

**Crook:** Well, I'm really pleased to be talking with Mark today, he's an educational researcher from Monash University in Australia. So just a few words of framing before we start, we think these conversations will be of most use to novice researchers and particularly those whose main identity outside of research that is involves professional practice. So teachers, carers, policymakers and so on. So I think the topic today is really very relevant to their interests. If Mark has recently published a paper with Anne Edwards from Oxford University and the paper is about the effective management of educational research practice, its title is "the relational features of evidence use", and I'd like to come to the matter of relationships in a second mark as that's really the heart of the piece. But can you first explain what is covered in your phrase evidence use?

**Rickenson:** Yeah, absolutely, Charles. Our understanding of evidence use is really the use of research evidence within practice, within professional practice. So it could be a school leader. It could be a classroom teacher. It could be a support staff within a school or some other kind of education professional, using research in some way to understand and improve their their practice. And it could also be system system leaders, decision makers within policy policy settings or indeed educators in community settings who are looking to better understand their practice and improve it by using ideas and or practices that come from research research evidence.

**Crook:** Ok, so what the article seems to do is to acknowledge that research is often a coming together of these different communities. I mean, perhaps with different interests, and I think your article is offering a framework for thinking about the management of this coming together. So there is a sense in the article, and I think you've just alluded to this, that there are two overarching categories of players in all this. On the one hand, researchers and on the other hand, practitioners. Now this may be too simplified to be useful, but can you unpack those a bit more? So I mean, who are who have been in your own work, the principal agents within those two categories? Well, researchers, I think, is straightforward, but it's the practitioner side I'm thinking about.

**Rickenson:** Yeah, now I think it's a really good question, Charles, because I think specificity is really important. It's it's very easy to talk in broad categories like researchers and practitioners, when actually there's just a diversity of different players within both of those within both of those categories. So I mean. And I mean, the work that was kind of discussed in the paper with Anne was actually Anne's work was looking

at researchers who'd work closely with policy makers. The work that I'd done with colleagues in Melbourne in Australia was looking at civil servants, policy makers who were using research in policy development. And so in terms of the categories, they were researchers from different disciplines, academic researchers from different disciplines. In terms of Anne's work, in terms of my own work, they were civil servants who were involved in some aspects of policy development. So that might have been policy advisers. It might have been policy writers. It might also have been analysts within an education department. Now the question that you raised, though, is kind of what types of practitioners now other work that I'm doing. I'm particularly involved at Monash as part of a team doing the it's called the Monash Q Project, where we're looking at the use of research evidence in Australian schools. And there we're looking at classroom teachers, middle leaders and also senior leaders who might be assistant principals or principals, all of whom are involved in practice within schools. So, yeah, I mean, and then of course, between, you know, or surrounding schools, there are a whole range of players who are involved in using evidence or supporting improvement in in in practice in local local authorities, other professional learning providers. There obviously always specific to your particular context, but there are. So I think being specific is is is really important. And that plays into the understanding of relationships.

**Crook:** Okay. Let's step back a bit. I mean, I would like to talk in a second about your particular solution to moving forward on this. But can we just clarify the problem that the framework you've got is a tool for addressing? So I mean, the reader may take you to imply in your introduction to the paper that there is something troublesome about how collaborations involving researchers and practitioners are typically managed now. Do you feel that there often are tensions in such projects? And if so, I mean, what can we say about where those tensions come from?

**Rickenson:** Ok. Yeah, that's an interesting question. I mean, in a way, the paper is a response to the fact that the relational dimensions of using research in practice are not always well acknowledged or well understood. So in a way, our paper is trying to respond to that and to say we know these things are important, and many people have said in the literature that these things are important and many people in practice acknowledge that they're important. But we don't always have vocabulary to talk about it well and, particularly, to try to improve it. But what are the difficulties might be driving it, I mean, there's always been an issue where. When there's an encouragement to work

in a collaborative way with non researchers, so people who are in policy making, for instance, or in in practice, the people do tend to use research more than DO research. It can be quite limited where there's involvement, Charles, it can tend to be just agreeing a couple of a bit of input into research instruments early on and then later on. Help us with dissemination and certainly work I did with several years ago connected to the teaching and learning research program in the UK, where we were looking at this idea of user engagement and what did it mean to be involved in a more meaningful way? And I think that was a response to just research often being seen as not relevant enough to practitioners or policymakers and policy makers and practitioners not feeling as if they're involved in driving agendas of what gets research, how it gets researched and then, of course, how it can be communicated and used.

