THE RIGOUR-RELEVANCE RESEARCH DEBATE: A PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Our (academic journal) publications are unreadable and unread; practitioners get next to nothing from our papers; students sigh when required to read a "proper" academic article; thinkers in adjacent disciplines ignore our obscurantist "insights"; and I, for one, don't blame them.

Stephen Brown, cited in Lee & Greenley, 2010:5).

We who are members of ANZAM are by definition aware of the critically important role of academic research into issues that are seen to be of relevance to business managers; but the quote that begins this paper suggests that our academic perceptions of importance, or indeed relevance, may not be so immediately apparent to practitioners of the world of business who are assumed to find value in the application of research findings. This difference of opinion has existed for some considerable time, and has often been represented as a conflict between an academic emphasis on methodological rigour and a practitioner focus on industry relevance – thus the emergence of a "rigour versus relevance" debate as an apparently dichotomous choice between academic theory and business practice.

These contrasting positions have led to a presentation of rigour versus relevance as a dichotomous and mutually exclusive choice – one can either have methodologically rigorous academic investigation OR practically relevant and applicable outcomes, but it just isn't possible to have both of these things. In recent years though, there has been a gradual move towards a consensus position in which the academic extremists have softened their attitudes to the extent that applicability of findings has enjoyed a greater degree of recognition; whilst the growing popularity of a DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) degree, as an alternative to the traditional PhD (Bourner, Ruggeri-Stevens, & Bareham, 2000) has seen the emergence of a new cohort of "scholar-practitioners" who are rather more receptive to the need for rigour in the research they design and implement in the workplace (Wasserman & Kran, 2009).

It is however in the nature of things that commentary on this developing consensus has been all but entirely played out in the pages of academic journals, and has therefore been authored by academics with a natural affinity for the rigour side of the coin. As such, the conflict may have become more conciliatory but nevertheless remains somewhat unbalanced, as the academic community is still largely isolated from much of the practitioner media, and practitioners are equally unaware of the academic writing that so directly concerns them. Scientific journals are still seen as the exclusive preserve of university academics, whilst the distribution of industry media is equally restricted to a practitioner readership only, and one less than satisfactory outcome of this misconnection is the almost total absence of any practitioner comment on the rigour-relevance debate. An attempt to address this oversight forms the cornerstone of the current paper.

The paper begins with a brief review of the antecedents of the rigour-relevance debate, before moving on into an identification of a landmark editorial in the European Journal of Marketing (Lee & Greenley, 2010), in which a number of leading academics and editorial board members offered a brief 200-300 word position statement related to how each saw the current state of the divide. This key article was then used as the basis for an on-line discussion group exercise, in which two separate cohorts of DBA students were asked the lead question "if you had written your own contribution to the EJM article, what would you have written". This opening position statement was then opened to on-line debate over a one week period, at the end of which time it was possible for the author to present back to the students a summary statement that arguably captured the main issues that practitioners believed to be important.

The rigour versus relevance debate

A recent article by Hughes, O'Regan, & Wornham (2009) incorporates a succinct response to the debate in its title - "*getting business and academia to collaborate*" – and it does appear to this author that the very existence of such an article is a sad commentary on what should be a vibrant and mutually beneficial relationship. At the very least, it should be obvious to academics and practitioners alike that it is a good idea for them to talk to each other about the problems that both parties arguably face, but Hughes et al struggle to find concrete examples of where this is actually occurring - "*while we found some notable exceptions, the general picture is of practitioners facing highly uncertain environments but rarely interacting with strategic management academics*" (Hughes et al 2009:52). The authors go on to cite Henry Mintzberg's (2004) contention that, certainly in the case of mature adult learners, the student seeks learning while the university delivers qualification – if this is indeed the case, then the existence of significant mismatch at this most basic level is surely indicative of a sub-optimal level of co-operation. As Hughes et al turn to the vexatious topic of research, a further chasm becomes apparent. Readily evident from the style and substance of an academic "paper" conference is a palpable emphasis on the "front end" of the research process – what is the foundation philosophy that underpins the research, how can we best define the concepts that we use, and how can those concepts be represented in an elegant theoretical framework? Let us be clear that there is no intent here to demean this level of concern with the contributing components of the research process, for they are undoubtedly vital in establishing the validity and reliability of the work that has been carried out; but in an environment where the presenter has perhaps 20 minutes allocated to get the message across, many practitioners would in all probability be interested to see equal attention being given to what the findings were.

