Bridging the research-practice divide: Harnessing expertise collaboration in making a wider set of contributions

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A B S T R A C T

Understanding how we develop research contributions which go beyond conversations in the academic field is an enduring challenge. While much has been written on the importance of academic-practitioner relationships in the research process more is needed on conceptualizing how we develop a wider set of contributions. In this paper, we call for researchers to be reflective as to how different forms of expertise can be drawn on during collaborative relationships to bridge the research – practice divide. We develop a framework which combines different levels of expertise with varying forms of academic-practitioner collaboration to widen the impact of our research. Four strategies are proposed by which academics may leverage their expertise in collaborative relationships with practitioners to develop Research Impact and Contributions To Knowledge (RICK). These include: maintaining *critical distance*, *promoting deeper engagement*, *developing prescience*, and *achieving hybrid practices*. We discuss implementation approaches for each of these RICK strategies and suggest writing genres to help increase engagement by practitioners in research contributions.

1. Introduction

Making contributions from our research is an enduring and vexing question for scholars regardless of where they are on their career trajectory (Barrett & Walsham, 2004). For example, editors and reviewers constantly remind authors of the need to develop their contributions and point to the inherent merits of extending knowledge through theoretical insights (e.g. Van de Ven, 1989; Webster & Watson, 2002; Whetten, 1989). Scholars have also highlighted the pragmatic virtue of simplicity in developing one's contributions (Weick, 1989) as well as the importance of coherence (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011).

Corley and Gioia (2011) develop a more expansive understanding of theoretical contributions. They highlight two key dimensions of a contribution, namely its originality (i.e. revelatory) and utility (i.e. practical or scientific usefulness). Building on the rigor versus relevance debate (Gulati, 2007; Tushman & O'Reilly, 2007), they note the ongoing neglect of our contributions' practical utility. One often cited rationale for this is the need for purity in academic inquiry which comes with distance, independence, and academic detachment (Caswill & Shove, 2000; Van de Ven, 2018).

Another related stream of research emphasises the need for collaborative academic -practitioner relationships. For example, scholars highlight academia's lack of engagement with practitioners and how this limits the scope of theorizing (Bartunek, 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 2006; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Van de Ven (in press) points out that academic and practical knowledge are

two distinct domains of knowledge and both are critical for understanding complex issues. He highlights that there is a common misguided assumption that practical forms of knowledge are necessarily derived from academic research (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). In doing so, he argues that we miss the distinct competencies that practitioners have and their insight into complex problems (Van de Ven, 2007). Relatedly, Bartunek (2007) argues for "a relational scholarship of integration" so that academics can learn to work with practitioners in new ways and on a more equal footing. Such relationships can be fostered by understanding the complexity of practitioners' expertise and knowledge (Trullen & Bartunek, 2007). In this way, an engaged scholarship perspective challenges key debates as to whether our conceptualization of expertise should be exclusively associated with analytic abstraction (Caswill & Shove, 2000).

We build on these two streams of literature to examine how researchers can widen their contributions through a deeper understanding of expertise. In the following section, we start by discussing further the challenge of bridging academic-practitioner relationships in expanding the scope of our contributions. We subsequently draw on Collins and Evans (2008) problematization of expertise as being both contributory and interactional, to develop an expertise- collaboration framework. We conclude by discussing how our RICK framework is related to specific research strategies and suggest how they may be connected to specific genres of academic writing to widen the accessibility of academic contributions to practice.

2. Bridging academic practitioner relationships through knowledge exchange

Corley and Gioia (2011) highlight the "uncomfortable silence" which often follows when practitioners listen to research presented in academic meetings. The common view is that academics "talk funny" using specialized language which obfuscates (hides) the practical utility of their theoretical contributions. And this problem is noted not just by practitioners but also by celebrated and reputable researchers in management. Donald Hambrick, recognized as one of the 24 most original and impactful management theorists (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014), suggests that the problem may also begin at the early development of a research project. He suggests that theory can often distort the straightforward beauty of an original research idea. The problem progressively gets worse and by the end of the research project the published article can be 'a contorted, misshapen, inelegant product, in which an inherently interesting phenomenon has been subjugated by an ill-fitting theoretical framework'(Hambrick, 2007, pp. 1349).

In addition to being "lost in translation" whereby researchers have a hard time explaining the relevance of theories to practice, Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney (2007) also note the equally challenging "lost before translation" problem which works against the potential for research to have relevance and impact. In this situation, ideas are developed which are irrelevant to practice. The consequence may be that theory is being used for theory's sake rather than for the sake of practical utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

The challenge for academics is to learn how to connect tacit and explicit dimensions of practitioners' knowledge so as to discern how academics' knowledge might link to their way of knowing. Polanyi's paired concepts of *sense giving* and *sense reading* in knowledge exchange (Barrett, Cappleman, Shoib, & Walsham, 2004; Polanyi, 1962) can aid "giving sense" of our knowledge to wider communities. Having tacit understanding of other communities' knowledge domains enables academics to clarify and translate the meaning of their theoretical contributions. In the same way, practitioner communities with a tacit understanding of academic knowledge domains are able to *sense read* the theoretical contributions leading to practical utility of the findings. Some practitioners, however, may view theoretical contributions as "funny talk" not only because of the difficulties they have with academic language but because of their more limited tacit understanding and expertise to effectively engage with the research.

3. Contributory and interactional forms of expertise

In this section, we draw on a relational view of expertise (Collins & Evans, 2008) to examine how we can increase the practical utility of our academic knowledge. Specifically, we problematize expertise as being both interactional and contributory (Collins & Evans, 2008) and suggest that these forms of expertise can be drawn on in knowledge exchange across different academic-practitioner relationships.

Contributory expertise refers to experts having such a high level of proficiency and tacit understanding of a domain of knowledge that they can add to that body of knowledge. Contributory experts can add to the knowledge in their domain of expertise. They have become immersed and socialised within their expert field so they can make judgments about new insights according to the accepted criteria of the field. To do an activity with competence requires contributory expertise (Collins & Evans, 2008). For example, academics may be contributory experts to the literature on knowledge and collaboration in online communities and may therefore publish papers in their academic field to convey their contribution.

Collins and Evans (2008) suggest that, in the absence of such a high level of contributory expertise, people may be able to develop what they refer to as interactional expertise. Such expertise is gained by becoming familiar (or fluent) with the language of a domain of expertise. Interactional experts, according to Collins and Evans, have been immersed in a domain to such an extent that they have internalized the rules and forms of expression and are able to understand and discuss expert insights. By gaining interactional expertise, individuals can converse with those who are (contributory) experts in the field, even though individuals with interactional expertise may have little if any practical competence in the subject. In Polanyi's terms, practitioners, by developing their interactional expertise can enhance their tacit power in sense reading theoretical contributions. Similarly, with interactional expertise, academics can sense read knowledge in the practitioner's field.

These forms of expertise can be developed through different levels of academic practitioner relationships. For example, as contributory experts, researchers often undertake field research in various practical domains, such as healthcare or car manufacturing. In so doing, they may develop interactional expertise to understand the "concepts-in-use" in the practitioner's field setting.