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Engaged Scholarship and Academic Industrialism The Making of the Academic Industrialist Thinking & Research with Impact - Looking at Risk Management Approaches in Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper explores the long-standing debate on the researcher-practitioner relationship and the value added from engaged research and scholarship. The rise in more engaged and action-based scholarship has become significant with respect to the contribution to research. In this paper we address some of the fundamental concepts in engaged scholarship, experiential learning and the role of hard science and practice coming together to deliver value. To illustrate, we give an example of working on this in the context of risk management thinking with managers and how this is approached by both the academic and the practitioner or manager. The role of field-based research where a direct interaction with data collection from industry through all methods must be better developed to help facilitate the speed needed yet maintain the right level of rigor and accuracy needed. The paper concludes with the conclusion that a great deal that can be gained from the effective symbiotic relationship between researchers who bring academic vigour and scientific authenticity to research and the practitioners who bring both practicality and application to research.

1. Introduction:

The current and on-going discussion on the translation of theory into practice and the changing attitudes towards effective practitioner-academic contributions to various theories and practices in action-based research, evidence-based management etc. is very interesting. As explained by Bartunek (2008), the contemporary situation in fact offers possibilities for organisational development (OD) practitioner-scholars to develop much stronger links between their work and academic theories through the facilitation of practitioner-academic forums. These forums help address the development of skills and theorizing about them.

Interestingly in the early work of Shull (1962), he identifies that whilst management models may be designed for observation and predication, their most common purpose historically has been to prescribe managerial practice! He states a very interesting observation which very much remains true in the models of management and organisational behaviour:

“Prescriptive models gain a moralistic, as contrasted to realistic, cast from the original assumptions upon which they are based as well as from the specific restrictions held for the intermediate interpretations and conclusions at various stages in their derivation. Probably the most significant constraint is the assumption of organisational rationality. If managerial performance is assessed and rewarded according to organization accomplishment, the rational conclusion is that managers should identify with the group’s formal objective. To the degree that a member of an organisation is rational and sensitive, and his decisions are grounded in institutional values and experiences, prescriptive models reflect actual behaviour. None-the-less man does not completely adapt to, nor meet fully, the dictates of the formal organisation. In even the highly structured system, man has some natural proclivity for apathy, emotionalism and personal selfishness which can result in his behaviour being at odds with organisational purpose”.

The above is very significant because in the study of economic theory which stakeholder-value maximization and more recently stakeholder-value theories are based on, the assumptions underlying human behaviour in terms of rationality. Whilst this is fully recognised, these assumptions are however still

made because they allow for the building of a model based on the ideal situation. This is very important for both the academician and practitioner to recognise and appreciate as the main debates between both groups revolve very much around this point. Reality “in-practice” may be extremely difficult to confirm in the absence of a model to be put in place with some contours. Even in the early 1950’s Lewin who was instrumental in developing action-based research spoke of the “quasi-stable equilibrium” in which who proposed a process model of planned change in which three stages of unfreezing, shaping, or changing and then refreezing [Bartnuk (2008)].

These models although now challenged given the fast pace of change within organisations still forms the basis or reference base for discussions. It is beyond this discussion to return to the philosophical development in sciences and the epistemological developments in which today more social-constructionism and post-modernism models have prevailed in modern management sciences, however, positivist/empiricist persuasions still give scholars some degree of comfort or “emotional cushioning” when it comes to the models as it helps facilitate the validation exercises which can be said to be one of the functionalities of academic vigour.

Mir and Mir (2002) argued that in social sciences the impact of transformational power needs to be revived through the return to what they call the central thesis of sociological imagination which will help the science return to its purpose of a tool of intellectual and political transformation. They explain that in the search for effective organisational theories is a result of the on-going debates between philosophical and practical assumptions of organisational science. They quote Davenport and Prusak’s (1998): “knowledge is a fluid mixture of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides the framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of the knowers. In organisations, it often becomes imbedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms”. If this is true then not only does the practitioner become a significant tool in the application of theory into practice for the academic, but more so a source of knowledge (in itself) which must be accessed.

