

# The Distinct Epistemology of Practitioner Research: Complexity, Meaning, Plurality, and Empowerment

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## Abstract

Practitioner research will continue to be regarded as second-class academic inquiry unless it distinguishes itself from standardized scientific research. This paper clarifies the epistemological concepts of *complexity*, *meaning*, *plurality*, and *empowerment*, among others, to show how the former type of research is different from the latter. It elaborates on the case of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, a community-based study of mutual help for those who are concerned with personal difficulties, to demonstrate an example of practitioner research that embodies sufficient theoretical understanding of the four concepts. We argue that, with practitioner research, language teachers should return to the tradition of the humanities with a renewed awareness.

**Keywords:** practitioner research, epistemology, *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, narrative

## Complexity, Meaning, and Plurality

On the occasion of the 1st JACET Summer (45th) and English Education (6th) Joint Seminar at Kyoto Prefectural University on August 21, 2018, I delivered a plenary lecture in English entitled ‘Four Fundamental Concepts for Practitioner Research.’ I argued that practitioner research, distinct from the traditional one that is based on technical rationality (Schön, 1983), needs to explore alternative assumptions of fundamental notions, as these two types of research are radically different in epistemology. I presented four such concepts, namely, *complexity*, *meaning*, *plurality*, and *empowerment*. In this paper, I will summarize the first three briefly and then elaborate on the last.

## Selection, Contingency, and Emergence in Complexity

*Complexity* is a concept from systems theory (Luhmann, 1996, 2012). A system is complex when it contains too many elements for any observer to overview all of their possible combinations and consequences in real time. A simple illustration is a comparison between a game of tick-tack-toe and a game of chess. Whereas the former, with nine slots and two signs (a circle and a cross), enables players to predict its consequences quite quickly, chess allows no players such a privilege; the conceivable moves are numerous at each turn, and further potential developments are practically infinite. In this sense, chess is complex, while tick-tack-toe is not.

A complex system can be a larger one in the real world. A classroom lesson is a complex system, and so is the organized network of educational institutions at a national level. One feature of a complex system is that its participants, teachers in our case, need to *select*, as no one

knows the correct action among numerous options that leads to the best result. As a teacher continues to choose his or her actions among countless possibilities (“Should I ask this or that question, make this suggestion now or later?”), the situation becomes more *contingent*, a state of “as-it-happens-to-be,” which is neither necessary (“as-it-must-be”) nor impossible (“as-it-cannot-be”) in logical sense. In a contingent, and therefore dynamic, state of affairs, nobody can predetermine one single factor that promises the best outcome, because enumeration of all possible scenarios in advance is beyond the cognitive capacity of either human or machine. A transient state in a complex system is not an instance of a predestined move, but a unique case of *emergence*, a circumstance no participants or observers may have anticipated at all.

Practical considerations of the concept of complexity include a claim that teaching is creative and must be treated as such. When teachers and learners are allowed to perform to their potential and hence be creative, they may surprise themselves by an unexpected outcome they produce collaboratively. Another consideration is a critical challenge against the validity of comparative studies of teaching methods. These comparative studies assume that one factor (i.e., a teaching method) would generate the desired result and that researchers can generalize their findings to dictate what teachers should do in other classrooms. However, the assumption of simple causality and universal validity is contradictory to the ideas of contingency, emergence, and selection that a complex system implies. The issue of complexity reveals a wide discrepancy between comprehensive technical rationality and spontaneous practical rationality. We argue that no practitioner research is successful when it fails to recognize the field of education as a complex system.

### **Actuality, Potentiality, and Autopoiesis of Meaning**

The second fundamental concept that I presented in the lecture was *meaning*. Instead of the traditional semantic notions of denotation and connotation in standard linguistics, I introduced the idea of actuality and potentiality of meaning proposed by Niklas Luhmann (1990, 2002, 2012), one of the most eminent theoretical sociologists of the twentieth century (1927–1998). *Actuality* of meaning is the focus of our sense-making, something we perceive (outside or inside the mind), which is practically the same as denotation. The idea of *potentiality*, on the other hand, is quite different from that of connotation. *Potentiality* of meaning is all that can emerge from actuality, something much more extensive than connotation. It includes anything conceivable: recollections, associations, images, and imaginations one can attain when one identifies one’s actuality. Potentiality as a vast system of ideas is therefore complex, too. Neither oneself nor any independent observer can enumerate or predict what one’s potentiality will present next. (A simple thought experiment: Imagine one particular thing. First, you may recall a most representative image, but it may bring other incidental associations, which in turn may invite even more peripheral ideas, and the process continues. It is impossible for you or anyone to predict what you will be thinking five minutes later.)

Luhmann argued that meaning is the ceaseless integration of actuality and potentiality. Thus, meaning is a dynamic *process*, not a static state. It continually updates and reshapes itself. Meaning continues to create its latest constellation of actuality and potentiality as consciousness or communication advances. The process of self-production or self-organization is termed as *autopoiesis* (*auto* meaning “self,” and *poiesis* meaning “making, formation or production”). As

we experience everyday life, consciousness and communication develop by themselves. Even when one wants to control one's consciousness ("Focus on this job!"), one often finds it drifts away beyond one's command. Likewise, one will fail when one tries to regulate the flow of dialogue as one wishes (When one feels that one did, one ruins communication and changes it into something else such as catechism.) Consciousness and communication are, in this sense, instances of an autopoietic system. Each of them creates itself and is not created by something other than itself. Meaning, which appears in these two media, are also autopoietic.