In short, to borrow from action learning theorist Reginald Revans (1998), many universities are somewhat distant from the reality that they themselves are part of the rigour-relevance problem, and that the rigour-relevance problem is in turn part of them. So, if practitioners can't get what they believe to be timely and relevant information from the university sector, where do they look? Increasingly the answer, as Hughes et al note, is to be found in high circulation trade journals, and in the type of "this is how you do it" book authored by prominent practitioners such as Bill Gates, Richard Branson, or Robert Kyasaki. The issue here of course is that this type of publication would be more accurately described as "this is how I did it", for there is no serious attempt to attach any objective justifications to the wildly optimistic claims that if one "does this, and does that, then one will undoubtedly succeed". Optimistic, and simplistic, for success in business is difficult, which is why we bought the book in the first place, yet all we learned by buying the book is that business is not difficult at all. So what's the answer?

According to Hughes et al, the answer lies in the dismantling of the "we teach" philosophy that has traditionally been associated with the tertiary learning environment, to be replaced with a co-operative and inclusive model of "we learn" together – i.e. practitioners learn about the contribution that theory can make to their practice, while academics learn about the ways in which operational reality implicates the translation of theory into action (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006). So, what can we realistically hope to gain in searching the literature for an augmented practitioner perspective in the design and implementation of research investigations?

In this respect, if one important distinction (Hughes et al, 2009:52) is agreed to be accurate - "*the main role of universities is seen as the education of large numbers of people in basic strategy concepts …. and* *consultants are seen as an effective bridge in terms of translating academic knowledge (into business language*)" - isn't there a form of middle ground here that we could usefully explore? If this is in fact the case, then the demands of context suggest that academia must do better at outreach into industry to gain a "get your hands dirty' appreciation of what actually goes on in that industry in the 21st century – rather than what theory says OUGHT to be happening in some idealized and ideal world.

This of course requires a reciprocal gesture from practitioners, in terms of refocus into a revised view of academia as an alternative source of advice that can very successfully bring a fresh perspective on problems that have been troubling for some time, and problems that lie as yet undiscovered in the future. When both of those viewpoints are combined into an attempt to work co-operatively and synergistically together, we move quite sharply towards an ideal world in which we can achieve <u>both</u> rigour and relevance in our business management practice (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). If we can achieve this type of outcome in our research conducted in industry, we will have gone some considerable way down the track of bridging the academia–practitioner gap; but it does seem that, in this instance, "if" is a very big word.

In a sensitive and perceptive article by practitioner-turned-academic Patrick Jenlink (2009), the author notes that he did have to derive his own answers to questions like these in a journey towards doctoral qualifications that was far from easy, representing as it did a deliberate move from high level professional expertise and experience to what might be seen as a virtual academic infancy. Jenlink then notes that, though a useful vehicle to help him conceptualise the challenge presented by this move, the frequently observed presentation of academia and practice as a mutually exclusive choice is ultimately going to do a lot of damage to those who occupy either position in this perceived dichotomy. Instead, he advocates a practitioner approach that takes the memory of practice (workplace wisdom gained through experience), and exposes, compares, and reflects that memory to the evaluative and analytical mirror of academic theory.

This approach is effective in demonstrating the need for closer understanding on the part of the occupants of both camps, if the acknowledged philosophical gap between them is to be closed or even reduced. Though Jenlink clearly advocates reconciliation over separation, he does so from a pronounced academic standpoint – so what this paper has attempted to do is to turn the mirror backwards, and to try to expose the memory of academia to the mirror of practice.

Method

In a recently established Doctor of Business Administration program at a (British) Russell Group University, participants in their first taught module are presented with three useful contrasts that are proposed to populate interpretation of the rigour-relevance debate:

- The contrast between conventional academic scholars, mostly concerned with the way the world should be today and/or could be tomorrow; and experienced industry practitioners, mostly concerned with the way the world is today and is likely to become tomorrow.
- The contrast between an academic focus on asking appropriate questions, within an appropriate framework of logic; and a practitioner focus on finding appropriate answers within an irrational framework of environmental influences.
- The contrast between a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) qualification aimed at producing more capable academic scholars; and a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) qualification aimed at producing more capable business managers.

The obvious paradox that comes out of all of this is that a substantial majority of the candidates for DBA were already be able to claim a strong degree of experiential knowledge in terms of “right side” practitioner capabilities – evaluating the world as it is, and coming up with the best possible answers; but the contrary aim of the DBA programme was to equip those candidates with the “left side” academic ability to construct a view of the world as it should be or could be, and of developing the technique of asking better questions. This is well captured in a fourth contrast, between what Reginald Revans (1998) called our Ps and Qs - our programmed instructions (or learning via practical experience) and our questioning insights (or learning via formal education) – and the essence of this contrast is to position that debate as a substantial and worrisome gap, between what our left side academics typically provide through business school education; and what our right side practitioners really need in order to manage their businesses better.