Van de Ven (2007) does identify with this and explains that although these more traditional and orthodox “scientific” approaches have prevailed with the inherited practices from our teachers and mentors, in the past 30 years in the social sciences there has been a significant “deconstruction” and “revision” of the traditional views. Most importantly he explains that regardless of the areas of philosophical foundation of sciences such as positivism, relativism, pragmatism, or realism – engaged scholarship requires a comparative understanding of these different philosophies of science and how practice can in fact influence these philosophies of science.

The model that Van de Ven (2007) offers in his book on engaged scholarship is quite simple, as with many management operational learning models cyclical and very powerful. Mapping the model against the comparison of the experiential learning model and a problem-solving process [adapted from Bostrom et al (1990) & Scott (2002)] we see very clearly the stages being linked. Stages 2 to 3 help in the development of a theory in “theory building”. The problem formulation is between stage 1 and 2 which is the thinking stage between Theory and Reality. Stages 3 to 4 between the abstract conceptualisation of the model and the active experimentation lay in-between Reality and the Solution and so on. See figures 1 and 2.

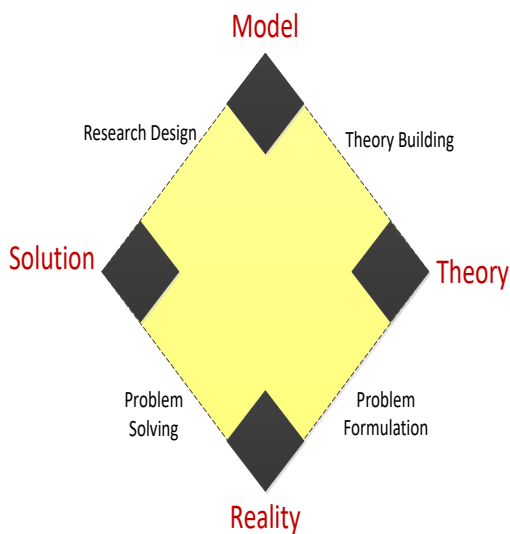


Figure 1: Engaged scholarship (simplified) diamond model [Source: Adapted from Van de Ven (2007)]

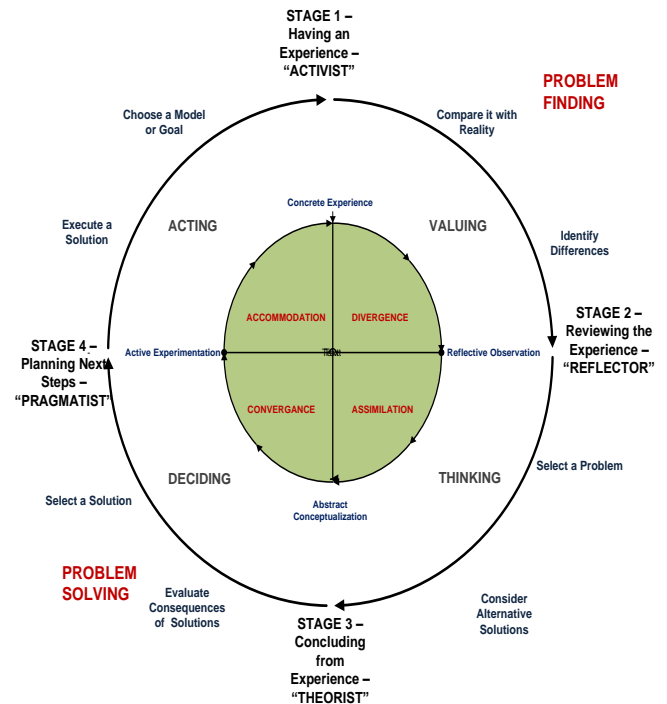


Figure 2: Comparison of the Experiential Learning Model and a Problem-Solving Process [Adapted from Bostrom et al (1990) & Scott (2002)], Source: Budworth and Al Hashmi (2014)¹

Furthermore, there is much greater scope of action-based research and engaged scholarship today than ever before, as the speed at which good research needs to be translated into application in business and industry has become one of the most critical factors. The speed at which research can be undertaken today with advanced search engines and the general power of the internet, means that from problem statement or research question to findings and recommendations for action can be done in a matter of a few weeks where it may have taken months or years in the past.