We contend that we should adopt Luhmann's framework of meaning. A case in point is meaning, the medium of narratives, as one of the essential resources in practitioner research. If one adheres to the traditional notion of meaning as a fixed set of denotation/connotation, one may disregard the narratives of teachers or students as always imprecise or loose. This negative perception undermines the merits of practitioner research. As Barkhuizen (2011, p. 396) points out, narratives of practitioners are active and fluid, neither permanent nor unchallengeable. To appreciate the dynamic nature of stories, we need to change our concept of meaning into an alternative one like Luhmann's.

### **Embracing Diversity in Plurality**

These two alternative concepts of complexity and meaning categorically distinguish practitioner research from traditional experimental studies. However, practitioner researchers may pause and wonder if they are asked unassumingly simple questions: "Why do we need communication in practitioner research?" followed by "Isn't the personal reflection of a practitioner enough?" These questions are perplexing because, after all, our consciousness is complex enough to deal with the potentiality of meaning. To answer this question theoretically, we need to introduce our third fundamental concept, plurality.

*Plurality*, as advocated by a prominent political scientist and philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), is a necessary condition of our coexistence (Arendt, 2019). This condition focuses on the quality of our life. We coexist as human beings when our differences are accepted and respected. On the other hand, when we are ordered to think and behave like "the Great Leader," for example, we critically lose our basis to live as human beings. (Note that Arendt, as a Jew, fled from the totalitarian society dictated by the Nazi regime.) On the other hand, when we live together in plurality, we embrace our distinct perspectives and different aspects of observation. Plurality is necessary to deal with complexity and appreciate the sense of meaning that we discussed.

Political dictators are not the only suppressors of plurality, though. The idea of the *Average Man* (Rose, 2017), a dominant belief in business and education of the twentieth century, also crushes our diversity. The notion has its roots in the conception by Quetelet (1796-1874), who defined the average as the norm of everything. His conceptualization was further developed by Galton (1822-1911), who claimed that we should rank the Average Man from top to bottom. He believed that on average, the top layer of the population excels in all areas, while the bottom fails in them all (Galton was a defender of class society.) This nineteenth century notion was applied to business by Taylor (1856-1915), the father of scientific management, and to education by Thorndike (1874- 1949), the father of educational measurement. Since then, we have taken it for granted that people should work and study according to the standardized way that is designed

for the Average Man. Schools, for example, provide curricula and tests that are constructed for the average learner. All students, despite their differences in talent, capacity, and interests, are required to study the same content at the same time at the same pace. Consequently, those who attain the highest score on average are regarded as the best. Teachers are also expected, these days increasingly in Japanese public schools, to adopt the same teaching method. On many occasions, they are ranked according to the average scores their students produce in standardized tests.

Averagism had its apparent merits in the last century when mass production was the core competence of society. However, in the twenty-first century, as we begin to see diversity as the vital source of creativity, we need to shift our focus from standardization to uniqueness. What wins in the market is a unique product with its distinct identity. Likewise, in education, the days are gone when teachers had to adopt the same teaching method because they possessed little expertise. Also gone are days when students had practically no access to knowledge except to copy what teachers wrote on the blackboard. There is a need for teachers and learners of today to shift their emphasis from standardized knowledge transfer to creative collaboration in classroom learning where diverse individuals interact spontaneously (Dintersmith & Wagner, 2016). We argue that ignoring individual traits under the name of standardization may have an oppressive totalitarian inclination.

We make use of a complex system like classroom learning more productively when we let the participants conceive of and apply their different ideas, as they can then most flexibly adapt to emerging situations. We should appreciate the diversity of different approaches and use the difference as a source of insight for all participants. Similarly, we understand the potentiality of meaning more adequately when we share multiple perspectives and aspects of observation with others. This could be considered analogous to legal authorities inviting jury members when a case is complicated, or newspaper editors choosing to supplement a single voice with the opinions of other people. This is equivalent to researchers exchanging views when they explore new areas. We argue that communication makes better use of complexity and meaning than a single consciousness does.

### ***Tojisha-Kenkyu as an Instance of Empowerment***

In the JACET lecture, I used most of my time explaining these three concepts of complexity, meaning, and plurality. I was able to speak only briefly about the last issue, empowerment. I will therefore use the rest of this paper to elaborate on this unexplained concept. In the interest of readers whose access to Japanese documents is limited, I will introduce the case of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* in Japan as an example of practitioner research that promotes empowerment. (For further explication on complexity and meaning, please see Yanase (2019)).

We have seen so far that no one is entitled to command complete control of teachers or learners in the classroom. The participants should explore the potentiality of meaning as they perceive in their praxes and embrace their differences in communication. The next question is what specific measures we should take to empower teachers and learners.

The notion of *empowerment* is in the spirit of Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that was adopted by The United Nations General Assembly in 1948: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and

should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.’ Considering the nature of complexity, meaning, and plurality, we argue that the cognitions and feelings of teachers and learners are essential elements of research. These individuals should not be regarded as powerless *objects* in a study that are controlled by the academic or administrative authorities. Instead, teachers and learners (and other people who are connected to them) should be empowered as agents in practitioner research. Together, we empower ourselves. Researchers deepen their understanding by acknowledging the legitimacy of the voices of teachers. Teachers, in turn, increase their effectiveness by recognizing that there is always a reason for learners’ behavior. Finally, learners, particularly those who have been stigmatized as “far below the average,” enhance their self-respect as co-researchers in the learning community, not as losers or victims in the current school system.