So, what do practitioners typically see as important in all of this? Answers to this question were sought within the context of a tutorial clinic implemented for a cohort of 24 DBA students. At the time of clinic delivery, the students had already completed two of eight taught modules, and were therefore reasonably well acquainted with the academic demands of the programme, and were also familiar with the action research paradigm that underpins the conceptual approach to teaching and learning. For logistics purposes, the students were divided into two separate on-line discussion groups, and the key demographics of each group are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 about here

As a foundation for the discussion to follow, students were asked to read Nick Lee and Gordon Greenley's editorial to an edition of the European Journal of Marketing that specifically set out to review the interface between academia and practice in the context of marketing research and marketing education. This editorial contained the brief and often conflicting opinions of editorial board members, presented as 200-300 word reviews of how each board member viewed the current status of the academia-industry relationship. Students were asked to initially submit their own 200-300 word review of the current position, phrased in a similar way to those of editorial board members, then enter into an online debate over the period of a week, in which they were able to challenge the opinions of other students and seek to find some form of consensus opinion. At the close of this process, the author attempted to summarise student thinking into a series of key principles, and this part of the project is more fully described in the following section.

Results

All 24 students participated enthusiastically in the discussion that followed, and within their respective discussion groups. Over the one week duration of this project, students in Discussion Group A made 170 individual posts to the on-line discussion forum, while students in Discussion Group B made 179 posts. As one might expect from highly experienced practitioners who were committed to a programme of doctoral study, the quality of reasoning, analysis and evaluation was uniformly strong, and a whole range of highly original thought emerged from the discussion. A process of content analysis was then used to extract themes from the 349 posts that were presented in this discussion, and the following key points became evident.

- The way that the discussion question was framed seemed to lend itself well to a practice-based response, though many contributors were also able to illustrate their comments with appropriate citations from the literature. That in turn allowed identification of a key difference between what OUGHT to work in theory and what actually DOES work in practice. That difference lies at the heart of what was discussed in the clinic, and it was good to see it so clearly laid bare.

- There was no real agreement on the value of knowledge for knowledge's sake : while many participants seemed to be somewhat scornful of this practice, a good point was made about today's whimsy being tomorrow's essentiality.
- The discussion question was commonly seen as a gray, rather than a black or white issue, though many students commented that the rift between academia and practice was widened through the common use (in academic journals) of dense and impenetrable writing styles. One student noted that HBR can convey some very sophisticated thinking in relatively simple and straightforward language, and posed the very fair question of why writing style did not seem to be an important criterion for quality evaluations.
- Many contributors made the point that rigour and relevance are anchor points on a continuum, and not a mutually exclusive dichotomy, which was acknowledged to be a fair point. It was also noted with regret that all of the opinions offered in the Lee & Greenley article were from academics, with no practitioner comment included. It seemed to students that revealed a fundamental lack of interest in the views of practitioners, and that journals like EJM would do well to include a selection of respected practitioners on their editorial boards. This of course was the line of thought that ultimately resulted in the writing of the current paper.
- The idea of practitioner irrelevance was soundly rejected. In the view of both Discussion Groups, the issue at stake was not around whether academic writing was of value to practitioners. Rather the issue was seen as one of access, in which practitioners were restricted in their ability to read academic journals in the first place, and were then seriously challenged in their ability to comprehend material that was written in an unnecessarily obscure language.
- The enormously important influence of interpersonal relationships on the constructivist paradigm of management thinking also clearly revealed itself. Perhaps understandably, students saw a major

role for scholar practitioners in bridging the academia- practice divide, and indeed there was strong support for the establishment of a formal joint venture partnership dedicated to the improved dissemination of relevant business research.

- Despite the high academic level of the discussion environment, there was still a tendency towards student criticism of what other people (EJM editorial review board members and fellow students) had written. It was therefore necessary to remind students that the purpose of this week was to establish where they personally stood in terms of the rigour-relevance debate, and it is difficult to do this adequately by simply critiquing the ideas of others. Flowing on from that observation was a tendency to stack responses with direct quotes from previously published material. This can be a very effective tool when used sparingly, but it is all too easy to overdo it.
- Many students leant heavily on their own life experiences to flesh out their responses to the question. Though, overall, this was accepted as a sound strategy for participation, it did reveal the extent of the task at hand in terms of seasoning an array of undoubted practitioner talents with a subtle flavouring of theory.
- Students were unanimous in concluding that rapidly changing environmental circumstances may well result in changed academia-practitioner relationships (by default) and that will be a welcome outcome of strategic change.
- Overall, students seemed to be optimistic about the chances of ultimate reconciliation of academic and practitioner views, and it was encouraging to see this optimism imply that practitioners are happy to move if they can see a reciprocal gesture from academia.

