**Special Issue *Management Learning***

**Management Practising and Knowing:**

**Dialogues of Theory and practice**

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**Practising and Knowing Management: A Dialogic Perspective**

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**Abstract**

This paper develops a dialogic perspective on practising and knowing management. It builds on prior work which has considered the nature of management research as well as the relationship between those who research organizations and those that manage them. The paper argues that practising and knowing are co-constitutive, dialogic processes and that viewing the process in this way helps move beyond views of knowledge production and consumption which centre on translation between communities. The paper sheds new light on the nature of research relationships by presenting two ways of mapping the dynamics of these relationships in terms of dialogue.

**Keywords:** Management Research, Relevance, Dialogue, Practice, Knowing

Our focus in the special issue is to adopt a dialogic perspective to examine the relationships and interactions between theory and practice, as well as to explore both practising and knowing as dialogic, co-constitutive processes. To that end, we begin by reviewing the so-called ‘relevance debate’ in order to establish what this SI might contribute to an established, perhaps even entrenched, set of conversations. Next, we set out a way of incorporating the temporal dimension of the relationships between knowing and practising which we found helpful in editing the SI. Finally, we introduce and map the contributions offered by the papers presented here.

**The Trouble with Relevance**

The field of management and organization studies has been troubled by the way in which research is conducted, communicated and consummated. For more than forty years management researchers have pondered the extent to which their endeavours are valued by those in managerial positions (see for example Ordiorne, 1966; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002; Bartunek, 2011). Susman and Evered described a crisis, the principal symptom of which was “that as our research methods have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that organizational members face” (1978: 582). This stinging critique of the research community’s tendency toward introspection could just as easily have been made today and Swart (2011) has argued that knowing is only valuable when it is enacted. The relevance debate persists, perhaps perpetuated by the fact that the term itself is poorly defined and “can refer to very different things” (Nicolai and Seidl, 2010: 1257). Markides argues that the issue is not so much one of relevance but one of digestability in that research is “not presented in a form that [managers] find useful” (2011:125).

Relevance has often been linked to rigour with these ‘two Rs’ being regarded as double hurdles (Pettigrew, 2001) which result in actionable knowledge and which bridge the “knowing-doing gap” (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999). Hambrick (1993) asked provocatively, ‘what if management mattered?’ in his presidential address to the Academy of Management. Almost half of his successors have returned to the relevance theme. Bridge building is a recurring metaphor (with the notable exception of Weick’s “Gapping the Relevance Bridge”, 2001). However, efforts to work across researcher-practitioner boundaries are not always successful. For example, involving practitioners in the review process for published research has been shown to exacerbate rather than ameliorate differences between researchers and managers (Nicolai, Schultz and Göbel, 2011). Indeed, Carlile suggests that a semantic approach to knowledge recognizes that “even if a common syntax or language is present, interpretations are often different” (2002: 444). However, the notion of a common language may itself be fanciful since Cunliffe cautions that the practitioners in her own research “rarely spoke about their actions in ideological or critical ways” (2002: 40). Rather than focusing on collaboration, Kieser and Leiner suggest that “researchers and practitioners may be able to productively antagonize each other” (2011: 23). If this productive antagonism is supposed to allow each community to pursue its own interests, there remains the question of why practitioners fail to take up such research findings (Guest, 2007). Those within the academic community remain “split as to whether they see research collaboration with practitioners as having primarily positive or primarily negative effects” (Rynes et al, 2001: 342). So where and how are bridges to be built?

**Toward a Dialogic Perspective**

In our estimation, our community appears to be trapped in a conversational loop. Furthermore, we are conscious that this Special Issue could leave us open to accusations of complicity. One could argue that the only real beneficiaries of the protracted debate on relevance are those academics who make short term publishing gains since the long term difficulty does not appear to be abating. Around a decade ago, mode 2 knowledge production was identified as another way of overcoming the relevance issue but Bartunek pointedly notes that “there has been much more discussion of mode 2 than illustration of it in academic journals” (2011: 556). However, we do think there is an alternative to the conversational loop.