We find an illustrative example of such empowerment in an area of psychiatric care and social support. It is a praxis called *Tojisha-Kenkyu* (literally translated as ‘Research by those who are involved in troubles’). It has been active for over 20 years in and beyond Urakawa, a rural area of Hokkaido, Japan. It is a self-help study by and for those who experience mental problems (schizophrenia, in many cases). It was initiated by the innovative social worker Ikuyoshi Mukaiyachi in cooperation with the progressive psychiatrist Toshiaki Kawamura. Instead of regarding patients merely as those who must be controlled by medication and hospitalization, they started listening to their voices. Contrary to the tradition in psychiatry, they lent an attentive ear to the stories of the marginalized people as legitimate narratives. These pioneers encouraged mutual listening among patients and their associates as well. Gradually, Mukaiyachi began to suggest that the stigmatized person should be a researcher of their problem and invited others to participate in the inquiry, hence the name of *Tojisha* (those who are involved in troubles)-*Kenkyu* (research).

Many publications on *Tojisha-Kenkyu* are currently available both in books and academic papers, mostly in Japanese. Urakawa Bethel House (2002, 2005) and Mukaiyachi (2009) are self-explanations of the praxis by the *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members, and Ishihara (2014) is a collection of philosophical analyses. Kashiba, Nakagawa, and Yanase (2018) and Nakagawa, Kashiba, and Yanase (2019) are papers about *Tojisha-Kenkyu*’s applications in teacher education. In this paper, we focus on the principles of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* in order to provide insight into practitioner research in language teaching.

The *Tojisha-Kenkyu* community published a pamphlet entitled *Tojisha-Kenkyu that transforms agony into hope* (Urakawa Bethel House, 2012) to explain the fifteen principles they honor in their praxis. For clarification, I will divide them into three groups (each consisting of five principles): *Self-acknowledgement of Vulnerability and Problems*; *Emphatic Fellow Members*; and *A Stance as Researchers*. I will translate and explain the principles in these divisions in the following three sections.

### **Self-acknowledgement of Vulnerability and Problems**

*Tojisha-Kenkyu* starts when a person acknowledges themselves as a vulnerable person because of the problems they have. They decide to join the community of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* where they are encouraged to reveal their problems; to take the initiative to tackle the issues while supported by others; to believe that their experience will be of some help to others; to use

humor to express hardship; and to exercise *Tojisha-Kenkyu* whenever and wherever possible and appropriate. We will explain these five principles in more detail below.

**(1) Showing your vulnerability.** In our contemporary society, where the pressure to normalize people is powerful in various institutions like schools or hospitals (Foucault, 1995), people often suppress their unique identity. When that identity is associated with a social stigma, in particular, they struggle hard to hide their status and thus do not readily admit that they are feeling vulnerable. People often pretend that they are just like “everyone else,” i.e., normalized persons or “the Average Man.” They try to show they are capable of the task that everybody else is expected to complete. When they fail, they feel ashamed, blame themselves, and suppress their vulnerability further.

*Tojisha-Kenkyu* encourages its members to share their vulnerability to connect with each other as vulnerable human beings on equal terms. The connection creates a relationship of mutual trust and support. This principle has relevance to the notion of *relational resilience* (Jordan, 2018), which states that the power to undergo a difficult situation lies more in the social relationship of “tend-and-befriend” than in the individual propensity for “fight-or-flight.” We increase our resilience when we relate to each other as vulnerable persons.

**(2) By yourself, with others.** A *Tojisha*, as a unique individual with their problems, is a being that escapes from the mutually exclusive dichotomy of “either individual or social.” A *Tojisha* finds the community of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* crucial to deal with their hardship. In their challenge, a *Tojisha* is both individual (as the owner of the problem) and social (as a community member.) As the problem owner, they are the sole person who directly experiences and suffers from the consequences of the predicament. However, in the community of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, they are all the more connected to other people because of their problem and receive support from them. Here is a delicate balance between individual responsibility and social help. Other members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* try their best to help the *Tojisha* deal with the problem. At the same time, it is accepted wisdom in the community that other persons “should not take the problem away from its owner.”

This wisdom is reminiscent of the prolific therapist C.G. Jung. From his abundant experiences, Jung came to the conviction that if a therapist intervenes too much and solves the problem of the client for them, not letting them experience their troubles, the problem would lose “merit” for the client. Jung (1986, p. 147) said that ‘we only gain merit and psychological development by accepting ourselves as we are and by being serious enough to live the lives we are trusted with.’ Likewise, a *Tojisha* needs to face their hardship by themselves, but at the same time, they should be *with others* who support them with a deep respect for the life that they have to live.

**(3) Finding relevance in your problem to others.** *Tojishas* are encouraged to cease to regard their problem as a private matter. No person is an island. Problems people experience are connected to various social factors in a complicated way. Therefore, the *Tojisha*’s issue must have some relevance to other people who are affected by those social factors as well. If a *Tojisha* can realize that they are not alone in suffering from the problem, they can recognize

themselves as a part of a social movement to face the challenge. They are not a miserable loner who is agonizing over their predicament; they are a representative of those who challenge the task as it occurs in the current society.

