Management Theory and Practice: Bridging the Gap through Multidisciplinary Lenses

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Editorial

Management Theory and Practice: Bridging the Gap through Multidisciplinary Lenses

Professor Douglas Brownlie of University of Stirling, UK, Dr Paul Hewer of University of Strathclyde, UK, Dr Beverly Wagner of University of Strathclyde, UK, Professor Göran Svensson of Oslo School of Management, Norway

Recent years have seen a turn towards 'practice' as an analytic object in management studies. Informed by the wider turn towards practice in contemporary social theory (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny, 2001) sympathies have also grown towards research designs that offer richer and more penetrative treatments of context and process. Growing investment in practice-related research programmes, especially in strategy (eg Whittington, 2006, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2008; Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007) has produced busy schedules of presentations in practice-related tracks at EGOS, BAM, EURAM and AOM. Similar movements are underway in marketing and consumer research (Araujo, 2007; Brownlie, 1991; Hackley, Skalen & Stenfors, 2008; Holt, 1995; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2007; Kjellberg, 2008; Warde, 2005). These efforts continue to attract scholarly investment, leading to further development of the knowledge base of 'practice' in management and organization studies.

In some ways the practice turn in management scholarship was animated by wider institutionally framed concerns about the perceived character of management research, expressed in terms of the problematic status of its 'relevance' for management practice. Indeed, debate concerning the general topic of knowledge production in management studies led, in the UK at least, to a much publicised chracterisation of management research on the basis of the degree to which users and producers of knowledge products were integrated within managed networks of activity and collaboration. Starkey and Madan (2001) positioned that debate in terms of mode 1 (M1K) and mode 2 (M2K) knowledge production[1], arguing that the M1K approach to knowledge production "*is no longer sustainable*" (ibid: S5); and that M2K is the way ahead for reforming university business schools seeking to close the 'relevance gap', or otherwise return to viability through "*[reworking] the theory –practice alliance*" (Weick, 2001:S73). In response to this a wider repertoire of positions on 'relevance' has opened channels of collaboration across disciplinary areas, making possible more interdisciplinary research of the sort that generates relevance by building interfacing processes into the research activity itself, as exemplified by the UK's Rural Land Use Programme (Marzano, Carss and Bell 2006). We have also witnessed the development of Institutional carriers of 'relevance', such as the Advanced Institute of Management.

[1] Starkey and Madan (2001) argue that the way to bridge the so-called relevance gap between management academics and practitioners is through structures that encourage and reward M2K rather than M1K. In summary, M1K can be characterised as disciplinary-based and governed by the academic interests of a specific research community. It is driven by scientific interests and is more concerned with theory than practice. M2K is crucially concerned with knowledge in the context of application. It is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous and is concerned with relevance to the problems of knowledge-in-use, practice and accountability.

For this special issue we urged potential contributors from management disciplines to consider once again the putative relationship between theory and practice, asking what the character of that relationship might be? We asked if that relationship matters; and if it does, how and in what ways does it matter? Perhaps, as we speculate above, circumstances have moved on, and the relationship is no longer workable or interesting in the form of a direct link between knowledge-making and its utilisation in the field of occupational practice? We suggest that 'relevance' and 'being critical' are qualities widely attributed to efforts that close, contest or interrogate the gap between theory and practice - between the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge products by those practicing in the knowledge economy, whether as situated members of the community of managerial practitioners, or members of the community of academic practitioners. The various qualities of reflexive skepticism are well worth fostering and preserving. We attempt to contribute to this.

Introductory Themes

For many academic practitioners of business and management, closing this so-called gap has assumed the proportions of an heroic struggle between the high-mindedness of theory and the allure of pragmatic everyday trials and the tribulations of heroic practitioners struggling in 'the real world'. For the editors, such black and white views are ultimately unfulfilling and only seem to reify and sanctify the ideal of the theory/practice divide. That is, positioning management practice on the one hand as romantic, but ultimately mundane and un-reflexive as habitual action; while on the other hand there is theory, the sphere of abstract knowledge, framed within the academy and characterized as dry, erudite, perhaps reflexive, but reductive and limited in scope.