Like others, we have been part of a new line of inquiry focused on both practising and knowing since we can “only know that which becomes the subject of our practice” (Nicolini et al, 2003: 8). Cook and Brown’s highly cited contribution describes an epistemology of practice which, they argue, helps draw attention to knowing (1999). The practice turn in organization studies (Whittington, 2006; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) has produced a substantial body of work and many of these studies indicate that practices emerge over time. For example, Jarzabkowski, Lê and Feldman’s study of coordinating mechanisms suggests that they “are constituted through coordinating” (2011: 1). Hargadon and Bechky describe critical “moments when participants in social interactions make new sense of what they already know” (2006: 491) as a means of explaining the emergence of collective level practices, and collective practices may be a basis for co-production of knowledge (Antonacopoulou, 2009). However, as Corradi et al (2010) point out, although practice based studies may be becoming institutionalised, the concepts and labels that constitute it are still disputed and unresolved.

Historic exhortations to jump the rigour and relevance hurdles and the subsequent focus on co-production have enriched our ability to explain the problem but they have not resolved it. The ‘double hurdle’ approach is founded upon the assumption that there are distinct identity categories arranged in hierarchical modes. When the evaluation criterion of rigour is applied the researcher is in the ascendancy whilst when the criterion of relevance is applied, the practitioner is in a senior position from which to judge. The alternative proposition of co-production holds different assumptions about identity. The ideal is for a non-hierarchical sharing of values, evaluation and practice such that there is a ‘blurring’ or hybridization of identity (Ellis and Ybema, 2010) between the researcher and practitioner. A dialogic perspective challenges both of these assumptions, suggesting that separateness may be maintained, but bridged or “punctuated by intense, generative dialogic encounters” (Beech et al, 2010: 1361). By conceptualising management practising and knowing, not as separate *entities* but as entwined *activities (*Tsoukas, 2009; Langley, 1999*)* it is possible to conceive a dialogic view of processes that incorporate both. This would allow us to move beyond the focus on two separate identity groups. Rather than working with the labels ‘researcher’ and ‘practitioner’, a dialogical perspective suggests that the actors are all practitioners who bring different modes and expertise of practising to the dialogue. This shift in emphasis suggests a dialogue between practitioners of theory with different foci, rather than the traditional wish to enable one group to translate their ideas better for the other. Similarly, a dialogic perspective shifts the emphasis to understanding how such dialogue energizes participants (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Hence, we see a dialogical approach as one way of enacting the practices of knowing and researching. As such, it is important to study practice in order to know better how we can ‘do knowing’ as well as how practices are enacted and coordinated (Nicolini, 2011). This lies at the core of capturing practising as a ‘deliberate, habitual and spontaneous repetition’ reflective of the dynamic and emergent nature of action (Antonacopoulou, 2008: 224). It also provides a challenge for the roles of theory and practice. Ramsey (2011) argues that beyond using theory to explain practice, it can be used in a form of moment-by-moment provocative relating between researchers and managers.

We focus on dialogue (Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 2012) because it informs our view of a research process where managerial practice and research practice interpenetrate each other, or what Shotter refers to as the constant unfolding on ‘intra-action’. Dialogue theory also sheds light on the identities that are constructed in and around the enactment of these practices. In the next section, we use a short vignette from our own research to introduce two elements of a dialogic perspective on research processes.

**Depicting Dialogue**

In order to develop a dialogic perspective on research, we first situate it in a specific context. About a decade ago, two of the authors of this paper were invited, by the Chief Executive Officer of a large complex organization, to undertake a three month piece of research on governance issues in the organization.

Figure 1 depicts the process by which a bridge is built between the research- practitioner and management-practitioner communities over time. A dialogic encounter occurs where there is a negotiation of ‘my interests’ and ‘your interests’. The initial interests of the CEO related to an overtly-stated need to consider alternative forms of governance, but also, as we discovered later, to a need to find a way through political differences between some members of the board and other stakeholders. Our own overt interests were in assisting the organization, and also in the possibility of gathering examples that could feed into our writing on change management. As the organization subsequently discovered, we were also interested in gaining access to work in real-time with people leading complex change. Finally, as researcher-practitioners we were aware that the potential to develop on-going access would allow us to cultivate high quality data that would be publishable.