2. Hard Science vs. Practice

In some interesting work using narrative enquiry, Ospina and Dodge (2005) contrasted the workings of practitioners and academics working towards developing public administration scholarship. They

explain that one of the main drivers behind the development of this relationship between practitioners and academics has been the basic desire to connect in the interest of developing knowledge and better-informed professional practice. Due to the very nature of applied academic research within the context of social sciences which differs greatly from laboratory hard-science work due to the level of interactivity with the inhabitants of the world. They argue that whilst researchers remain very much committed to scholarship based on the theoretical and methodical rigor, they continue to address this whilst appreciating the practical relevance of knowledge.

It is probably the greater level of reflectivity undertaken in learning today as managers, requiring developing fast in a rapidly changing world which has driven both practitioners to connect with academics. Undoubtedly with many academics moving into practices in roles beyond hard-core research and development only and more into implementation, theories are finding breeding ground for flourishing. Likewise, with many more practitioner-friendly academic awards, qualifications, and training such as in advanced executive education, there are many practitioners who are also crossing into the whole of academia and trying to understand better how conceptual and theoretical models can help make informed business decisions. Much of the modern Organisational Development has been influenced by the premise of developing the Learning Organisation and especially in a business world today where being informed and having the right information at the right time and acting upon it has not only been significant to progress and being ahead of the competition, in certain industries it is a question of survival.

Let us, however, also understand some of the challenges facing this relationship and partnership between academics and practitioners. Much of the challenge lies in the fact that the critical nature of critical scholarship is very questioning of nature of the organisation at work and may promote at times what may be seen as non-objective views of organisational life and therefore causing some resistance especially when demanding the interests of the stakeholders of an organization. Mir and Mir (2002) talk of this abstracted empiricism which impacts on the inquiry into organisational theories, for example the ROI as a measure of a company's performance. This means that to calibrate the views on organisational performance a

more balanced view is required, and this can be better measured when both the practitioners and theoreticians work together albeit in the spirit of a sort of compromise!

3. Understanding Risk as a Concept and Practice Imperative

Let us consider the concepts of risk within an organisation. For example, March and Shapira (1987) explain in a study on managerial perspectives on risk and risk taking that managers take risks and depart by being removed from the typical or classical processes of choosing from among alternative actions in terms of the mean expected value and variance (risk) of the probability distributions over possible outcomes. They identify that manager's conceptions lead to their orientations being quite different from what would be expected from a decision-making theory perspective; because simply (1) they are insensitive to estimates of probabilities of possible outcomes; (2) their decisions are heavily influenced by the focus on performance targets; (3) they differentiate between risk-taking and gambling!

If we were to assume that such a study could be used to develop risk management programs, practitioners would need to understand the degree of validity of such conclusions and academics need to understand better what makes these managers depart from the otherwise probabilistic theoretical models and frameworks.

However, the level of leadership or managers reaction and approach to risk management is greatly influenced by not only their natural appetite for risk or discourse on risk aversion, but it is also greatly influenced by their experiences to date. For managers who have been through one or more significant experiences from their decision making or the decision making of the organisations they have worked for leading to loss or otherwise negative outcomes.

It could be further argued that the level of useful knowledge gained by leaders when managing risk in organisations is furthermore a function and the level of experiential learning and reflection. So, between the academic models, framework and systems they engage with and experiential knowledge gained over time,

managers become more effective especially when dealing with complex challenges and problems.