Accounts of the gap between theory and practice in management typically employ the rhetoric of 'distance' between interlocking cultures; in this case between those organized around the totem 'scholarship' and those organized around the totem 'practice'. They write about the former needing to get closer to the latter by means of getting under the skin of 'reality' in real-world practice. The nature of this so-called knowledge crisis is commonly understood in terms of the wide and widening gap between received wisdoms of management practice that inform scholarship and the contemporary 'reality' of work within various management occupations.

Close observers of the world of managerial work note the dismantling of traditional organizational structures and radical new arrangements being put in place for (re)organization of work generated by business functions. Such accounts typically employ the fashionable rhetoric of business process re-engineering, flattened hierarchies, downsizing, and outsourcing etc. In this setting, the nature of the crisis of 'relevance' is commonly understood in terms of radically changing business environments demanding innovative solutions and new competencies of work organizations and their staff.

Both sets of rhetoric employ the construct 'relevance', as if it is a transparent and innocent term qualifying the relation between representations of practice and the reality of contemporary managerial work. They reveal an assumption that the 'real picture' of what goes on in management work is available to researchers and can be apprehended, so that 'relevance' is a matter of making appropriate choices concerning the bootstrapping of theory and methodology (Brownlie, Hewer & Ferguson, 2007). In other words representations of management practice can be rendered more 'accurate', or truer to 'reality' by means of sound research design choices and execution. Brownlie and Saren (1997) debate this, arguing that the gap which is said to exist between management practice and theoretical accounts of this practice can be understood as being symptomatic of tensions residing within contemporary academic management discourse, wherein different interests struggle to assert themselves through competing assertions about accountability.

To be sure, 'relevance' of management research to the problems faced by 'user groups' is an important consideration in attracting the interest of external funding agencies. In this context 'relevance' is understood as a quality attributable to knowledge that brings the communities of scholarship and practice together, to the benefit of both. Embedded in this view of 'relevance' is the understanding that management scholarship and practice are somehow different, in ways that are well understood by the various academic management disciplines and their related occupational groups.

> *"This paper explores the idea that the gaps between theory and practice are firmly embedded in the conceptual foundations on which the whole practice of educational theory has been built and will only be eliminated by eliminating some of the dubious assumptions in terms of which education theory and its relationship to [teaching] practice have always been understood." (Carr, 1980: 60).*

This special issue contributes to our understanding of the problems of thinking 'theory *into* practice' through the framework of cultures of 'relevance' and the work of competing representations that seek to capture one occupational culture and then express it in terms of another. As Carr (1980:61) argues, in the context of the gap between the "abstract and highly general principles produced by educational theory and the concrete situations that teachers face in the classroom, no single account of closing the gap between theory and practice is sufficient to successfully render the diversity of understandings and experiences of 'relevance' within the discipline, its related profession and other stakeholders". 'Relevance' as a strategy for closing the gap is seen as a site of contestation; and the contemporary crisis in defining this terrain within the theory-practice axis is considered the latest in a long line of critical episodes in the development of available management discourse (Brownlie, Ferguson & Hewer, 2007). The construct 'relevance' offers a convenient "prism" through which to understand perennial debates about the balance between putting theory *into* practice and practice *into* theory in management and business subjects. Current notions of 'relevance' are located with respect to historical developments of the apparatus and accoutrements of management research as a disciplined domain of knowledge-making and education-based social reproduction. The emergent institutional structures and processes that govern the conduct of knowledge production in management have evolved over time in response to questions asked by circumstance and power, particularly regarding the functioning of programmatic statements about the domain of practice. We argue that despite the pressure to make management knowledge relevant, our current understanding of how 'relevance' is *accomplished* and *performed* is inadequate to the growing demands of accountability and accessibility in research. This is a compelling issue, made all the more so by the apparent silence of the literature on the matter. That said, the formula for publication in senior management journals does include space for managerial implications as a matter of editorial necessity. However, a close reading of the material typically provided here reveals a secure but limited understanding of 'relevance' as a source of disciplinary capital based on the notion of 'relevance' as an event, as an outcome, as an argument staged in an academic text, not a process of work that itself needs management. The editors argue here that 'closing the gap' is not merely a quality of knowledge that results from its asserted applicability to the declared problems of 'practice'. For this quality of knowledge is not an end in itself. The position of power and the discourse of 'relevance' in management makes possible appreciation of what the competition is about, for the coordinates of its contested claims are those of influence and privilege.

