

The role of dialogue in addressing the theory practice gap in marketing

Abstract

The intractable nature of the academic practitioner gap has a long history of diverse debate ranging from Dewey's argument about the true nature of knowing to contributions based on epistemic adolescence, ontological differences and more pragmatic suggestions about different tribes. Others include the rigour versus relevance issue, failures in curriculum or pedagogy and a clash between modernist and postmodernist epistemologies. Polanyi's description of tacit versus explicit knowledge further extends the debate as do issues of knowledge creation and dissemination.

The intractability of the gap suggests that it is at root, epistemic. To identify the existence of a gap in such terms a domain specific epistemic questionnaire was used. A factor analytic process extracted a common set of factors for the domain of marketers. Five epistemic knowledge factors were identified. Three of these showed significant difference in orientation between practitioners and academics confirming that the theory practice gap is tangible and revealing an indication of its nature. A remaining factor relating to practice dialogue emerged. Correlating this factor with knowledge factors shows that academic epistemic views move toward those of practitioners as dialogue with practice occurs. This is highly significant finding in respect of identifying ways of closing the TP gap.

Background

The Academic versus Practitioner Divide is an issue long discussed by business academics and by business leaders. For business practitioners the context of the discussion is usually based around a critique of the preparedness of business graduates for business practice, based either on their competencies or the traits they exhibit in respect of the needs of business. With academics it is the above but it is also research relevance and the purpose of the business school in terms of whether it is an academic social science faculty or a school preparing students for professional management (Starkey and Tempest, 2009). In fact the debate about practical relevance versus academic rigour gap is over 60 years old when in 1949 Merton (Dess and Livia, 2008) asked social scientists to "*more carefully consider the usefulness of their work*".

The question underpinning this work is why after over half a century of debate does this gap still persist?

30 years ago Dickinson (1983) wrote that "*communication between business academics and the business community appears to be minimal...academics have little interest in practitioners and their ideas*" (p51). A number of other writers during the period from Dickinson to today have argued for the existence of the gap between theory and practice in management or marketing in various forms with and with various degrees of concern (Baker and Erdogan, 2000, Baron et al, 2011). It has been the subject at least three Academy of Marketing conference's since 2000 (<http://www.academyofmarketing.org/conference-history/conference-history.html>) To understand the nature of the gap we have to understand the various strands relating to the 'gap' theme. These are varied and no single uniform theme underpinning the TP (theory practice) gap has emerged. Significant strands include discussions on the academic practitioner divide (Brennan, 2004, Brennan and Ankers, 2004, Baker, 2001, McDonald, 2003b), the relevance gap (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005, Piercy, 2002)

or estrangement from practice (Baker, 2008). In their influential article published in the Harvard Business Review, Bennis and O’Toole (2005) argue that virtually no top ranked business would hire tenured academics because they lack a real world business track record. Many of these arguments emerge from the academy’s need to publish and arguments are made that this creates a perverse incentive, prioritising rigour over relevance (Bartunk and Rynes, 2010, Baron et al, 2011)

In a comprehensive review of arguments surrounding the theory practice gap Fendt et al (2007) list nineteen separate arguments describing the nature of the gap. Grouping these into the major issues provides an overarching view of the arguments put forward. The groups are – predominance toward modernist reductionism, poor relevance, immature theatrical coherence, and different use of language. This last point is supported extensively elsewhere in terms of Gibbons modes 1 and 2 knowledge, Polanyi’s tacit versus explicit knowledge as well as argument about knowledge for theory or for doing which will be explored later. Other frameworks include Reed (2009) who discusses Van Den Ven and Johnson’s analysis of the 3 major ways in which the gap has been framed. These are issues of knowledge transfer, conflicting philosophical views and as a knowledge production problem. Ivory et al (2006) analysis of the nature of the gap characterises three main themes which he presents as dichotomous issues.

Conflicting themes in the debate on Business Schools Ivory et al (2006)

Research is too abstract	Insufficient rigour for a social science based research
Teaching is too theoretical	Teaching is not distant enough and sufficiently critical of practice
Business education makes little impact on business practice	Business schools have a negative impact on ethical behaviour

The effect of epistemic outlook has been the subject of research in a variety of academic versus applied contexts including Haggis (2004), Schon (2001) and Wilkinson and Migotsky (1994). Business studies is often criticised as vocational in nature and intellectually unchallenging, O’Hear,(1988), Tight (2002), and others. Others talk of academics as spectators (Dewey, 1938a) emphasising rigour over relevance through an academic culture based on envy of traditional university subjects like Physics (Tapp, 2004).

The influence of epistemologies on the outlooks of academics and practitioners has had only small attention. Yet such influence could play a significant role in underpinning the gap. As Kayes (2002) puts it, theorists need to be able to justify their teaching as relevant to management by asking the question “why is learning important for managers?” In effect epistemology involves the development of a vocabulary that “constitutes legitimate knowledge in a profession” (Kayes, ibid) and informing curricula around a language that may lack practitioner relevance has significant implications.