Discovering the relevance of their problem to other people, however, may not be easy, considering the currently dominant folk theory of personal attribution. When a problem arises, people often finger-point someone to blame. This personal accusation may be overwhelming in societies where the Western individual tradition has been embraced since ancient Greek civilization (Slingerland, 2015). In this sense, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* offers a valuable perspective on our understanding of problems.

**(4) Exercising humor.** *Tojishas* are encouraged to use humor when they describe their problem. The humor here is opposite to self-destructive cynicism. It is a habit of the mind one acquires to provide an alternative perspective to the situation that is otherwise only miserable and hopeless. It is also the “ultimate courage in life” to retain a calm, reflective mind right in the middle of difficulties. By smiling naturally in spite of the problem, a *Tojisha* creates a new self who observes the suffering self and depicts it in a way that is both acceptable to and amusing for people, including the *Tojisha* themselves.

We interpret the use of humor as a second-order observation (Luhmann, 2002). Second-order observation is another observation of a given observation (i.e., the first-order observation). It is different from another first-order observation of the same object in that it specializes in *how* the first-order observation was conducted, not *what* was observed. A second-order observer does not question what the first observer found. For example, if a person (as a first-order observer) recognizes themselves as miserable, the second-order observer accepts the description first and examines how they came to the perception. On many occasions, the second-order observer seeks alternative views by suggesting a different way to see the issue. In *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, a *Tojisha* is encouraged to be a second-order observer of their own (first-order) observation. They are invited to change how they see their problem; they learn that they can abandon hopeless perception. The *Tojisha* distances themselves from the problem (see Principle 9) and finds an expression to depict themselves in a way that produces spontaneous smiles in the community of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*. The humor in *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, as a product of a second-order observation, liberates all its members from the miserable perception that once was considered inevitable.

**(5) Whenever and wherever it is appropriate.** When a *Tojisha* internalizes the above principles, they can engage themselves in *Tojisha-Kenkyu* anytime and anywhere. They start by acknowledging their problem without shame. They empower themselves with the conviction that this self-exposure will inspire support from other members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*. With other members, a *Tojisha* relates their problem to issues in the current society. They also learn to see it in a way that makes everyone smile. These principled actions change an isolated troublemaker into a legitimate participant of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*. The attitudes those members share will be illustrated below in the five principles of empathetic fellow members.

## Empathetic Fellow Members

People in *Tojisha-Kenkyu* are empathetic fellow members who suspend their immediate judgment, ready to change their line of thought, acknowledge the limitations of their power humbly, separate the problem from its owner, and help each other in the process of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*.

**(6) Suspending prejudice while listening.** The members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, whether they are professionals (social worker or psychiatrist) or non-experts (with or without the experience of similar problems), refrain from imposing their judgment on a *Tojisha* immediately. This principle grants the *Tojisha* an opportunity to tell their story without being interrupted by the listeners. The principle is an equalizer for the listeners. It discourages the professionals and experienced from assuming they know better and, at the same time, encourages the other members to feel they are entitled to speak up in *Tojisha-Kenkyu*.

A similar proposal was made by Anderson and Goolishian (1992) in the name of the 'Not-Knowing Approach' in narrative therapy. Not-knowing requires experts not to let their prior knowledge dominate the conversation. They should not talk *to* the other members, trying to convey the pre-held assumptions, but speak *with* each other in an attempt to co-develop unique understanding that the current unique issue deserves. Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* need to be genuinely curious about the story of the *Tojisha*.

**(7) Accepting the person's epistemology and questioning prevailing views.** Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* do not preach. Nor do they demand that the *Tojisha* should be like "everybody else" (i.e., the normalized person or "Average Man"). The *Tojisha* may question what everybody else would take for granted. It may be because of this different understanding that they are experiencing troubles. They may also offer an alternative view about the issue at hand. The *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members respect the epistemology of the trouble maker. The experience of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* has taught them that *Tojisha's* unique understanding can challenge prevailing views of the current society; a marginalized view may change the culture for the better. *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members occasionally say ironically to the *Tojisha* that 'You are lucky to have this problem' or 'You are talented in the way you agonize.'

Such remarks remind us of Jung once again. Jung generally recognized a problem one repeated as a result of the message from the unconsciousness in the form of bias, bigotry, aberration, delusion, or neurosis. According to Jung (1986), such an 'unreasonable' disorder (from the viewpoint of the consciousness) is a rebellious attempt of compensation by the unconscious against what it regards as an 'unreasonable' order imposed by one's consciousness. The unconsciousness is attempting to restore the balance in the Self, the totality of the consciousness and the unconsciousness. When one's consciousness severely restricts one's thoughts and behaviors to conform with the norm of society, the unconsciousness sends its message to disturb the excessive activities of the consciousness. However, the conscious mind cannot readily decode the signals from the unconsciousness. Therapists, therefore, support the client to interpret the message in a meaningful way so that they can restore the balance and grow as a human being. Jung echoes with the *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members when he says that a problem like a neurosis is 'something favorable' for the client from the viewpoint of human



development (Jung 1986, p. 190).

**(8) Positive acknowledgment of powerlessness for a perfect solution.** While humble, members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* do not underestimate their expertise (see Principle 6). They believe they can discover something new when they acknowledge that their knowledge is limited. A paradox to describe this mindset would be “becoming powerful by admitting powerlessness.” Given its complexity, no *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members can arrive at a perfect solution to the problem that a *Tojisha* faces. They are “powerless,” but the awareness of their powerlessness increases the collective motivation for communication, collaboration, and creation in *Tojisha-Kenkyu*. Because they are powerless as individuals, they are driven for collaborative inquiry in *Tojisha-Kenkyu*.