Let us look also at another example; a study conducted on the benefits of HR planning and organisational performances. The study showed that there was no real big difference in organizational performance from firms that had formal HR planning systems and others that did not. Although there has been literature, which has tried, through the development of theoretical models to establish that there was a pay-off of using formal HR planning systems in organisations. The performance measures in the study mainly looked at financial performance – and the study expected that some benefits would come from applying a formal HR planning system within an organisation or otherwise by comparison of 287 out of 500 companies. What was most striking from the conclusions of this study conducted by Nkomo (1987) is the desire in more recent years from scholars and practitioners to try to establish “empirically” the financial impacts of HR management programs and policies. Clearly as explained in their conclusions was that there are some relationships, but only through more engaged scholarship and greater practitioner involved review using a normative-descriptive analysis.

Even from a postmodernist perspective, Barge & Oliver (2003) explain the importance and significance of appreciating how practice influences the realities. In their post-structuralist enquiry into the appreciation of management practice they explain that through exploring manager’s perspectives, visions and experiences a better understanding of the organisational culture is achieved. Of course, this is done through various methods, of which reflexive dialogue is critical with various practitioners (managers). Their research also informs on that the reality is quite dynamic and changing and to understand the organisation at any given point in time that action-based and engaged scholarship is imperative.

In another study which employed a postal survey of some 155 organisations to look at employee involvement and the middle manager, the quantitative analysis struggled to deliver the kind of definitive results with respect to Emotional Intelligence (EI) and middle management leadership. Whilst some conclusions are drawn based on statistical correlations,

it may be argued that the study also requires more direct engagement from respondents qualitatively to reflect on the drivers of employee engagement, especially in organisational change management [Fenton-O’Creevy (1998)].

4. Better Decision Making

Shull (1962) explains that one of the limitations of developed prescriptive models in organisational and management research is that they are always limited to by the accumulation of experience to date or that which is phrased only in terms of practices and the ends currently approved. With predictive models, the idea is to have the managers use this information to better deal with change, or at least more intelligently – however, managers themselves are not passive agents within the system and are both affected by changes but also plan a primary role in producing that change. That is why for us to truly understand leadership and management behaviour a more engaged approach of continual dialogue and interactions between the academicians and practitioners is fundamental. This is truly a significant point in the context of this study.

Gore (1968) highlights the importance of both knowledge and experience to bring about “wisdom” in management practice. He explains that in practice, a better balance between study and practice and concedes that management and business schools will not be reduced in their value as centres of learning about business and will remain important yet will be able to succeed more when they are able to blend traditional learning with learning-through-doing. This, the author believes, can only be achieved through a more engaged and practice-based approach.

Michael Tushman of Harvard University explains that the quality of the partnerships between universities and firms through executive education and projects has increased greatly the insightfulness of the research questions and has also improved the quality of the data that is collected. He explains that business school academicians can now live up to their expectations of shaping management practice. He also explains that executive education may well be underleveraged in reducing what he calls “the rigor-relevance gap” between business schools and the world of practice.

This is a particularly important point to address in this research as the level of awareness of the policies, systems and the very theories underlying them are very much missing when it comes to areas, for example like, Safety and EHS from management training, executive education, and business school modules. Some organisations do train their managers of understanding safety and EHS, but the knowledge is superficial, the depth is severely lacking especially in terms of informing on causality models between policy or “business” decisions made and both the impact it has on the motivation of the practitioners and other organisational employees and thus the implications that translate into sub-standard safety performance [Walsh et al, 2007].

In the same article John Kimberly, explains in his reflections of experiences in research in to practice that although the faculties appreciated the financial support and inputs from industry but perhaps did not value as much the project given its applied orientation – perhaps due to two main reasons with respect to the fact that the projects were on the boundaries of academic respectability and also that many of the publications generated were principally practitioner orientated, and therefore it may have been felt that opportunities to make more general contributions were missed. Which in fact raises an interesting aspect in the discussion surrounding practice and academia? Surely for both to work closely an alignment of both utility and motivations must be better understood [Walsh et al, 2007].