He research question can be summarised in the following broad question:–

Do academic and applied marketers have different value orientations in respect of their views on knowledge. In particular what are the main factors underpinning the epistemologies of academic and applied marketers and is there any variance in their views towards these orientations.

Academics will be evaluated through university business school marketing lecturers and practitioners via practicing marketers. Any gap will be revealed through the identification of the epistemic values of each group. The study of personal epistemologies has emerged in recent years and in particular Hofer's instrument the DEBQ examines domain specific epistemic views based on how professionals come to know and what type of knowledge they value

Research Methodology

The following section explains and justifies the methodological decisions made.

3.3 Research Strategy

The overall research strategy is to identify a set of epistemic factors common to the whole sample. Their identification provides an understanding of the overall epistemic identity for marketers be they academics or practitioners. The next step in identifying whether there is an epistemic gap between the two groups will be to compare means for each factor between the two groups. Any significant differences here will suggest that each group whilst sharing a common epistemic underpinning, views some or more of these epistemic factors differently. In other words they will have separate epistemic perspectives on key epistemic factors. A cross sectional survey was employed to identify, using factor analysis, the epistemic belief structures of marketing academics and practitioners. This will identify the underlying value structure of their respective underlying epistemologies. Hofer's (1997) self-completion DEBQ instrument was distributed via email and was located on Qualtrix

The population of inference under examination is marketing practitioners and marketing academics. 327 usable responses were obtained with a split of 97 academics and 219 practitioners. The aim of this distribution was to obtain a large enough sample to provide significance in findings. Respondents self-selected themselves or choose to opt in.

Results Factor Extraction

Exploratory factor analysis was performed using SPSS Principle Axis Factoring (PAF) and oblique (direct oblim) rotation. Five factor were extracted. Factors 1 to 5 are seen as similar to factors extracted elsewhere from other epistemic studies and from theory but factor 6 – practice dialogue – is unique. In essence factors 1 to 5 are discipline factors related to values about the significance of types of knowledge in the discipline. Factor 6 is about engagement with practice through dialogue

Examining for difference between academic and practitioner

The one way ANOVA is used. Any significant difference between the means of the groups indicates that the groups have different views on the epistemic factor in question. A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore impact of discipline backgrounds on the factor scores identified. Respondents were divided into 3 groups based on their discipline backgrounds. Academics were respondents whose discipline background was from the academy, practitioners came from a practice background and hybrids had a background which encompassed both practice and academic disciplines.

Based on robust tests factor scores were statistically significantly different between discipline background for - Factor 1, factor 2, factor5 and factor 6
 There were no statistically different factor scores with factors 3 and 4

Correlations between primary epistemic factors and explanatory dialogue factor 6

Correlation between explanatory and primary factors was conducted using Pearson product momentum correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of reliability
 Summary of correlation findings

Increased academic dialogue with practice	Decreased academic dialogue with practice
F1 increases propensity to repudiate simple explicit knowledge	Increased confidence in academic authority
F2 Importance of practice experience increase with dialogue	Importance of practice dialogue decreases as dialogue decreases
F3 Accumulation of fact becomes less important	certainty in academic static knowledge decreases with dialogue
F4 Shows a propensity for belief in existing (fixed) knowledgebase to decrease	increases the likelihood of justification from academic sources

Overall correlation analysis suggests that propensity for practice dialogue has a stronger effect on academics epistemic positions than on practitioner’s positions. Hybrid values mostly lacked relationship strength and significance possibly due to the small sample size

5.1 Findings

The main significant finding is that the DEBQ provides a five factor structure model describing the epistemic views of marketing academics and practitioners and hybrids and a sixth explanatory factor. The factors identified bear some similarity with Hofer’s but are underpinned by a unique item structure. There is a significant gap between academic and practitioner scores revealing a dichotomous structure to factors 1, 2 and 5, analysis of which reveals the different influences on the way academics and practitioners see the nature of knowledge and how they arrive at knowledge

Significantly however whilst some gaps between academics and practitioners showed statistical significance, the groups did share similar factor scale orientations on some factors but were more separated on different sides of factor dichotomous scales on others. This suggests that academics and practitioners share some similar beliefs in what knowledge is and how they come to know but show some significant separations on some of the factors that make up these structures

The third main conclusion is the emergence of a group named hybrids who comprise academics with substantial practice experience. This group tends to share its main epistemic outlooks with practitioners rather than academics but generally their factor scores are positioned between practitioners and academics with the exception of factor 5.