**Crook:** Ok. Yeah. I recognize those problems. So what we're dealing with here is a framework for addressing them. And I think many people listening will probably recognize that mutual understanding, if you like to call it that, is an important responsibility in these relationships. So yeah. Can we take the components of your framework in turn and in which there are three? The first item is what you call relational expertise. Now I took this to mean expertise in the forming or conduct of relationships. It's something perhaps that the individual brings to the collaboration as an interpersonal form of competence. Is that correct? Is that what it means?

**Rickenson:** Yeah, I mean, it is Charles. I mean, Anne Edwards would be the one to really talk, you know, powerfully about about these concepts because they come from her working so basically and develop those concepts in studies of into professional collaboration. So they were looking at very much in the in the time in the UK, or in England, when there was a move towards much more joined up. Well, I forget now the phrases that we use, but it was basically about social workers working with teachers, working with lots of different, different agencies, working together in a more connected way. But of course, that raised lots of challenges around into professional collaboration, where people hadn't necessarily been needing to collaborate before. And so Anne was using, you know, ideas from cultural historical activity theory to understand these where these collaborations worked and what helped them to work when they did work and what got in the way when they didn't work. And so relational agency is about understanding being able to understand the, you know, the motives that you bring and that others, others bring to a collaboration, so I, you know, like I, it's sort of like being

able to communicate yourself what matters to you professionally and understand what matters to others as a basis for recognizing where your own expertise begins and ends, where other people's expertise begins and ends, and how it can interact. It's not about becoming each other in terms of the practice, but really thinking about how your professional motives and interests can can kind of connect. That's that's what relational expertise is about in a kind of very kind of focused, precise sort of way.

**Crook:** So this is a kind of blend of both social and cognitive expertise because the way you've described it, I feel it's partly about the quality of empathy - being able to read other people's motivations and aspirations and so on. But it is also a communicative capability. It's also about having the sensitivity to express your own perspective. Is it that kind of competence?

**Rickenson:** I mean, yes, yes. I think it is. I mean, when we were doing the work, you know, several years ago now around user engagement, we talked about it being almost like with research. There's a lot of focus on, you know, the kind of the know what, but it was about the know who and knowing how to know who. And so and I think you're right, there is there is an empathy side to it, but there is also a communicative side to it. Yeah, that that I haven't heard it articulated like that, to be honest, Charles. But that makes sense to me. Yeah.

**Crook:** Okay. Well, that's useful. And so maybe finally on that, I guess one thing you're then likely to ask is where does this come from? I mean, is it some precious dimension of individual difference that perhaps, you know, has accumulated over a long lifetime? Or is it something that reflects simply experience, maybe expertise in being in these relationships and just wondering how far it's you see as the human capacity which we may differ in or how much it's something that's constructed, you know, across experience?

**Rickenson:** I don't know the answer to that, really, I mean, I think it. I mean, other than to say, I think it's it's both. It's certainly something that that you can develop through experience, you know, and I think but I think being alert to it and I think there's a really important role within the undertaking of of research processes of of kind of helping people to understand what's going on relationally in an advisory group meeting or a meeting with a with a research partner or an initial conversation about a research idea

or a practitioner's, you know, might be a negative response at a conference to a particular like what? Like kind of helping and thinking about the relational dimensions of regular research processes, I think is a is yeah, it's part of it over time of starting to tune into that and then have a way of talking about it with others who are involved. Okay. Yeah, I mean, your question like, I don't know, I don't have a really strong view or, you know, I've got a research based response to that.

**Crook:** I might come back to it at the end because it was a sort of closing issue that I think relates to what you just said. So let's move on to the second component then, which you call common knowledge. This is interesting because this is a concept I've always had active in my own mind, but I've got it from a different place. And interestingly, it's also from an Edwards because Edwards and Mercer wrote a book called Common Knowledge. And I think their idea was that it was something teachers aspire to establish as foundational because it's what their community the classroom has come to share is what is known by us kind of thing now. Is this what you kind of mean in this context? Is it, you know, the group of people engaged in research through their relational expertise have produced this output. This thing that we all agree we now understand is that is that what it is?