5. Effective Collaboration

Whilst academia can bring good and solid foundations of informed research which is based on a rigorous study of the facts leading to realities, practice brings to the table practical facts about realities (in application) which are perceived. However, it can thus be argued that neither party of academics of practitioner can inform on the realities without one another and in management research we thus must conclude that both complete each other rather than compete with one another. Moreover, whilst academics are far better at constructing the models, explaining the modalities between (multiple) variables, and making a good scientific argument, the practitioners can help in functionally testing these models effectively. The result of a successful

symbiosis of this kind is a more practical yet well-constructed model.

To this end, as noted by Kimberly (2007) “the craft of research heavily depends on the ability of the researcher to maintain a certain degree of cognitive and emotional distance from the phenomena being examined. In an ideal world, the researcher is a dispassionate investigator, motivated by a deep and abiding interest in understanding something new or different about the way the world works.” Then he goes on to say: “When researcher-manager interactions become too close, it is not clear whose agenda is being followed.” Furthermore, we thus may find that in many industry-funded projects often the overall academic motivation of advancing knowledge in management research and science is hijacked by the drive towards the creation of certain outputs which must be put into practice at a time when the pure researcher may feel that such a decision would be premature [Walsh et al, 2007].

Lastly, we must come to appreciate that when management research through this more “consulting” approach is employed, it is imperative that the recommendations be operationalized. The recommendations can thus fail in two ways. The first is that they are misunderstood and thus implemented incorrectly leading to an incorrect solution through incorrect use of the diagnosis. The second way is whilst such investigation is undertaken with a great deal of academic vigour, failing to consider other practical realities such as organisational employee-relations and engagement climate, corporate politics, inadequate communications, or many other types of organisational environmental conditions etc.

Thus, those same recommendations may fail but for reasons that do not relate to the recommendations which may have otherwise worked and worked well! Therefore, it is critical for the practitioner to be engaged and help effectively “operationalize” such recommendations with the academicians. Here the motivations would be aligned as both the practitioner/manager wants the recommendations to work as he has spent valuable time being engaged, and the academic also wants it to work to be satisfied that he has added value to the communities of management and research. This as noted by various commentators [e.g., Kimberly, Ashford, Tushman - see Walsh et al, (2007)] requires that academics develop a dual-set of

competencies – i.e. both excellence in research and excellence in consulting.

What remains fascinating about the subject of safety and risk management, is that even with academics much of the research surrounding safety design and engineering has been with more the engineering (with more positivistic approach) disciplines whom focus on statistical significance, quantification of risks and study of probabilities whereas safety cultures has been more the focus of the industrial physiologists and behaviourists (with more constructionist discourses) whom on the other hand focus on social interactions between people, aspects of engagement and belief systems and organisational behaviour.

So even with the academics themselves there is somewhat a divide in this area - whilst what practitioners want from both groups are solutions which can be implemented within the context of organisational working with a degree of confidence and practicalities in implementation of what may seem at time very abstract recommendations. This is worthy of further research.

The critical and key success factor is therefore the effective pragmatic translation of research into action.

6. Conclusions

Engaged scholarship and practitioner-based research are extremely valuable in both the advancement of management sciences and research. The level of learning that both researchers and practitioners can potentially gain from one another is significant and they bring academic vigour and realistic implementation respectively. The academics in management schools have had to develop a dualistic set of competencies both as academicians who add valuable and solid advancements in management and social sciences and consultants who are able to help managers become more effective in management.

To this end, if done properly action-based research which leverages on the strengths of both academics and managers of practice can yield highly effective results that can bring about much more effective systems of work, policies, and practices within organisations.

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