Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide – bridging the gap through Mode 2 research

David E Gray, University of Surrey
Paul Iles, University of Salford
Sandra Watson, Edinburgh Napier University

Journal of European Industrial Training 35(3) 247-263
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide – bridging the gap through Mode 2 research

David E Gray, University of Surrey
Paul Iles, University of Salford
Sandra Watson, Edinburgh Napier University

Abstract

In HRD, the relationship between theory (usually produced by academics) and practice (the domain, normally of practitioners), has been seen in dichotomous terms of theory versus practice, referred to in various ways such as: the research-practice gap; the implementation gap; the research-practice divide; and the theory-practice void. This gap is also typified by Mode 1 research, an approach which adopts the principles of ‘normal science’ and which generates results, the main beneficiaries of which are the academic community. Practitioners, however, need research that has a practical focus and which can be applied immediately. This article examines the nature of Mode 2 research, where knowledge is generated in the context of multi-stakeholder teams (academics and practitioners) that transcend the boundaries of traditional disciplines, working on problems to be found in working life. It is an approach that requires both academic rigour and practical relevance. The article presents and critically evaluates a number of examples of academic-practitioner partnerships in action in order to highlight both the potential and the challenges for the development of Mode 2 research. It also recommends strategies for the advancement of Mode 2 research, including getting academics to attune themselves more closely with the needs of practitioners, encouraging academics to write for practitioner journals, and the use of the kinds of research methodologies that can generate richer stories and cases that resonate with practitioner interests.

Introduction

In HRD, the relationship between theory (usually produced by academics) and practice (the domain, normally of practitioners), has been seen in dichotomous terms of theory versus practice, epitomised by HRD activities which remain relatively uninformed by sound theory (Swanson, 2001) and are still prone to fads and short term panaceas; for Short et al (2003: 241): ‘The void is filled by the fads, which falsely offer panacea solutions and lead to the poor reputation of HRD in delivering real long-term benefits’. Short et al (2009:432) claim: ‘instead of new professionals turning to models and theories from a body of understanding of what works and why, we see them turning to a fad-driven body of literature that can be best described as what sells’. A recent study by Iles et al (2010), using article publication counts from two different journal databases and employing institutional theory to analyse coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism, has recently explored whether Talent Management is such a fad in HRD.

As Callahan and de Davila (2004:91) point out, ‘we face a challenge to close the gap between research and practice for HRD.’ For Short (2006), the gap takes a variety of forms: the research-practice gap; the implementation gap; the research-practice divide; the theory-practice void; and the ‘disconnect’ between HRD researchers and research consumers. Even the terms used to describe key stakeholders are varied; practitioners who contribute to and see a value in research are described by terms such as: researcher-practitioners; scholar-practitioners; practitioner-theorists; and reflective practitioners. Should we not talk in terms of a multiplicity of HRD divisions, encompassing the aims of research, who sponsors it, who uses it and the roles and vested interests of key stakeholders?
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

This is not a debate confined to HRD; in the management/organization studies field, it is often characterized as the ‘rigour-relevance’ debate (eg Aram and Salipante 2003; Fincham and Clark 2009; Huff and Huff 2001; Starkey and Madan 2001). Fundamental ontological and epistemological differences seem to underpin views on knowledge production and consumption - especially between the academic’s search for generalisability and the practitioner’s search for specific, particular solutions. Some authors argue that the ‘rigour-relevance gap’ should be bridged (Fincham and Clark 2009); others that the gap is already being bridged (Hodgkinson and Rousseau 2009). Kieser and Lenner (2009: 517) in contrast, claim that researchers and researched inhabit separate social systems, leaving an unbridgeable gap ‘not only attributable to different languages and styles in the scientific community, but also to different logics - to differences in defining and tackling problems-that prevail in the systems of science and practice’.

Against this, Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009: 538) argue that collaborative research can be both rigorous and relevant; ‘developing deep partnerships between academics and practitioners, supported by appropriate training in theory and research methods, can yield outcomes that meet the twin imperatives of high quality scholarship and social usefulness’. Starkey et al (2009) claim that traditional research gives primacy to ‘rigour’, leading to research of interest only to the scholarly community; relevance however is a necessary condition for rigour, leading to new forms of engagement with theory and practice. While research does not inevitably have to be connected to practice, in an applied field such as HRD, there has to be some connection. Stewart (2007: 95) argues: “The threat is that academic researchers pay too much attention to their own arguments and debates and too little to the needs and interests of practitioners’; users and funders of HRD research are becoming increasingly frustrated with management research’s lack of relevance and engagement with the world of practice.