<u>The Contributions</u>

The contributions in this special issue form a small part of the current discussion which is reverberating throughout academic communities in many disciplines. Further to our call a wide range of interesting papers were submitted and we thank all those who initially responded to the call. We invite you to read the articles which we, (and reviewers), considered most significant and think carefully about their contribution to the continuing debate.

The first contribution by Jacqueline Fendt, Renata Kaminska-Labbe and Wladimar Sachs argues that there needs to be a return to the principles of pragmatism, and through this philosophy the relationships between theory and practice can be addressed. They tell us pragmatism can be traced to the writings of James Dewey, William James and C.S. Pierce, and the desire to produce 'useful knowledge'. Of course the idiosyncratic nature of organisations poses a problem for theory building and they suggest that the much malingned action research approach is an appropriate methodology to enhance both the relevance of management research and assist theory building. The notion of relevance is important and requires collaboration between practitioner and academic. Together they should be addressing contemporatry problems and converting knowledge into practical solutions, while at the same time encouraging a grounded approach to theory building. The authors endeavour to bridge the gap by offering a set of pragmatic proposals to improve the relevance of management knowledge, thereby characterizing the practitioner as reflexive – a practicing reflector – that is, as ad hoc researchers who 'make do' through working within their own tacit knowledge to produce their own theories in action, or as they explain*: "It is in this process that they learn, modifying theories that underlie their actions, rendering in the process explicit what was hereto tacit."* (this volume). Practitioners need to be able to make speedy assessments of situations because the "real world" cannot tolerate the slow, ponderous, process of the academic. It is only by academics working through these problems in "action", can the gap between the two be bridged. The sentiments in this paper are echoed by others within this issue.

This theme is continued in the second paper of the special issue, by Ian Fillis and Ruth Rentschler, which calls for adoption of a metaphorical approach to management practice to overcome contemporary problems (ambiguity and chaotic market conditions) of the business environment. They argue for a better understanding of the *"mutually beneficial relationship between the two realms";* in the pursuit of relevance, academics and practioners have different views of the gap. Academics can learn from practitioners and practitioners can also learn from academics. However, many choose not to, perhaps, because of the often perceived inaccessibility of academic language." (this volume).

Turning to small business marketing they suggest that often daily endeavours of practitioners should be considered as artistic, on the basis that *"it is uniquely created by the individual and relates specifically to his/her company."* (this volume). Equally the artist "solves problems, develops strategies and provokes society in general to think about issues that may not have been viewed as important before the production of the artistic work". Therefore, a more critically informed approach to understanding marketing should take on board the fact that metaphor is often employed as a basis for understanding – "to disturb the status quo" – enabling practitioners to act and at the same time allowing academics to stand back and objectively compare and contrast particular contexts in order to assses generalisability of that knowledge. From a methodological perspective, this paper calls for more qualitative research which grounds practice into theory and argues that exploring metaphor also serves to create a language that can be understood by practioners and academcs alike.