My Interests

My Community

Your Community

Your Interests

Dialogic

Encounter

Figure 1: Bridge Building

During the first meeting some negotiation, translation and repackaging occurred. The particular problem of governance issues created a need for the CEO. It simultaneously created access for an intensive study of change since the CEO and the researchers agreed that interviews with key players and attendance at management and board meetings would form part of the research. Over a three month period, the dialogic encounter generated outputs which spoke to both agendas. Several presentations and interim reports were presented to groups and individuals within the organization. Simultaneously, data were gathered and theorizing occurred about both the specific issue of governance and the wider issues of organizational change. The specific issues around governance advanced to the point where the organization’s change process proceeded in ways which were deemed satisfactory to various stakeholders. Equally, the study provided a number of opportunities to develop contributions to theory through data that subsequently contributed to publications, some of which were co-authored with those within the organization. In one sense, the participants returned to their own communities at the end of the encounter. However, the interpenetration of practices need not occur only in the moment but rather, can continue slowly in the background as research-practitioners’ theorizing is influenced by the encounter. For example, aspects of the dialogic encounter challenged established theories, whilst the management-practitioners’ ways of seeing their practice also shifted over time. One set of interactions highlighted conflict between members of the organization which were discussed in the context of various academic theories of change. During these exchanges, one particular conversation included the observation that pearls form around a piece of grit. Some members of the organization referred to this as “grit theory” and the metaphor of grit recurred a number of times, eventually becoming a common way of discussing difficult interactions within the organization..

In order to understand this dialogic encounter further, we next explore the identity dynamics of the situation. Figure 2 sets out three narratives that may run through any dialogic encounter. Each narrative pre-exists the dialogical encounter and the interesting issue here is to consider the way(s) in which these narratives are impacted by the encounter.

Dialogic Encounter

Your Story

My Story

Theory’s Story

Figure 2: Identity Dynamics in Research

Figure 2 suggests that at least three stories are influenced by the dialogic encounter. In our vignette, a series of encounters over time led to some reframing of identities, knowledge and practice. As we got to know each other better, our ‘ulterior’ interests were revealed (to no-one’s surprise) and importantly, the CEO became a ‘filter’ through which we thought about data both from her organization and from other organizations with which we had worked. Interpretivist research can entail role-thinking and the CEO provided us with one route to sensemaking about data. For the CEO, our involvement had provided some legitimacy for actions she wanted to take, although sometimes in unpredictable ways. For example, by the time our report on governance was delivered, the political tensions surrounding governance issues had largely abated and she had moved on to fresh concerns. However, the report was still viewed as significant in that it provided a nuanced view rather than simple recommendations. In discussions, the CEO related this to her studies in Classics and over the six years of our working relationship (which continued until her retirement) she encouraged and debated non-simple ‘answers’ to problems. This was not what she had been expecting from management academics. Thus, there was a sense in which aspects of our identity stories absorbed elements of the other (Sims et al., 2009). Who we were was made up in part of how we understood ourselves in relation to the other and the modified practices we developed. Our stories of self and other became modified through the dialogic encounter as we picked up new experiences, reflected upon ourselves and acted into the future.

The third dimension depicted in figure 2 is that of theory. Our intention is not to suggest that theory itself should always be reified. Yet, over time, the tone of theoretical debates do tend to change (see for example, the practice turn in organization studies referred to earlier in the paper). Such changes within a theoretical narrative occur through the accumulation of myriad smaller contributions and adjustments made by individuals and groups over time. New theory narratives form part of the way in which we think about, engage with and describe theory. Consider the impact of Henry Mintzberg’s study of strategy making (Mintzberg, 1973). The dominant theory narrative leading into that piece of work was one of strategy conceived as logic and planning. In the years that followed, a different view of strategy as emergent and processual was established.

Of course, figure 2 emphasises a stark contrast between narratives pre and post encounter. Yet, clearly in our illustration there was not a simple and singular encounter. Our work with CEO and other members of the organization took place over an extended period and comprised multiple encounters. Hence a more nuanced understanding of figure 2 would highlight issues of iteration and context.