**Rickenson:** Yes, it's it's yeah. And I I know that book. Well, yeah, I know exactly what you mean. It's it's about the understanding that you build up collectively in collaboration through working on a common problem. So your understanding initially in relational agency, you're understanding what matters to each other professionally and then you're using that as a resource to come together to to build up a new understanding of a shared problem so that so Anne would talk about it in terms of this might be, you know, a social worker, a teacher and a and a parent understanding the needs of a particular child who who's having difficulties and coming together and building up a common knowledge, a new shared common knowledge about that problem, where you're seeing it in new ways through the interaction. Now. In terms of the use of research evidence as opposed to actually doing research, then. It can be helpful in terms of. On the interactions between people involved in making sense of research and how we might, how it might apply within our practice, for instance, it could it could apply there. So it's both the interaction between the people and the interaction between the people and the research evidence that they might be looking to use or at least to understand.

**Crook:** Ok, so where are we getting to then is you've got a form of. Social cognitive engagement with people, it generates this consequence, which we're calling common knowledge, and then you've got your third component, which feels to me it's about the acting upon this achievement. So I read this as meaning as a kind of reward of building common knowledge from the exercise of relational expertise. So, yes, kind of moving forward is that. Yes, that's the point. Is it there now?

**Rickenson:** Yes, exactly. Yeah. The relational agency is then the unfolding of that joint, taking joint action on the on the problem that has been understood, you know, using the common knowledge to then apply and unfold Joint Action. So, yeah, exactly right. It is. They are linked in a in a - not sequential is the wrong term - but they are related and they are cumulative and building. Okay. Yeah.

**Crook:** So that's helpful, that's that's kind of certainly strengthened my grip on the system here, but just a question now, I suppose, about how we enact this framework. So do you have thoughts about, I don't know, interpersonal strategies or institutional strategies or specific social practices that would bring about more comfortably, you know, a greater atmosphere of transparency, which I suppose what we're talking about mutual awareness. I mean, what what kind of things you have in mind need to be done better by people confronting this?

**Rickenson:** Well, I mean, in a way, I mean, there's something in terms of research practices. I think there's something important about thinking about the relational dimensions of or the potential relational dimensions of all aspects of the of the research process right from, you know, the identity, the identification of issues to research. You know, what is worth what, what is worth asking, what is worth researching and what are the researchable questions about those topics that that can be there can be collaboration there and then kind of all all the way through. So there's something about raising awareness of that, bringing into research training, bringing it into research mentoring, bringing it into how we plan and undertake our research projects, how we think about how we assemble research teams thinking about. The research process requiring almost thinking about what are the blends of expertise that are needed to develop powerful knowledge. And it's you know that going back to there's a lovely quote from Michael Gibbons for the book 'production of knowledge' that was, you know, published a long time ago. But at the time, there was also a short piece in Nature by

Michael Gibbons, and it talked about something, this idea of, you know, scientifically robust knowledge, but also socially robust knowledge in terms of being socially useful. And there's a lovely quote the broader the scientific community, the more socially robust will be the knowledge it generates. And there's something about taking that idea seriously in terms of the way in which we build research agendas and conduct research processes. And then, of course, you know, help people to interact with the research outputs. So there's definitely I mean, so there's something about, you know, the way we think about the research process and what it involves. From my own perspective as well, in terms of an interest in improving the use of research evidence in in contexts of practice or policy, I think there's something really, Um, valuable in this in being able to be a bit more, I suppose it's it's sort of emphasizing the relational dimension of using research well, so that in order to find research as a practitioner, you have to interact with colleagues, you have to interact with people so beyond your school. And so there's a there's a real collaborative. It requires interaction with others, seem to make sense of the research and to critically appraise its quality. You've got a sense-check thing with others. It's so much more productive if it can be done in collaboration. And then, of course, if you're looking to make change based on research within your organization, then you have to have people on board. You have to understand where people are at and that that collective dimension of it is so critical. So there's so there are implications for the research process, Charles. But they're also really important implications for the use of research and thinking about research, inform practice and what can help to improve that within within organizations and individuals practice.

**Crook:** So it's kind of a greater engagement with what we might call meta collaborative issues, I suppose. I mean, kind of standing back from the practice of collaboration and more actively engaging with what's involved.