The article by Ross Brennan seeks an alternative approach arguing that we need a more detailed understanding of the nature of this gap. To do so, he offers a glimpse of three cognate fields within management – economcis, nursing and marketing –reflecting on the nature of the theory/practice debate and how it has taken different forms in these areas. For example, within economics he details criticisms based on the ontological assumptions which lie behind their ways of understanding contemporary reality. Thus *"economics has an idealised, mechanistic view of the world"*; whereas in nursing, focus is placed upon the urge for evidence based practice and accordingly the gap is much reduced. An up-to-date knowledge of current research is critically important in nursing, as it is highly relevant to nurses every day work, so they must have access to on-line journals and are actively encouraged to search for evidence to support their regular practice. This paper reiterates views in the first two articles of this edition although in marketing, Brennan argues that far too much academic theory is found to be irrelevant. Finally with regards to marketing he claims that marketing practioners, rarely have access to academic writing, consequently do not read them and assume such material is irrelvent to them. Brennan lays the blame for this squarely at the feet of acadmic institutions because they do not, or rarely, reward applied research. However, all is not lost as he points out that perhaps the divide should actually be encouraged on the basis that marketing theory can develop outwith the confines of boundaries, time frames and commercial deadlines. This point is clearly emphasised in the Fillis & Rentschler paper while practioners continue to find solutions to immediate problems and develop "theory in use"; a point also made by Fendt *et al*.

The following article is an invited commentary by Professor Michael Baker who points out that *"...what academics should research and teach that might be of relevance to practioners is not new"*. The subject of marketing is dynamic and accordingly academics need to continually re-appraise and revise ideas. As marketing is such a relatively new discipline, it suffers from a lack of theoretical heritage. Nevertheless there is a defined body of knowledge acting as a substantive grounding termed "principles of marketing". This paper highlights the important point that many disciplines are applied and concerned with finding answers to "real world" problems, while others such as marketing are founded on many disciplines each based on an accepted theoretical base in its own right. The main thrust of this paper is that in the past lecturers in Marketing had actual experience of the practice of marketing, while today, academic qualifications suffice. Furthermore, the more research oriented the institution, the less it will look for evidence of professional practice. In Baker's view this is where the gap resides.

Barry Ardley offers another way of thinking about this theory/practice gap in terms of the appropriateness of academic textbooks. He argues that such texts, with their penchant for universal truths and positivistic approaches to social reality serve only to obscure and fail to capture the interpretive nature of knowledge. Drawing on insights from ethnography, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, Ardley argues that such traditions have generally been under-utilised for the study of marketing management. To counter this, he conducted a number of phenomenologically-inspired interviews with marketing managers which reiterated the idea of the poverty of textbook approaches to knowledge production, decision-making and understanding. Like Fendt *et al* (this volume), Ardley's data reveals the importance of intuition and tacit knowledge produced by marketing managers working in local contexts, or as one of his repondents reveals about their practices: *"...they have a gut feel for what is going to work and what isn't going to work"*. In his view, what matters are the narratives and stories which management practioners tell to make sense of their own world; an approach which unfortunately is not addressed in the majority of textbooks. Marketing knowledge is dynamic, not fixed. Many of the issues raised in Michael Baker's commentary are echoed here, that is, the need for marketing academics to have practical experience but he also encourages academic freedom to develop new theory. Students are the conduit of this knowledge to the real world, and are taught by academics who share their research and research articles with the students in the course of their teachings.

The implications of the academic-practitioner divide for marketing education is expanded upon in the final paper of the special issue by Edgar Centeno, Michael Harker, Essam Ibrahim and Lee-Wei Wang. In this paper, a piece of research was conducted, which examined postgraduate marketing education to determine if it met the expectations and requirements of current and future postgraduate students. They pointed out the lack of studies examining service quality in the UK higher education sector, and revealed that for many students what is termed a 'short term focus' is manifest. That is the MSc is considered by students as an end in itself, rather than the first step on a potential professional career ladder. The need to engender a change within our own pedagogic practices would thus appear long overdue. Or as Fendt et al (this volume) suggest when paraphrasing the work of Ghoshal (2005): *"If we do not truly seek to understand and in a time frame that permits us to prepare our students better and in more timely manner for what expects them in practice, the gap between their learning years and textbooks and the reality 'out there' as they experience them, will become intolerable."*

Our next viewpoint is written by John Ramsay, and he looks at purchasing practice and theory and argues that the *"....field is currently obsessed with studying the effects of corporate bloating and this is generating a considerable gap between theory and practice."* He observes that this fixation with the concerns of large corporations has the effect of over-emphasising some subject areas and under-emphasising or entirely omitting others. Over-emphasis of, for example, P&S functions' strategic contribution is deemed mis-guided given that most companies, certainly in the United Kingdom, are tiny given that the purchasing function comprises the managing director. He goes on to articulate his view that the use of chain and network metaphors as a means of explanation is, for most companies, unhelpful and of little practical import. Small companies, in general, have no ability to influence or indeed "control" their upstream supply chains. At the same time, there is a concomitant under-emphasis and failure to understand P&S phenomena from the SME perspective. Ramsay also suggests that there is an entire absence of study of the commercial negotiation process, and since this is a core purchasing activity, the fields' failure to explore the subject is emblematic of the gap between theory and practice in Purchasing & Supply.

