other researchers' uncertainty, I was able to use this insight to move forward. Finally, the pleasure that is experienced through creativity was a key driver in exploring a different way of knowing and researching that fits my dual disciplinary background in English and Sociology. Wenger (1999, p. 161) states that when we weave together multiple trajectories of learning, we experience identity as "a deeply personal dimension of individuality". Thus, in bringing together two different knowledge domains, I felt I was becoming more myself and finding my authentic voice as a researcher.

Discussion

The five narrative poems presented in the Findings reveal my lived experience as a practitioner-researcher and the different factors influencing my identity development. Ford (2020) argues that through contextualising individual stories, narrative inquiry can provide an opportunity for collective reflection. My personal narrative presents one practitioner-researcher's experience of spanning the boundaries between LIS professional practice and LIS research and the incremental transformation as a result. This Discussion will now explore the Findings in relation to wider institutional and sectoral barriers for practitioner-research.

The synergistic relationship between research and practice were evident in **You are here**. As Kram et al. (2012) found, a practitioner-researcher's negotiation of identity across two communities of practice can create a virtuous circle between research and practice which leads to innovation and creativity. This can offer an opportunity for professional growth and more meaningful LIS practice as suggested by Doucette and Hoffmann (2019) but it is not without tension. The literature review established that the crossing of boundaries requires the development of new competence in relation to knowledge, values and perspectives. I experienced a sense of uncertainty as I navigated the boundaries of the research landscape and explored narrative inquiry. I felt conflicting feelings: enjoyment of learning about my chosen research method and confusion related to the many fluid approaches to narrative data analysis. Feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity are evident in the narratives of practitioner-researchers and doctoral students (Kram et al., 2012; Roberts, 2021; Vetter & Russell, 2011). Moving through this space, with the support of my mentor, contributed to my incremental transformation from novice practitioner-researcher to a practitioner-researcher interested in creative, narrative methods. This shift is represented in **Uncertainty Confidence**.

Librarians' lack of research skills and confidence are commonly cited in the literature as a barrier to research and a multitude of approaches have been developed to address this: mentoring (Cirasella & Smale, 2011), strength-based approaches (Jacobs & Berg, 2013), writing groups (Bullion & Brower, 2017), staff exchanges (Namhila, 2014) researcher-in-residence programmes (Detlor & Lewis, 2015), research methods training and peer networks (Luo et al., 2017). There is some evidence that such programmes can have a positive impact (Albarillo et al., 2022, 2024). However, Berg and Banks (2016) argue that the emphasis on skills is misplaced and advocate for a shift to focus on capabilities. New skills and research competence can be developed during the lifecycle of a research project if practitioners have adequate access to learning resources. Interventions which focus on increasing research skills, while commendable and no doubt enriching for practitioners, fail to address the structural barriers within the funding landscape. They may also contribute to a wider narrative that practitioner-research is a desirable, high-status activity associated with

professional prestige (Scott, 2026). Thereby contributing to vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) and this is portrayed in **Mythic journey**. The expectation to undertake research alongside practice without funding, time or resources risks harming the wellbeing of individual librarians by adding an additional burden.

Research funding bodies and the higher education sector need to address the wider structural changes required in research culture to ensure librarians (as well as other third space professionals) are eligible for research funding. A clear institutional pathway, research office support, development activities and opportunities for further progression will help LIS practitioner-researchers move from the periphery of the research landscape towards the centre. Further, small seed funding for practitioner-research needs to be available through professional associations for librarians to demonstrate their research capability. Funding calls and development opportunities need to be delivered with regularity and consistency to facilitate planning within organisations where staffing models may lack agility. As St. Clair et al. (2009, p. 190) comment in relation to practitioner-research in adult education, “occasional projects without application of findings and follow-up are not going to contribute a great deal to professional knowledge”. LIS practitioner-research offers benefits to higher education institutions because LIS practitioners can transfer their skills in relation to user engagement and translation of research findings to different audiences. It is important to also note that LIS professional associations have a role in communicating the value of practitioner-research to managers (Scott, 2026). By understanding its value, managers can champion the allocation of time and resources to support such projects which can shape more innovative practice.

Novice LIS practitioner-researchers will also need support from mentors and more experienced researchers as they cross the boundary into the research landscape. **Mass Stranding** illustrates the emotional load I experienced as an insider researcher. On the one hand, by being immersed in narratives of practitioner-researchers, my own growing identity as a researcher was reinforced. On the other hand, the stories shared by participants, colleagues and friends coalesced into an emotional complexity which required space and time for researcher reflexivity. Critical dialogue with other insider researchers is helpful to manage emotional complexities, empathy and identity development (Bulk & Collins, 2024). My mentor’s role in shaping my identity as a creative-narrative researcher is shared in **You call me sunshine** demonstrating the value of reflective dialogue in my development. The equal distribution of power within this relationship allowed me to share my feelings through metaphors of experience. A personal research network appears to be an important factor in the productivity of accomplished librarian-researchers particularly when there are collaborative opportunities (Kennedy et al., 2020). This suggests opportunities for librarians to undertake collaborative research projects and learn from more experienced researchers should be encouraged.

Conclusion

This personal narrative inquiry explored my lived experience of undertaking a piece of qualitative longitudinal practitioner-research as both a novice and an insider. The narrative poems revealed the factors shaping the layers of my developing identity. The synergies between research and practice were evident with each role inspiring, and building on, the other. A creative approach to data re-presentation facilitated a deeply individualised approach to knowing. Through writing poetry, using metaphor and a reflective dialogue with my mentor, I made sense of the complex emotions arising from my position as an insider researcher. The tensions I experienced were shaped by my choice of research method and

being immersed in the stories of my participants, colleagues and friends. Further, the fluidity of narrative analysis approaches created a feeling of uncertainty, but it is at the boundary of the landscape of practice where innovation, imagination and creativity unfold. To conclude, LIS practitioner-research can enrich practice through the development of new knowledge and inspire innovation. Poetic narrative approaches can provide personal and collective insights into our lived experiences. In crafting a personal narrative through poetry, the researcher can explore their own storied experience, reach a deeper understanding of their embodied emotions and share this process of becoming with the reader.

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