**Rickenson:** Yeah, yeah. That's yeah, that's an interesting way of putting it. Yeah, that's right. It's. It's that we can. Yeah, we can start to understand, you know, understand and unpick and unpack the collaborative processes, and there's there's there's benefit in doing that. You know, we have, you know, I mean, that's often done at a large scale in terms of social network analysis and those sorts of things can be. You know, this is this is kind of doing it in a a small at a smaller scale. But both, I think, are really important and understanding the contribution that that can make to the building of knowledge research and the use of knowledge in terms of research use. Okay.

**Crook:** A key question, Mark, about I suppose what you might call the receptivity of research partners to these concerns. Now in your article, you're very useful I think in quoting from interviews that have taken place with practitioners of one or policy makers of one kind or another. And I got the impression this may be wrong that the voices that you use there with those of the researchers. Now, have you explored in the same way how far other individuals in this partnership, the more practitioner individuals, whether they recognize as vividly the these components of relationship building? Or is this a widely understood responsibility in these projects?

**Rickenson:** Ok, so the quotes in in half of the paper were like the quotes from Anne's work were from researchers describing their perspective on collaborations with policy or practitioners. The work that in in our work from from Australia was was based on policy makers and other practitioners. So there is definitely kind of research user voice in there. So is there a is there a receptivity, is there a recognition of the importance of these sorts of elements? Yes, I think there is. I mean, because when you talk, when you say, for instance, in work we've done with policy makers here in the state education department, they were very clear that we have, you know, they would talk about the collective collaborative nature of building policy and the ways in which they needed to test out the policy narrative and the evidence that was being drawn on for that developing policy narrative with different groups of stakeholders in order to understand likely responses. They talked about the ways in which different parts of the department and groups connected to the department will be brought in at different times to build the agenda to develop a shared understanding. So there were lots of examples that they didn't use. Of course, of course, they didn't use the language of relational expertise, relational agency and common knowledge, but they certainly talked about processes that were akin to those sorts of concepts, you know, coming from one's work.

**Rickenson:** And even more recently, actually, Charles, we've you know, in the Monash Q project, we're working with schools across four states in Australia, and we're so we did a survey of about five hundred school leaders and teachers asking them, What does it mean to use? One of the questions we asked was an open question What does using research well mean to you in your context? And we coded up the the responses depending on the kinds of issues that they're they're bringing up and relationships in the relational was very, very strong. You know, in the in order to use research, well, it has to



be collective. There has to be involvement of a number of people. It needs to be done in a collaborative way. Reaching out to networks is really important. You know, often it came up in in in the negative where where teachers are saying, well, if, if research, if research informed practice means that our, you know, our leadership team get a bee in their bonnet and then implement something without any consultation, then that's not using research. Well, what using research well is doing it in a collaborative way, etc. So I think I think it is something which is recognised in terms of both building knowledge and using knowledge. It may just be articulated in different ways.

**Crook:** Okay. Okay. Yeah, that's helpful. Just let me push against that. This is my almost final question, but it does seem to in my mind to be a challenge. Are there not situations in a researcher practitioner project where the motives of partners do not naturally complement each other so comfortably? In fact, it seems to me this could be quite common, and I'm thinking that sometimes a researcher is motivated by quite abstract theoretical concerns that can feel remote from the needs of a collaborating site of practice. For example, they may be pursuing, I don't know, some remote cognitive theory of dyslexia. Now that might bring them together with practitioners, but the frame of reference would be very different now. This surely can make relationships building quite difficult within many active situations. What do you think?

**Rickenson:** Yes. No, I agree. I do. What do I think, I mean? For sure, I mean, you know, the world's and the interests in the needs of research and practitioners are often, you know, they can be very different and the practices that we're involved in can be can be very different. I've always found that. Having conversations and interactions with different kinds of professionals, even it's almost like by by realizing how disconnected our different kind of interests are. It is. It's kind of it's really instructive in a way. It helps you to see, certainly from a researcher perspective, it really helps you to see your work from different perspectives and kind of framed in different ways, and you really understand people's very different starting points. Now, that might not be. It's almost like what's the time scale of of of of a productive relationship. I think many of these things are about building kind of understandings that are really over the long term. You know, it might. So you could well have a situation, Charles, like you described where you kind of worlds apart in terms of the immediate needs of the moment, but by still by interacting and understanding how. Apart you are. And and why can be quite powerful? I think so, it's not. It's not, I don't know. It's almost like you can't judge it in right in the moment in

like, is there real productive interaction right now? It's almost like sometimes having experiencing those sorts of difficulties is really productive.