We may find a similar mindset in some principles of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The first three steps of the AA state:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

(AA, 1981)

We need to consider two points to find some relevance in this to *Tojisha-Kenkyu*. First, ‘we/us/ourselves’ here should be understood as a simple aggregation of isolated individuals who have not yet formed a united group who share certain principles. Second, ‘God *as we understood*’ can be translated in a non-theological way. We understand this God by paraphrasing the expression in the second principle (‘a Power greater than ourselves’): a Power greater than individuals who were isolated. Given these two interpretations, we now render the above three steps as a general statement for the community-based self-help group:

1. We were powerless as isolated individuals and could not manage the problem each had.
2. However, we now realize that if we communicate and collaborate as community members of self-help, we may be powerful enough to restore ourselves.
3. Therefore, we now turn our past will and lives to the care of the collective wisdom that we may create.

Interpreted in this way, both *Tojisha-Kenkyu* and AA offer a coherent antithesis of the individualistic notion of power.

**(9) Not judging the person because of the problem they acknowledge.** Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* separate a problem from the *Tojisha* who acknowledges it. Without this separation, people often blame them personally because of the problem in which they are caught. People take a cognitive short-cut and believe that *the individual* is the problem. With such a personal accusation, both the *Tojisha* and their neighbors lose the cognitive capacity for creative thinking. To disentangle the problem from the person, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* encourages its members to personify the problem and describe it with a proper name. When a *Tojisha* suffers from frequent hallucinations, for example, the members describe them, with a sense of humor (see Principle 4), as someone who is frequently visited by ‘Mr. Hallucination.’ The members offer suggestions like ‘Can you talk with Mr. Hallucination?’ or ‘What do you think

Mr. Hallucination wants?’ Gradually, then, the *Tojisha* begins to recognize their problem as something (or someone) they can face and negotiate, not as an intrinsic part of their identity. This linguistic technique of separating the problem from the person is known as *externalization* in narrative therapy in English speaking countries. Narrative therapy shares with *Tojisha-Kenkyu* the concept of ‘The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem’ (Epston & White, 1990). With this change of perspectives, *Tojishas* regain a sense of autonomy, which is what the members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* want as emphatic fellow members.

**(10) Helping *Tojishas*’ self-help without sacrificing ourselves.** Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* support the self-help of the *Tojisha* but do not sacrifice themselves in the process. They understand that the problem the *Tojisha* experiences contains seeds for positive change (see Principle 7) and thus embrace the challenge. They listen without prejudice (see Principle 6) but not to their own exhaustion (Mukaiyachi, 2009). They accept the feelings of the *Tojisha* with empathy, but after that, they explore the issue as a research activity. The members do not victimize themselves as those who are obligated to listen. When the *Tojisha*’s problem troubles them, they acknowledge it honestly to themselves and the *Tojisha*. Also, the *Tojisha* accepts that there is a limit to the tolerance in the fellow members and finds other methods of self-help that do not burden them. They decide not to be a pathetic victim or perpetual trouble maker. Thus, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* is an act of mutual self-help that does not involve causing unacceptable troubles for each other. To sustain such self-help, the members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* take a stance as researchers, not as miserable patients or irritating trouble-makers. In the next section, we will explore the five principles of taking a stance as researchers.

### **A Stance as Researchers**

Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* think and behave as researchers. However, it is essential to note that ‘research’ here is meant to be an inspiring notion to *Tojishas*. Outside the community of *Tojishas-Kenkyu*, many *Tojishas* have their dignity diminished by other people who stigmatize their problems. When *Tojishas* reflect on their issues, that negative perception causes them to denounce themselves. However, when they are encouraged to research their topics, *Tojishas* (most of whom are not professional researchers) begin to regain a sense of agency with this new identity. In many cases, this perceptual shift is a game changer. They restore dignity and act as individuals who observe the problem in collaboration with their fellow researchers.

We should also emphasize that research here is more action-based than theoretical. Their research defines the problem of a *Tojisha* in a broader context than rigorous academic research does, in the sense that it is pragmatic and seeks a way out, rather than being fixated to a complete explanation. It uses every resource available, not limiting the methods and epistemologies to those legitimized by the established academic community. It places more value on action than analysis. It recognizes the fact that researchers themselves are embedded in the problem-solving, unlike theoretical researchers who may feel detached from the problems.

**(11) Looking at a bigger picture rather than focusing only on the problem.** As we have seen, members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* try to be free from currently dominant views (see Principles 6 and 7) and find the relevance of one problem to other issues in society (see Principle

3). Furthermore, they understand the problem in a broader framework, just like prudent researchers do when they find that a problem is nested in a web of other issues. Researchers with much practical experience in the real world know that a solution to one problem may lead to the emergence of complications. Physical coercion to stop one aberrant behavior in one person, for example, may cause severe psychological imbalance in them, and consequently in their family. Experienced researchers know that they need to look at a bigger picture. With a broader framework of understanding, they may find that the problem is preventing other more harmful issues from emerging or that there is a deeper root-cause that should be addressed first and foremost. Members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* emulate the wisdom of these researchers.

