# Practitioner Research Competency Framework

Translated and adapted by members of the Practitioner Research Network (2026). Original version by Van der Donk and Van Lanen (2015).

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## Background and Development

The framework was originally developed as a Dutch competency framework for practitioner research (Van der Donk & Van Lanen, 2015) to support the integration of practitioner research into professional education and practice in health, social work and education. The present version builds on the broader Dutch body of knowledge on practitioner research, international practitioner research literature, and the experiences of practitioners, educators and researchers involved in practitioner research networks. The framework has been used by higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Belgium to support curriculum design and course development.

## What Makes This Framework Distinctive?

This framework combines widely recognized general research competencies with the specific competencies needed to conduct practitioner research in professional contexts.
In addition to formulating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, practitioner researchers need to work collaboratively with stakeholders, integrate different sources of knowledge, and contribute to learning, innovation and practice improvement.
The framework therefore combines general research competencies with competencies that support collaboration, stakeholder engagement, knowledge integration and the application of research outcomes in professional practice.
The competencies in this framework are described as observable practitioner research activities. The knowledge, skills and professional dispositions underlying these activities are not described.

## Foundation

Practitioner research is understood as

> Empirical studies conducted by social workers, nurses, and other health professionals [or practitioners in other fields such as education] to answer questions resulting from their practices. The research takes place as an interaction between the practitioner doing the research and his or her colleagues, patients, or clients. The primary goal of practitioner research is to improve one's own practice (Sheikhatarri et al., 2022, p. 2).

The practitioner researcher plays a central role in the research process and is expected to conduct research activities as well as facilitate, coordinate and support meaningful stakeholder participation. Depending on the purpose and context of the research, relevant stakeholders, such as clients, pupils, students, citizens, colleagues, managers, partner organizations and community members, may contribute to different stages of the research process.

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## Cross-Cutting Competencies for Practitioner Research

The following competencies apply to all stages of practitioner research and are addressed throughout the framework.

### 1. Information Literacy

The practitioner researcher is able to locate, evaluate, integrate and use information from a variety of sources to support inquiry, decision-making and practice improvement.

### 2. Digital Literacy

The practitioner researcher is able to make responsible, effective and critical use of digital technologies, digital data and digital research tools throughout the practitioner research process.

### 3. Collaboration

The practitioner researcher is able to establish, maintain and facilitate productive collaboration with stakeholders throughout the practitioner research process.

### 4. Ethical and Professional Judgement

The practitioner researcher is able to critically evaluate actions and decisions against ethical, moral and professional standards and values.

### 5. Written Communication

The practitioner researcher is able to communicate ideas, research findings, interventions and recommendations effectively in writing for a variety of audiences.

### 6. Oral Communication

The practitioner researcher is able to communicate ideas, research findings, interventions and recommendations effectively through dialogue, presentation and discussion.

### 7. Critical Reflection

The practitioner researcher is able to critically reflect on their own actions, assumptions, professional role, learning processes and interactions with others.

## Practitioner Research Competencies

### **Competency 1** Positioning Practitioner Research

The practitioner researcher is able to position practitioner research in health, nursing, social work, and education within broader processes of professional learning and development.

A. Relates practitioner research to learning, professional development, systematic practice and research.
B. Describes the core components (stages) of practitioner research and explains their interrelationships.
C. Distinguishes between descriptive, comparative, definitional, evaluative, explanatory and design-oriented research purposes.
D. Describes the key characteristics of practitioner research.
E. Applies principles of methodological quality, usefulness and transferability in practitioner research.

### **Competency 2:** Situating Practitioner Research in Practice

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The practitioner researcher is able to situate practitioner research within the specific context of health, nursing, social work or education.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Accounts for the characteristics of health, nursing, social work or educational settings as practitioner research environments
B. Determines which stakeholders should be involved and how they can contribute to the practitioner research process.
C. Applies ethical principles and professional standards in practitioner research.
D. Establishes and maintains productive working relationships with relevant stakeholders and professional partners throughout the practitioner research process.

## **Competency 3:** Orientation

The practitioner researcher is able to identify, select and analyze a practice problem from multiple perspectives.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Identifies and selects practice problems.
B. Maps the context of professional practice.
C. Analyzes the practice problem from different perspectives.
D. Connects the practice problem to relevant theory and knowledge.
E. Clearly describes the practice problem.

## **Competency 4:** Focusing

The practitioner researcher is able to position a practice problem within the professional knowledge base, identify knowledge gaps and formulate relevant research questions.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Provides an in-depth analysis of the practice problem, drawing on both theoretical and practice-based knowledge sources.
B. Clearly defines the scope of the practitioner research and provides a rationale for which aspects of the practice problem are included and excluded.
C. Formulates a research objective.
D. Formulates research questions.

## **Competency 5:** Planning

The practitioner researcher is able to develop a realistic research plan that enables the collection of sufficient and useful data.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Selects appropriate methods of data collection.
B. Selects and actively involves relevant participants throughout the subsequent research activities.
C. Plans and describes research activities in a logical and feasible manner.
D. Develops a coherent plan with the active support of relevant stakeholders.

## **Competency 6:** Data Collection

The practitioner researcher is able to collect data in a variety of ways in order to gain a reliable and valid understanding of professional practice.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Collects data through the systematic study of literature and documents.

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B. Collects data through systematic observation.
C. Collects data through interviews, questionnaires, tests and other forms of stakeholder consultation.
D. Employs alternative methods of data collection to align with the characteristics of the practice context and relevant stakeholders where appropriate.
E. Collects data through visits to other departments, organizations or institutions.

## **Competency 7:** Analysis and Conclusion

The practitioner researcher is able to analyze theoretical and practice-based data systematically and draw well-founded conclusions.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Analyzes quantitative data using appropriate analytical methods.
B. Analyzes qualitative data using appropriate analytical methods.
C. Draws evidence-informed conclusions and clearly explains the relationship between findings and conclusions.
D. Formulates and justifies design principles (in case of design research).

## **Competency 8:** Design and Innovation

The practitioner researcher is able to systematically develop, test and implement interventions designed to improve practice.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Generates design ideas and selects the most appropriate intervention(s) to address the practice problem.
B. Develops and elaborates a well-founded intervention design.
C. Tests and evaluates the intervention design in practice and uses evaluation data to make informed refinements where necessary.

## **Competency 9:** Documentation and Presentation

The practitioner researcher is able to communicate research findings and facilitate their application in practice.

This means the practitioner researcher:
A. Identifies relevant audiences and stakeholders.
B. Communicates findings and outcomes to stakeholders.
C. Supports the implementation of improvements and innovations.
D. Evaluates and critically appraises the research process and its outcomes.

### Key Sources

Van der Donk, C., & Van Lanen, B. (2015). *Beoordelen van praktijkonderzoek.* Uitgeverij Coutinho.

Sheikhattari, P., Wright, M.T., Silver, G., Van der Donk, C., & Van Lanen, B. (2022). *Practitioner Research for Social Work, Nursing, and the Health Professions*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

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