

HRD Forum

Time to Bridge the Research Practice Divide

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Depending on your point of view, or politics or where you live, according to some commentators, we living through an epoch-changing transition. We do not know the outcome of this process, nor even the clarity of direction but we are becoming aware of some the effects of the disturbances and disconnections. This could include recent populist movements in the US and Europe which decry the gains of globalization in the face of those who have felt aggrieved by the disproportionate impact on their lives. It could also embrace the advances and possibilities of technologies which have been labelled the fourth Industrial Revolution, although how people will interpret such advances will depend on whether they are seen as a help or hindrance to how they live their lives. We can project both positive and negative scenarios, including seriously negative, and points in between. Such are the unpredictable and uncertainties, no wonder one commentator has declared, ‘the future is not for wimps!’

Talking of wimps, one definition is that of a ‘weak and cowardly or unadventurous person’. Is this also a person who, despite knowing better, sticks to the same path of action with the same undesirable results? One group, and I have been as guilty as others, is those in management and business academe, including learning and development or HRD researchers, who complete their research on the basis of rigour over relevance without regard for whether their work becomes ‘practical’ in the sense of impacting on what practitioners think, say or do. This polarization around the notion of rigour leads to an end result of ‘acceptable knowledge’ that meets the requirements of largely US-based journals. Further, in a means-ends inversion, these journals as outlets for the writing of academics in business and management are variously graded (have a look at this at <http://www.kfs.edu.eg/com/pdf/20820152253917.pdf>) so that many participants in this process become bound by targets such as four articles published in level four journals or ‘4 x 4’.

Interestingly, one well known academic has referred the pre-occupation with publication in ranked journals as a form of ‘fetishism’ which leads to a ‘perversion’. Another talked about the ‘closed incestuous loop’ among the writers of management research who were simultaneously both the producers and consumers of research outputs, with judgments of success based on the consumption by other writers who could cite a work in their next production rather than showing how it served. However, as the numbers who have joined the loop has swelled, very often to fulfil career ambitions, so has the number of outlets for this knowledge multiplied but the average citation for each paper published has fallen, and certainly readership by those outside academe has become reduced to non-participation because they are unable to play the game. Perhaps even worse, the work produced by business and management academics has been accused of seeking to ape science in an attempt to demonstrate rigour in its methods for developing theory, a process

referred to as ‘physics envy’ by some. But this can result in models and theories being taught in business schools which are inappropriate for human life and thus potentially promoting ‘bad’ practices. Interestingly, these comments were written in 2005, just before the bad practices hit the world with a vengeance.

The philosopher Nicholas Maxwell (go to <https://ucl.academia.edu/NicholasMaxwell>) has throughout his academic life criticized what he calls knowledge-inquiry; that is, the production of knowledge as an end in itself which is seldom put into practice. His target has been the social sciences in particular, which includes business and management — the very areas of research that might be expected to deal with problems of significance faced by leaders, managers, learning and development experts and so on. Maxwell has shown how increasingly academic research, caught in the knowledge-inquiry trap, becomes disconnected from the problems of practitioners. As a contrast, Maxwell has for some years sought to argue for research to allow actions to tackle problems with solutions that can be critically assessed to see if they work. In what he calls wisdom-inquiry, he sees the starting point for research to be the problems that people face in their daily lives whether at work, in their communities and beyond. In this process, Maxwell echoes the work of another philosopher, A. N. Whitehead who argued that rigour in research should include use-value as part of the process so that it could lead to living, living well and living better. Knowledge production should not be disconnected from its use.

In moving towards a use-value in research, and an enactment of wisdom inquiry, my argument is that in our turbulent times, we need to adopt scholarly-practice as a process of reconciliation between the needs for rigour and relevance. The term scholarly, derived from the Latin *scolaris*, as an adverb provides a qualification to how practice is conducted, suggesting that learning and deep knowledge can inform and be informed by practice. For this synchronization, the scholarly must take account and even be stimulated by use-value of those in practice. The starting point for scholarly practice has to be insufficient knowledge and understanding which has the potential to bring about use-value. In responding, there is need to avoid the polarizing tendencies of rigour but also of relevance which, without rigour, can result in quick fixes with short term benefits and an obsession with fads.