**(12) Making wise use of the problem rather than eradicating it.** In a broader intellectual landscape, members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* may find that they cannot immediately solve a given challenge because of its inherent root-causes or potential complications. In such a case, the members try to exploit the problem, not eradicate it. If, for example, a *Tojisha* has a hyperactive tendency, the members attempt to find ways to take advantage of their hyperactivity by, for instance, assigning them tasks that require alert attention in changing situations that other people do not possess.

Japanese carpenters of sacred architecture share similar wisdom. Nishioka (Nishioka, Ogawa, and Shiono, 2005) says that he learned from his past masters the saying ‘Don’t deny peculiarities. Accept and use them.’ A master carpenter who orders logs should know the ecology of the mountain from which the woods were shipped so that they better understand distinct features of the timber. A curbed log from a shady side of the mountain, for example, should be combined with a differently twisted trunk from another side of the mountain so that the two complement each other to make a stronger pillar. Likewise, when a master carpenter assembles a team of highly-skilled craftsmen, the master must realize that the team members often have idiosyncratic characteristics that are hard to rectify. The experienced leader does not try to deny or correct these traits. Instead, they find a suitable place for each member in order to create a unique assembly of carpenters for the best outcome in the given circumstances.

**(13) Think in the body, not in the head.** *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members “think in the body” and feel how their bodies react to the problem. They pay attention to the implicit alerts their speechless organs systemically send to their senses. Unlike theoretical researchers who only take an intellectual stance, *Tojishas* do not disembodiment their mind from their palpating anatomy or decontextualize their inquiry from the given situation. “Thinking in the head,” on the other hand, denotes exclusively intellectual research activities that disregard emotions, feelings, and all other subtle signals the body expresses. While findings from such a scholarly approach may be abstract and standardized, they fail to address the issue in the way it can be felt in one’s flesh and blood. Thinking in the body, however, encourages us to be perceptive, intuitive, and insightful. The outcome of such introspective inquiry is not as clear-cut or rationalized as that of theoretical analysis, but it directly approaches the problem as one “lived” in our life. As practical researchers, members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu* prioritize visceral understanding over theoretical sophistication; as Nietzsche said, ‘There is more wisdom in your body than your deepest philosophy.’

**(14) Changing words and deeds first.** The intuitive inquiry leads to the prioritization of action over theory. To tackle problems, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* researchers change their actions rather than stop to contemplate sophisticated academic commentary. Some quick responses are better than complicated explications in a dynamic situation. Furthermore, concrete steps may shift theoretical perspectives. In a complex network of multiple factors, researchers need to examine the issue from various viewpoints. If they refuse to act before finding an impeccable explanation, they are fixated on one perspective, often arbitrarily chosen, to the restriction of their intellectual exploration. To deal with compounded issues, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members change what they say and do for a better outcome.

**(15) Using everyone's experience as a shared resource.** The principles we have examined so far transform a troubled *Tojisha* into a catalyst who inspires all those concerned to recall their relevant experiences and restructure them to fit the current issue. Once a suffering person openly acknowledges their challenge to other members who understand how vulnerable people can be when they have problems, the sufferer ceases to be a deserted underdog. The person changes themselves into a social agent to deal with the problem, receiving support from other *Tojisha-Kenkyu* members. Those members, in turn, learn from the *Tojisha* about how to cope with sensitive situations with a sense of humor. They avoid passing self-righteous judgment and change their epistemology when necessary. Expert members acknowledge the limitations of their expertise, while newcomers encourage themselves to contribute to the joint inquiry in their unique way—both the experienced and the inexperienced train themselves to separate problems from the *Tojisha* as a person. The trouble maker may be a problem-owner, but that does not justify the stigmatization. All members of *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, in other words, behave as calm, disciplined researchers. They objectify the trouble to control the situation. They look at a bigger picture to stop finger-pointing or self-torment. They are no longer obsessed with perfect solutions or explanations. These practically-minded researchers perceive subtle clues that abstract minds fail to notice. They value actions, occasionally attain perspectives they never anticipated, and manage the state of affairs in a better way. All in all, *Tojisha-Kenkyu* is a profound learning experience for all of those concerned. Knowledge of all participants becomes a shared resource. The *Tojisha-Kenkyu* is an evolving network of people who jointly learn to help those who help themselves.

### **Implications of Tojisha-Kenkyu**

Following the *Tojisha-Kenkyu*, we may establish some dictums for practitioner research. Below are maxims that practitioner research may benefit from following. The numbers correspond to those of the *Tojisha-Kenkyu* principles.

#### **(1) From success stories to true stories**

It is a well-known but conveniently disregarded fact that academic journals publish more papers with successful results than those without. Given this bias, some researchers under publication pressure may extract only a favorable portion of their project. In our field, teachers continually hear success stories with formulae for excellent class performance. Novice teachers may emulate and fail, as the conference presentations contain little contextual information on

the praxes. Seasoned participants wonder whether academic research may have little to do with the praxes of teaching. However, if we shift the paradigm from technical rationality to practical wisdom that seriously considers complexity, meaning, plurality, and empowerment, we can change the narratives of conferences entirely. Teachers can then mutually admit their vulnerability and openly discuss their embarrassing situations. The norm of the narrative will be true stories with shaded nuances, not success stories with manufactured clarity. We believe teachers benefit more from truthful narratives than from the formula of success that only provides a decontextualized generalization of simple causality.