**Crook:** That, yeah, I no, I absolutely, you know, respond to that as a way of thinking about this problem, it is a problem that I think I mean, on the other side, on one side of it, you have researchers whose motivations may be very abstract and obscure from practice, and yet they hope in the long term relevant. But on the other hand, you've also got practitioners who do not have a lot of spare time. So they're thinking, I'm giving my time to this project. But actually, it's not clear at this point that it's going to feed into my practice yet, but they might generously allow it at some point. They hope it will. So it's it's quite quite a difficult thing to manage. It feels to me, but I agree you should manage it.

**Rickenson:** Oh, it is. I mean, absolutely. It's it's this. This work is not is not easy. But to yeah, but to sort of, I suppose, ignore it completely, is you just kind of go in separate directions because, you know, most people who are involved in educational research of some kind do want to make a difference and do want to make a positive contribution to educational improvement, however defined or, you know. And so I think thinking about the ways in which to build productive interactions with others as part of the research process and part of the research use process is a generative one. But it doesn't mean that all research, you know, has to be collaborative, it doesn't mean that all research has to be on issues that are of immediate concern to front line professionals. It doesn't mean that. All research has to be. Kind of immediately relevant and useful. I think there's a you know, there are. It yeah, it seems you can go too far with with that, you know, it's it's it's not that. I mean, there are there are there will be very good reasons why to work on research that isn't immediately relevant or isn't highly interactive and collaborative. Or, you know, I can't think of a good example, but there will be. And it's important that that work is is is encouraged and supported as well. But there are many educational challenges for which. Interactive work, which is framed up in a very responsive, interactive way with educators and leaders is, you know, is is a really productive way to go in just in terms of knowledge generation, let alone knowledge use.

**Crook:** Yeah, I mean, I guess the message is kind of there's a risk in being lazy about these responsibilities because it's not obvious at first that they need to be executed. But

actually, it's usually a good investment and probably will make most research projects go better, even if the partners do start from some distance apart.

**Rickenson:** Yes.

**Crook:** I just I mean, I'm conscious of the time, Mark, you've been very generous in talking about it at length. I just have a final question, I suppose. I think you allude to this in the paper because you do draw attention to the lack of research on the relationship building character of the research process, what we've just been talking about. So is it something that you personally or your colleagues are going to pursue? And is it part of your own research plan?

**Rickenson:** Yeah, I mean, it's certainly it's it's certainly we're particularly at the work that I'm doing with colleagues on the Monash Q project at the moment. We're three years into a five year project and we're looking particularly at what does it mean to use research well in education, particularly in schools, and that, you know, the relational collaborative dimension is coming through so strongly in what we're hearing back from from educators about what using research well means. So there's a real need there to link up. Kind of processes around collaboration within schools, which there's a whole, you know, field on that, but it isn't. It isn't often well linked with evidence informed practice and research, inform practice and research, use conversations. So we're trying to really put those together so well, you know, the the good work that's been done around professional learning communities can be connected with the use of research and research informed improvement. You can you can work those two together. So yeah, we're certainly developing and trialling professional learning around those around those areas and trying to really put the relational into what it means to use research well. So less in terms of knowledge, you know, kind of less in terms of the conduct of research, more in terms of the use of research. Charles at the moment, in terms of the work we're doing,

**Crook:** Ok, well, I mean, we look forward to hearing more about that. So that's good. Good to discover. I'm going to close in a minute mark. Is there anything you want to lob in? There hasn't been said that. We've missed important.

**Rickenson:** Yeah, well, I just I suppose I am, what is it? I mean, I suppose it's just around yeah, the interest in this in this area, you know, and I think it's it's a it's an area where there's commonality between the generation, you know, the conduct of research, but also the use of research. And that's often you have people who tend to do one or the other. But I think there's a real opportunity to connect these around the role of of relationships and collaboration. And that's not a new it's not a new argument. They are very well established, lots of research methodologies and approaches that use different kinds of collaboration. Absolutely nothing new about it. But I think recognizing its role within research use as well as research is, yeah, is exciting. And yeah, feels feels important.

**Crook:** Good. Thanks. Thanks again for sharing his ideas with us.