Discussion

So where does this leave the rigour-relevance debate when seen through practitioner eyes? Though the left-side viewpoint expressed earlier by Nick Lee remains well supported academically, it is argued as reasonable to suggest that this type of thinking is indicative of a hard science approach that sees the subject of research (businesses and the people who work within and without them) as inert and non-reactive participants in a objectively positivist experiment. It is difficult to accept that this is a realistic assessment, as social science researchers working with business related topics are inevitably going to have to contend with the mass of illogical contradictions that live within each of us as individual human beings. Those researchers do not have the luxury of carrying out research enquiry just because they are abstractedly interested in something, but are instead inevitably committed to research activity that in some small way enables practitioners to operate their businesses more effectively.

And this belief can clearly be seen as a bridge, or at least as a potential bridge, between the perspectives traditionally associated with the academic researcher and the perspectives similarly associated with the business management practitioner. It is also difficult to agree with Lee & Greenley when they seemingly attempt to equate the idea of "rigour versus relevance" with the even more simplistic presentation of "theory versus practice" as an either-or dichotomy. Kurt Lewin famously dispossessed this argument sixty years ago when he observed that "*there's nothing so practical as a good theory*" (Lewin, 1951, p.169) and this author believes that the academia/practitioner schism is far more attributable to a mutual communication breakdown rather than any flaw in this basic proposition. Gummeson is supportive here when he argues (cited in Lee & Greenley, 2010) that the purpose of business research is the intensely practical one of filling the gap between what should be and what is – an important point he makes here is the need to avoid confusion between the academic preoccupation with knowledge and the practitioner focus on judgment. We need both of those elements, for knowledge is certainly a valuable aid to judgment, but can never be a substitute for it.

For the author of this paper, this reality is captured in a differentiation between a positivist outlook on the conduct of investigations (where research is essentially defined as an unbiased and objective search for a single undisputed answer), and a constructivist alternative that sees "the answer" as an extremely moveable feast that emerges as a result of interaction between the problem, the context of the problem, and all of the people involved in the problem – on researcher's "answer" is likely to be different from another's, and different again from anyone else's answer. This is presented here as a significantly more practical and realistic approach to the process of research, and therefore the process of leadership-management, than any idea that a single, simple, statistical, and unchallenged solution can be found to the multitude of problems that business managers face in their day-to-day working lives.

Then, though it seems logical to follow on from there by trying to answer the deceptively simple question "what is research", it is immediately necessary to concede there is no one commonly agreed definition, at least in the eyes of practicing managers. This poses problems for the obvious follow-up question “why bother doing it”, though there are at least four competing answers to that question, each of which has its strong supporters in significant parts of the commercial environment :

1. Research as curiosity: a noble pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which on the one hand leads to genuine breakthroughs like DNA testing and organ transplants; but on the other provides the best justification we have for looking into some seriously arcane topics – e.g. Stack & Gundlach’s 1992 investigation into the correlation between a preference for country and western music and an individual’s propensity to commit suicide!
2. Research as business: a mechanism by which individual researchers respond to the stated needs of public and private sector organisations through competitive pursuit of funding parcels. The optimist would note that this approach allows the commissioners of research to control the process; the cynic might observe a danger that it can sometimes allow them to influence the findings as well.
3. Research as training: an approach by which students (in the broadest sense of the word) are introduced to research as an avenue to extend their spirit of enquiry, to somehow transform attitudes from passive acceptance to active challenge; or, for the unscrupulous, an easy way to translate large chunks of the education and training process into “self directed learning”.
4. Research as escape: the American folk singer Pete Seeger was highly adept at escaping the myriad household chores that result from having large numbers of children, would often intently pick out a tune on his guitar when dishes were to be washed or gardens dug – his excuse was “research”. The power and prevalence of the escape clause can be seen in the large number of research conferences held in pleasant and sunny beach resorts in the winter time.