## **(2) Don't solve a problem *for* someone; face it *with* them**

We should respect the autonomy of every teacher and learner, particularly when they are in trouble. It would benefit no one, in the long run, to patronize them with a solution. Everyone, as an autonomous being, deserves to experience what their life offers. However, this is not a suggestion for non-interference. All of us should be ready to help a troubled person when they decide to help themselves. Researchers, in particular, ought to invite teachers and learners to joint inquiries. In practitioner research, teachers are no longer mere recipients of helpful knowledge from controlling or condescending academics. All participants in the classroom are researchers of their issues, and professional scholars in teacher education must reinvent themselves to be their co-researchers.

## **(3) Explore the social background of a private problem**

Teachers alone are not entirely responsible for undesired outcomes in the classroom. In a complex web of factors in the real world, the roots of troubles extend beyond their private sphere to social domains where all citizens should be concerned. In the process of excessive individualization (Bauman, 2001), we attribute failures to a single person. However, the personal accusation does not help those experiencing difficulties, as they may only suppress the issue furthermore. We need to realize that problems are both private and social. Analytical efforts are necessary to connect what seem to only be private matters with social problems. Practitioner researchers should view classroom problems both from individual and social viewpoints.

## **(4) Encourage the use of non-literal language**

Scientists are trained to restrict their language use to literal expressions that only describe facts. Storytellers are not. They effectively use figurative language to broaden our imagination through narratives. One of these techniques is the use of humor. Humorous expressions are often non-literal depictions that liberate us from current understanding. Practitioner research should allow the use of humor and figurative rhetoric at large in writing. After all, a study for practitioners aims to elucidate a complex, dynamic process of sense-making of teachers and learners. If it restricts the language use as natural science does, it loses its potential to account for the complex matters that novels and historical writings do (White, 1980, 2014). Furthermore, if we are practitioner researchers on *language* teaching, we cannot afford to neglect the narrative aspect, one of the most significant features of human language that distinguishes it from machine language.

### **(5) From privileged scientific research to open collaborative inquiry**

Practitioner research needs an open mind. A liberal stance is a key to intellectual honesty for dealing with the vulnerability of human beings. When we celebrate open-mindedness, a joint inquiry would be more meaningful and pluralistic. With or without expertise, everyone is invited to bring their perspective to the problem. Teachers seek help from their learners. (If they want to support learning, what is wrong in seeking advice from the owners of learning?) Furthermore, troubled practitioners can even ask non-professional persons such as their friends and family members. As we have established, every problem is both private and social. Those without professional prejudice who well understand the practitioner personally may provide surprising insights that colleagues of limited interest cannot offer. Practitioner research should be part of everyday activities that are open to all people.

### **(6) Be ready to overwrite your prior knowledge**

In open inquiries, experts are often challenged by laypersons who ask questions that trained professionals never anticipated. Established intellectual authorities need to be open to intellectual humility, something they can become distanced from when they do not engage with views from outside of academia. In practitioner research, established researchers must be ready to overwrite their knowledge, just as if they were non-experts. Their prior wisdom may often be relevant, but ‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy,’ as Hamlet says to Horatio.

### **(7) Learn the negative side of standardized thoughts and actions**

All societies require their members to go through the process of socialization. Citizens are expected to adhere to common codes of thoughts and actions. When the majority of the community perceives that the conventions of a given society are apparently neglected by a conspicuous minority, whether it is a group of youngsters or immigrants, for example, the entire population must pay the price of the social conflicts that result. Newcomers, whether they are young or foreign, need to adapt to mainstream culture, while the social majority, in turn, must be ready to change their mindset according to new social trends. In this sense, we need to acknowledge the downside of standardized thoughts and actions. Standardization in excess may be close to oppression, which prevents potential innovations. Modern human civilization, as we know it, is the product of design and evolution. Excessive regulation of words and deeds as part of the social order decreases the range of selections people make and may eradicate the emergence of deviations that are essential to evolutionary processes. In our field, some public educational agencies in Japan discourage comments that are critical of governmental policies. Practitioner research, however, must empower the voices of the suppressed and disregarded. It should promote questioning of the current climate of education, if not its flat rejection.

### **(8) Disempower your ego to empower collaborative communication**

Educational experts, both professional researchers and long-serving veterans, must fight against their impulses to impose their “answers” on the complex problems that practitioners experience. The authoritative imposition of “correct” views silences other members and limits the analytical framework of inquiry to the one that the influential members favor. To analyze a

complex problem, a plurality of perspectives is needed. Practitioner researchers should listen to all members of the joint inquiry regarding what they perceive from their standpoint. Experts, in particular, must refrain from conveying the sentiment that practitioners should remain silent if they want to learn.

### **(9) Don't hate the messenger**

In the hyperactive culture of “publish or perish,” researchers prefer teachers and learners who produce positive results. As a result, they may disregard underachievers who, in turn, stigmatize themselves because they fail to meet expectations. Teachers may begin to neglect poorly-performing students, just as a thoughtless king might condemn messengers with bad news. Practitioner researchers must stay away from this cognitive shortcut of “they are the problem.” They first need to separate the issue of research from the person who is caught up in the problem. Thoughtful researchers should also acknowledge the possibility that the issue may lead to a breakthrough. Confronting truths we are loath to face may lead us to a new horizon of understanding. For that to happen, practitioner researchers need to respect all those who are concerned irrespective of the results of their accomplishments.