Morris Holbrook's trenchant and entertaining commentary completes this special issue. By means of a powerful literary device, Holbrook develops a radical stance on the theme of this special issue. It is now over thirty years since Holbrook and several other innovators in the field of Consumer Research argued against the institutionalisation of links of accountability between the so-called managerial commnunity and the marketing knowledge-making practices and products of the academic community. Indeed, the present commentary is a veritable retrospective of views that he has developed and published over three decades. To some it may seem that he adopts a rather staunch viewpoint, while to others it expresses how undesirable and even deplorable it is that we should even be having this conversation. In the spirit of the best metaphysicists, his paper employs a literary conceit that posits simple parallels between narrative devices employed in the children's fairy story 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' and those used over the years in the narrative plot of the 'bridging the gap' story - perhaps, a fairy tale of modern marketing. He suggests that finding a resolution to the differences between scholarly inquiry and practical relevance in either teaching or research is nothing more that a compromise that *"merits opprobrium rather than approbation."* For, as he has argued over the years, "*there is a fatal flaw in the ethos of marketing that has made our discipline uniquely susceptible to the degrading influences that have distracted us collectively from critical issues of the role of marketing in society"* (2005:143). He refers of course to the powerful doctrine of narrowly defined managerial relevance and the privileged position that its supporters hold in the academy through their claims to performance-enhancing knowledge. The power of Holbrook's analysis resides in the observation that the blind pursuit of managerial relevance in marketing has guaranteed academic marketing's wider societal and theoretical irrelevance!

The themes and ideas running through these papers indicate that the gap between theory and practice is seen in similar ways, though some views are more radical than others. Academics like everyone else make choices. Firstly, they choose to enter the profession and do this for many reasons, autonomy, freedom, creativity, teaching......... However, often the type of research undertaken, applied or theoretical is a choice driven by external factors such as availability of funding, access to industry, insitutional strategies, industries attitude to academe, etc. As Marketing, Management and Purchasing and Supply are applied subjects, it is important that academic knowledge finds its way into these areas of business. If it does not, then the gap becomes a chasm.

Given the nature of the disciplines and fields, academic input into practice and vice versa is essential. Two-way knowledge diffusion feeds into theory building and practice, thereby encouraging relevance as well as influencing the gap. We ask for academics to embrace mixed methods, qualitative, quantitiative, action research, ethnography etc, and move away from positivistic methodologies. As it is almost impossible to get a conceptual paper accepted for review in many academic journals, researchers are forced into rigid slots reinforcing narrow methodologies.

There will always be a gap, that is the nature of things, but it should be organic in form changing, vibrant and dynamic, not static or ever growing until we are consumed into a black hole of academic obscurity. Academics should be allowed to pursue knowledge and theory for its own sake, to develop new ideas, to encourage creativity and lateral thinking. At the same time practitioners might consider changing their attitude to academe, especially in the UK.

Finally, the special issue ends on a call for change; a call to radicalise our approaches to understanding and ways of knowing; a call to re-evaluate our relations with practitioners; and a call to reimagine our ways of representing our knowledge to constituencies, that is fellow academics, practitioners and our students.

Welcome to the thought-provoking and challenging world of European Business Review!

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Yours sincerely,

Special Issue Co-Editors

Professor Douglas Brownlie of University of Stirling, UK
Dr Paul Hewer of University of Strathclyde, UK
Dr Beverly Wagner of University of Strathclyde, UK
Professor Göran Svensson of Oslo School of Management, Norway