For everyone involved in some way or another by the research process, there will be a consequent conceptualisation of research that takes a position somewhere along this line, and its well beyond the scope of this paper to try to change anyone’s particular view or position. It is however suggested that it is of vital importance to understand and accept that the perspective that any individual personally subscribes to is a lens through which all subsequent pronouncements will be filtered. For example, in being informed of a new research project, and dependent on one's perceptual filters, initial reactions might well range through a similar continuum:

1. Curiosity : what are we trying to find out ?
2. Business : how much will it cost ?
3. Training : who will be doing the work ?
4. Escape : how much time away from my normal duties can I claim ?

Having said that, hopefully with just the right degree of cynicism, those four qualifying questions remain particularly valid as parameters of research for commissioners and/or funders of research to ask – ideally at the outset of a project. They also provide a useful introduction into a fifth perspective, that of research as a collaboration.

There are three vitally important aspects of that perspective, especially when viewed through the eyes of business practitioners. The first is that practitioners will inevitably view research as a function of business rather than as a function of education; the second is that research is seen as a process rather than an outcome, a tool not a target; and the third is that research offers a way to find practical answers to practical business problems. Many years ago, as a self-employed business person, the author was approached by a student who was studying at a local college. As a preface to seeking assistance with her business research project (note the 'training' view of research in action), she asked "if there was one thing you could know about your business that you don't already know, what would it be ?" Speaking from experience, it is suggested that any and every business person knows the answer to that question.

For each person asked, the answer will of course be different, but the important point is that <u>everyone</u> does have an answer – there are no "don't knows" here. For all business people then, research need not necessarily be seen as a mysterious and obscure pursuit that has little relevance for them – instead, it can be seen as a vital tool to aid them in the pursuit of competitive advantage, just as the more readily accepted "business" tools of strategy, marketing, technology, or innovation. In this respect, the practitioner view of research can reasonably be represented as a **business** activity; that requires a **search;** for answers to **questions;** that we **think** we want to ask. If it is conceded that this interpretation has any validity at all, there is an immediate challenge to what is commonly regarded as research and what is not.

However, and in pursuit of the collaboration perspective, the highly simplistic model of business research presented below has an allocation of roles for some very different identities. Instead of talking about "industry" the model talks about "business people"; instead of talking about "academia", it talks about "researchers"; and instead of talking about any other legitimate stakeholder, the model merely refers to the admittedly generic term "learning advisers". Taken together, these changes make the research development process look quite a bit different to the conventional:

1. Business People and Learning Advisers define the problem environment

   - (what's the problem?)

2. Business People and Learning Advisers develop a management objective

   - (what answers do we need?)

3. Researchers translate the management objective into a research plan

   - (what questions will we ask?)

4. Researchers collect and analyse data

   - (what do the answers tell us?)

5. Business People and Learning Advisers and Researchers write the report

   - (and that's the collaborative part !)

Now this is by no means a detailed formula by which the practice of research in industry can be significantly enhanced – all it does is to suggest a fresh look at some of the entrenched principles of research activity that we've grown to accept as fundamental. It is however suggested that, if we can begin to think about and to challenge some of these principles, in a co-operative and creative manner, then we might just make a dent in the R&D deficiencies we currently face in many business environments.

Table 1 : Focus Group Demographics

Group A	Gender	Age	Position	Industry	Country
A1	M	37	CFO	Accounting and Finance	Kuwait
A2	M	58	Owner	Business Consulting	Malaysia
A3	M	40	Director	Education and Training	Nigeria
A4	M	40	VP Marketing	Manufacturing	UAE
A5	M	61	Professor	Education and Training	Uzbekistan
A6	F	51	Unit Manager	ITC	USA
A7	F	28	QC Manager	Education and Training	UAE
A8	M	36	Operations Director	ITC	UAE
A9	M	42	Consultant	ITC	Germany
A10	M	49	QC Manager	Food Production	Oman
A11	F	38	CEO	Civil Engineering	Kenya
A12	F	45	Programme Director	Broadcasting	Jamaica
Group B	**Gender**	**Age**	**Position**	**Industry**	**Country**
B1	M	59	Owner	Accounting and Finance	Barbados
B2	M	51	Chairman	Science and Technology	USA
B3	M	45	Professor	Education and Training	Canada
B4	M	50	CEO	Banking	UAE
B5	M	40	CFO	Clothing and Textiles	Netherlands
B6	M	50	IT Manager	Mining	Ghana
B7	M	34	Head of Treasury	Accounting and Finance	UK
B8	F	46	Researcher	Pharmaceuticals	USA
B9	M	32	Marketing Director	Pharmaceuticals	Kuwait
B10	F	52	CFO	Public Sector	Kenya
B11	M	41	Project Manager	Building and Construction	Nigeria
B12	M	42	CEO	Management Consultancy	Kenya

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