Consider the vignette again, which describes an inquiry rooted in governance issues. One could be studying governance for the first time. Alternatively, it could be that this particular opportunity is the latest in a series of governance projects which the research-practitioners have conducted. By definition, doctoral students are typically participating in dialogic encounters with their particular research topic for the first time. If post-graduation, they pursue a career in which they repeatedly study the same phenomenon in a number of contexts, each new project might be explained differently in figure 2. For instance, their self-storying might evolve such that over time, they present themselves as progressively more expert on governance issues. This in turn might impact on their ability to build bridges in figure 1 (my opinion carries weight with your community *because* I am an expert).

Our contention is that figure 1 helps draw attention to the ways in which bridges are constructed over time and to consider what, if any, traffic may cross those bridges. Figure 2 is a helpful device when considering a number of critical issues in both knowing and practising management. First, research-practitioners may ask in relation to a specific piece of work: ‘what is happening now? and what might I want to happen next?’ In relation to the vignette, a one-off and time-limited opportunity to explore governance issues gradually became an extended and repeated set of dialogic encounters within the same organization. These repeated engagements familiarised the researchers with the context, revealing subtleties and layers of meaning within the organization. At each juncture, the participants ask themselves and each other, what would be a useful next step? This of course, includes the possibility that the research relationship has run its course (Beech et al, 2009).

Second, figures 1 and 2 prompt the question: what does each participant want out of the dialogic encounter? Perhaps, the CEO in the vignette began with an expectation of a short and fairly clearly delineated interaction to handle a set of governance issues. Perhaps she knowingly engaged a third party who could be presented to her internal audience as both independent and expert. What became clear as the research process unfolded, was that she valued both the opportunity to rethink or reframe issues in her own organizational practice. She also valued the opportunity to hear messages fed back through the research process which may have been unsayable more directly. An equivalent set of questions could be asked of the researcher-practitioners in the vignette in relation to their own practice. Figure 1 suggests that each of the actors in a dialogic encounter take material or discursive resources which will be valued by their own communities into and out of the encounter. Figure 2 considers the narrative implications of such transactions for the self-storying of both the researcher and the researched.

This vignette provides us with valuable lessons about the foundations of knowing and practising. At its core, the vignette describes something familiar about the emerging nature of practice and in particular, the ways in which practices are formed, performed and transformed in interaction with others. In short, the dialogic perspective our analysis presents in figures 1 and 2, point to a framework that captures collaborative research practice more generally. We feel that a greater understanding of co-constitutive research practice is valuable especially in capturing the lived experience of dialogues that have the potential to energize (and change) what both researcher and management practitioners do. This process of change in practice and practitioners reflects the impact of the dialogic perspective explicated further in the fours papers of the SI. We summarise each paper in turn next.

**The Special Issue**

The first paper by Kevin Orr and Mike Bennett, provides an auto-ethnographic account of co-production by an academic and a policy maker. It is a unique contribution to the debate not only because it offers an intimate account of co-constitutive research process, but because it also reveals the dynamics of the dialogic perspective. The rich account of the ongoing dialogue as part of the collaboration between two practitioners from different worlds and with unique stories detailed in the paper, offers a very pragmatic appreciation of collaboration as a transactional process. The two practitioners seek to create something together as a ‘we’ in collaborating and yet each of them has to maintain a focus on the ‘I’ – the respective personal priorities and constraints operates in their separate professional domains. These differences in agendas, stories and identities reflect the political dynamics of research and these are recognised as part of the struggle to transform tensions into mutually beneficial opportunities. Yet, their paper presents a healthy dialogue not because it underpins the effort to align competing agendas. Instead, it is in suspending the need for unity that the greatest scope for personal and collective growth may lie. This notion of suspense is just that – it embraces the unknown. Hence, a dialogic perspective in this account offers scope to appreciate difference as the foundation for making a difference (Bateson, 1972: 381). Difference is where we come to better understand knowing and practising as modes of engagement and re-engagement in our ongoing journey of becoming practitioners (be we researchers, business executives or policy makers).