Also significant is the identification of a separate and unique factor not identified in other epistemic studies but which concerns the influence of dialogue in influencing epistemic views of academics. Factor 6 relates to practice dialogue and concerns levels of involvement with

practice. It is very significant to note that correlating this factor with knowledge factors shows that academic epistemic views move toward those of practitioners as dialogue with practice occurs. This is highly significant finding in respect of identifying ways of closing the TP gap. Practitioner/hybrid views are much less likely to change with dialogue suggesting a more stable epistemic position. The fact that academic views are susceptible to change suggests that academics may find that dialogue and collaboration with practitioner produces a greater degree of epistemic work.

These main findings do suggest that the academy is an epistemically diverse place and agentic influences based on discipline origins will play a role in views on knowledge and that dialogue with practice is a key element in closing the theory practice gap.

Conclusions

Looking at competing modernist and postmodernist epistemologies it is clear that an epistemology of theory-practice must be embodied in practice, see tacit and explicit knowledge as inseparable, multidimensional and be situated in context. So much is clear from theory. The next stage is the movement from objectivist/constructivist to a postmodern epistemology of theory-practice embodying these features. So to understand what we consciously do in action researcher's need to reflect on the norms and values which shape the collective understanding at a point in time. Schon's 'reflection in action' (see p101) provides a partial solution. Partly because as Gilroy (1993) argued it falls victim to Meno's paradox of infinite regression of reflection but crucially because reflection does not necessarily include dialogue and action in practitioner practice. Schon's description of the 'reflective practitioner' being characterised by 'knowing in action' and 'reflection in action', does not of necessity require reflection of any more than the practice of the researcher, it does not require the inclusion of business practice. Indeed Hackley (1999) expresses the argument thus – *"The transition from positive premise to normative prescription is a classical epistemological dilemma..... what strategic marketing management, along with other practical fields of codified theory, has not satisfactorily addressed"*.—An empiricist descriptive epistemology has been suggested as a possible solution to Schon's dilemma by Heyes and Hull (2001) but such a solution raises criticisms of what constitutes experience and leaves less room for theoretical enquiry. Critically as Raelin (2007, p497) argues, it is our practices which reinforce our behaviours and structures and these in turn constrain our future actions. Hence some means of moving research outside conventional practice is required. A number of researchers from Schon to Dewey to Cook and Brown have outlined the shortcomings of conventional academic epistemologies and presented more or less sound models of epistemologies of practice or theory-practice. But defining alternative epistemologies without defining a mechanism for their adoption is a limited response. Others including Bendixen and Rule's (2004), model of epistemic doubt leading to the volition to change or Cook and Brown's (1999) concept of dynamic affordance, have put forward ideas to act to close the gap. But to limited practical effect to date. However their ideas do I believe offer a means of addressing the TP gap. First locating the problem as solely epistemic is I believe inadequate in terms of framing a solution. Nor do I want to suggest that all research should have practitioner outcomes, hence academic epistemology is about choice directed by the structural and agentic issues already discussed. Second a means of instantiating and directing change needs to be developed.

In addressing these issues it is clear from my own findings that dialogue plays a crucial role in closing the TP gap. The correlation results make this clear. So dialogue is part of any

solution. Indeed Cook (1999) argues that dialogue is a vital means of bridging epistemologies, although no quantitative evidence is put forward. Such evidence has now appeared here and supports Cook's argument. And also significantly Cook argues that dialogue between practice and research does epistemic work. But we need more than dialogue alone. I propose that the additional means of using dialogue to instantiate and direct epistemic change lays in transparency, or understanding the respective positions and what constitutes value on both sides

The results show that academics and practitioners do share some elements of epistemic perspective but the significant gaps on some factors identified have implications. In particular I am interested in how the epistemic gaps found contribute to a lack of epistemic development.

In Cook, Dewey, Schon and Orlikowski's arguments, knowing is a deeply epistemic effect based on the inseparability between knowing and knowledge. But also that this inseparability is function of embodiment in practice. And that further such embodiment can do epistemic work that simple knowledge alone is incapable of. Having established the dimensions of an epistemology of theory-practice in this research and the gap between academics and practitioners, what is left is a means of closing the gap. This paper proposes an epistemology of dialogue in action and this provides an opportunity for further research to explore how such an epistemology could be expressed in practice. The proposed epistemology has the effect of providing for Dewey's warranted assertions through its context but also provides an opportunity for Cook's dynamic affordance to be realised. The concept of 'affordance' relates to how a concept 'affords' action in the world. Research actions mediated by dialogue provides a means of identifying such affordance and inherently will include both tacit and explicit forms of knowledge through the use of dialogue. I would propose therefore that dialogue and introspection become part of the toolkit for academic marketing researchers and certainly further research on the process and methods of introspection will be required to enable this.

Beliefs in what knowledge is between the groups reflect what theory would predict, that broadly academics are influenced by academic rigour and practitioners by context and application. However despite significant gaps in factor scores on two of the three factors the overall factor scores suggest that the effect of the factors is not overridingly strong. This suggests that were structural incentives put in place then overriding the structural, agentic and epistemic positions of academics is not impossible.

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