### **(10) Don't be a martyr**

In their efforts to appreciate negative information, practitioner researchers should not martyr themselves to “save” underachievers. The theory of complexity tells us that none of us can guarantee the way to the best result. All we can strive for is a pluralistic collaboration for better exploration of the meaning potentials that the situation offers. Experts and other inquiring parties are exempt from the responsibility for the complete solution of the problem. All participants must care for each other so as not to exhaust themselves. Practitioner research must be sustainable, just as Exploratory Practice maintains. (Hanks, 2017)

### **(11) From *linguistics applied to different disciplines remixed***

Experts are trained to focus on the precisely defined area of their academic domain. While this self-restraint works for the rigor of their research, it may be counter-productive for viewing a bigger picture of a complex problem. The area of practitioner research may be included as one of the sub-fields of *applied linguistics*. However, we should never confuse the term with *linguistics applied*. Complex problems in the real world are never so simple that we only need one particular discipline (i.e., linguistics). Practitioner research is neither *linguistics applied* nor *psychology applied*. Scholars may categorize it as part of applied linguistics or applied psychology for their professional convenience, but we argue that we should conceive it as *different disciplines remixed*. Remixing is possible and desirable when intellectual resources are abundant (Kelly, 2017). The Information Revolution has enabled us to quickly access and learn to use the findings of different areas of academic inquiry. When we understand them correctly, we may combine them to innovate our understandings. In the field of applied linguistics, we have already witnessed the introduction of sociology, politics, economics, anthropology, and gender studies to the current debate, to the extent that we begin to wonder whether the term of applied linguistics is too limiting. Practitioner research, one of the most wide-ranging studies in applied linguistics, may deserve a new conception of a remixed inquiry of different academic

disciplines.

### **(12) (In)completeness is in the eye of the beholder**

One shows a narrow intellectual framework when one claims to have an exhaustive understanding of, or perfect solution for, a given complex situation. In a complex system, where no one can overview all possibilities, there is no such thing as complete knowing. The other side of the same coin is that when someone complains of only having an incomplete understanding or imperfect plan, they miss the point of complexity; “incompleteness” or “imperfectness” is the normal state of affairs, not something one should lament. Lamenting incompleteness is merely the projection of a negative perception. Practitioner researchers should start with what is given: we should stop wishing for a missing piece for the perfect picture. We only ever exploit the current resources by inventing combinations for a better outcome. Practitioner researchers should not delude themselves by hoping for something complete or deploring something incomplete.

### **(13) Don't disfigure the problem for your theoretical convenience**

Practitioner researchers heed attention to nuanced and intuitive non-verbal messages that the body of every participant is signaling delicately. They may sometimes betray their prior theoretical framework or even contradict each other. (Unconsciousness is well-known for its inscrutability to the rational mind.) Analysts may feel tempted to distort what they perceive to fit their theoretical assumptions. As all models are a result of simplification, the selection of information that works to their advantage is not entirely worthy of blame, particularly when they are studying a complex system. However, practitioner researchers should limit the disfigurement of their perception as much as possible. They should follow a phenomenological tradition (“things as they appear to be”) and describe what they apprehend. Making modifications to the phenomena for the sake of their favorite theory should be the last thing they should do, if at all.

### **(14) Research-in-action over research-on-action**

Analogous to the argument Schön (1983) advanced about ‘reflection-on-action’ and ‘reflection-in-action,’ we advocate for the distinction between *research-on-action* and *research-in-action*. The former is a traditional style of study where analysts observe the issue from a detached position. The researchers do not involve themselves in the betterment of the situation. On the other hand, research-in-action is an ongoing process of inventing actions as the researchers deem necessary in the real world. They relate their continuing trials to their ongoing analysis and vice versa. They act as they observe, and think as they move. Research-in-action is what practitioner researchers must prioritize over research-on-action.

### **(15) The more, the better**

The outcome that practitioner researchers want is the overall improvement of the situation, not a crystal-clear theoretical account. An elegant explanation is most likely to come from the vantage point of a single fixed perspective, but it misses a large portion of what we perceive as our realities. When researchers increase the number of observational aspects, on the other hand, the descriptions become less organized and may even lose their internal consis-



tency. However, if the plurality of views is what makes our reality (Arendt, 2019), practitioner researchers should welcome different competing views in their accounts. Practitioner research prioritizes relevance over rigor and embraces pluralistic descriptions.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, practitioner research that earnestly considers the epistemological issues of complexity, meaning, plurality, and empowerment are radically different from the ideal of standardized experimental studies, appearing more like a historical account or nonfiction novel. It is, however, no more or less valuable in itself than technical, rational research. The two types of inquiry are merely different in epistemology and purpose. If the academic motivation is to explain context-free universal laws of simplified causality at the macro level, the choice is standardized scientific research. If, on the other hand, the research interest is to support practitioners in the complex web of real-world problems, one should opt for the ideal of the descriptive and interpretive narrative format in the humanities and engage in practitioner research. This exploration for and with practitioners will innovate our understanding of what academic inquiry should look like. Its outcome is no longer a clear explanation or a guaranteed formula for success. It requires patient, thoughtful, and creative interpretations on the part of the reader. The reader needs cognitive and emotional maturity to be empowered by understanding the meanings of the complex interactions among pluralistic people. However, the reward is ensured as is evident from the fact that all peoples across the globe, from ancient times to the present, have benefitted from the culture of narratives. With practitioner research, language teachers should return to the tradition of the humanities with a renewed awareness.

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### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 16K04770.