The second paper by Javier Marcos and David Denyer, captures another story of collaboration between two groups of practitioners (researchers and business executives). This longitudinal account of their collaborative research and the dialogue between the various protagonists reveals the way practising and knowing were embedded in different stages of the collaboration as an unfolding story in its own right. It also highlights the ways in which these stories might change in relation to figure 2 Interestingly, the individual stories and identities of the various practitioners when brought together in dialogue were transformed into a collective story even with varying versions of how critical aspects that constituted the story were experienced and interpreted. This highlights the opportunity for co-constitutive research to act as a platform for greater integration. Integration as this study suggests, is as much about accommodating conflict and diversity as it is about creating meaningful shared understanding. This can be a useful vantage point for inscribing the ‘they’ into the ‘we’ and the ‘we’ into the ‘they’.

The third paper by Mairi MacLean, Charles Harvey and Robert Chia, provides a useful point for taking stock of practising and knowing management by allowing a closer appreciation of how modes of knowing are central to reflexive practice. The resulting reflexive behaviours are a process of rehearsing ways of remaking the self. This process of remaking reveals a mode of knowing through engaging with the unknown. Whether it is embracing opportunities, being ready to learn from unfolding events, intentionally accumulating personal capital or maximizing what existing circumstances can offer, the resulting action strategies have transformational potential. The paper illustrates five types of reflexive behaviour and two modes of reflexive practice in the career changes of managers comparing their elite and non-elite backgrounds. We have already drawn attention to the importance of repetition for researcher-practitioners and MacLean, Harvey and Chia offer a near counterpoint by foregrounding the importance of repetition in organizational careers. By re-viewing, re-fining and re-conceptualizing events in everyday practice, practitioners can enhance their career prospects. By implication, embracing reflexivity as part of the dialogue between theory and practice (Hibbert et al, 2010) provides scope for practising and knowing management in fresh ways.

The final paper by Katy Mason presents another rare glimpse of a dialogue between a researcher practitioner and a practising researcher. Her context is market sensing practices and emerging market frames. Dialogue here provides a valuable means of sensing, sense-making, framing and reflecting practices all of which unearth assumptions that provide valuable insights which inform and shape the market sensing process. Mason’s paper takes the importance of reflexivity in the practising and knowing management a step further using video diaries to enrich the conversation and provide access to everyday practice as this is performed in different locations and using different tools (technologies, brochures, etc.). These images of everyday practice feed the dialogue and become a powerful way of capturing generative moments in the dialogue where some kind of change in understanding might be identified. Placing Mason’s paper in the context of the dialogic perspective that the Special Issue seeks to advance, the dialogue it presents the identity of each of its participants in ways which collectively invite them to re-view their stories and themselves. By rehearsing again and again their framing, sensing, sense-making and reflective practices they inform their respective choices to act. The powerful connection that both practitioners experience in sharing their respective questions and embracing each other’s questions as their own, is a wonderful illustration of how the researching practitioner and the practising researcher inscribe each other.

**Conclusions**

The CEO from our earlier vignette was responsible for the direction of her organization and, in this case, its approach to governance. She repeatedly took the opportunity to persist in the relationship with academic researchers, with all the critical conversations that were implied in such a relationship. The academics were interested in knowledge and understanding, and repeatedly took the opportunity to persist in the relationship with the CEO and her colleagues, with all the limitation to their free flowing imaginations that was implied by such a relationship. Each party shows evidence of interest in the other’s way of knowing, and of wanting to engage in a dialogue which we might think of as mutual inscription. In this particular context, Escher’s ‘Drawing Hands’, shown in figure 3, is less a matter of optical illusion and more an invitation to recognise the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between researcher-practitioners and their managerial counterparts.



**Figure 3: Drawing Hands, by M.C. Escher**

In the process of academic and business practitioners working together, each inscribes the other while each may also want to influence the way that they are being inscribed. Persistent engagement, we would suggest, comes when the mutual inscription is strong enough to keep the other party interested, yet modest enough to allow the other party to feel that it is ultimately responsible for its own shaping and action. Each party is both the drawer and the drawn.

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