Much HRD research, however, focuses on relatively narrow aspects of a topic, or fails to address issues currently vexing practitioners (Berger, et al., 2004), while HRD practice successfully continues in many organisations without recourse to HRD research (Keefer and Yap, 2007). In addition, practitioners lack time to consider how scholars might help them (Bassi, 1998), may suffer from a lack of competence in undertaking research (Short, 2006), or may simply fail to recognise its importance (Gilley, 2006).

The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the role of theory in HRD practice and to explore whether the divide between academics and HRD practitioners can be spanned. In doing this, it presents a critical evaluation of some examples of academic-practitioner partnerships in action, in order to identify the kinds of bridges that can be built. Finally, the article seeks to look to the future, to speculate on where new forms of Mode 2 research may take us and how they might be generated.

The role of theory in HRD practice

What is it that these stakeholders could value in research, and what is its purpose? At its most basic level, research is concerned with building, testing, validating or falsifying theory. Theories are not static, but change on the basis of new, emerging observation and evidence, and must be capable of being tested, or falsified. In order to do this, researchers need to compare the predictions the theory makes with measurements made in the social world (Gilbert, 2008) – that is, the world of practice. So, how can the development of theory be made more relevant to practitioners? This paper explores an approach, Mode 2 research that may offer some solutions to this dilemma, before considering factors and issues that may impact on bridging the academic practitioner gap. Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to Mode 1 research as research that closely follows the physical science model.
Theoretical propositions, resulting largely from an academic agenda, are tested against empirical data, each successive study building on, and in some cases modifying, previous findings: Kuhn's (1970) normal science. There is a fundamental distinction between a theoretical core and other areas of knowledge where theoretical insights are translated into applications. The principle beneficiaries of Mode 1 research are the academic community. Mode 1 researchers strive for generalisable cause-effect relations; practitioners, however, need techniques and methods that can be applied immediately, and which may rely on a different evidence base and require an element of trust in the ability of these to deliver robust, practical, and valuable outcomes. Anderson et al. 2001 refer to this as short term ‘faith validity’ (p. 405). The authors argue that this can only be delivered by Mode 2 research.

In Mode 2 research, knowledge is generated in the context of multi-stakeholder teams that transcend the boundaries of traditional disciplines (it is consciously trans-disciplinary rather than just multi-disciplinary), working on problems to be found in working life. The process of knowledge creation involves a continuous interchange between eclectic theories and the outcomes of various interventions. Hence, frameworks are generated in the context of application itself, often including team members who are potentially users of the new knowledge.

In order to explore and compare the characteristics of Mode 2 research to other forms of research we have drawn on Anderson et al’s (2001) typology. An adaptation of this is presented in Figure 1, which presents a 2x2 model which locates research referred to as ‘Science’ by Anderson et al., in quadrants based on the dimensions of relevance and rigour. Mode 2 is an approach, then, that requires both academic rigour and practical relevance (Anderson et al., 2001) (see Pragmatic Science, Quadrant 2). In the case of management research, for example, it represents a dual approach to knowledge production that is both theory-sensitive and practice-led (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998). Unfortunately, other combinations abound which are of much less value. Popularist Science, (Quadrant 1) has a high practical relevance but the methodological rigour is low (for example, within the HRD context, many of the books on emotional intelligence, mentoring and coaching). It happens when fast-emerging business trends trigger ill-conceived research studies which are published to provide a degree of legitimacy or marketing support. Pedantic Science (Quadrant 3) results when research adopts sophisticated and valid designs but produces findings of low practical relevance to organisations or practitioners. This research usually derives from previous theoretical studies and is of interest to only a narrow field of specialist academics. Finally, Quadrant 4, is what Anderson et al (2001) term ‘Puerile Science’ where researchers produce studies of very limited practical value, using methods that lack rigour (for example, using small samples and single, non-validated data gathering instrument). While much of this kind of research is screened out by careful journal editors, some of it leaks through into professional and other media to influence the ‘organizational Zeitgeist’ (Anderson et al., 2001: 396) – in HRD, the kinds of fads criticised by Short et al (2009).
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

Figure 1 Fourfold typology of research (adapted from Anderson et al., 2001)

While Pragmatic Science (Quadrant 2) is recommended by Anderson et al (2001), we are not provided with detailed guidance as to the kinds of methodological designs that can achieve this. Burgoyne and James (2006), analysing corporate leadership development in order to produce a ‘best practice’ guide, do attempt to identify some of the tensions and challenges in this kind of Mode 2 research. Their research, part of a government initiative to improve the management and leadership capability of corporations in the UK; involved identifying what could be learned from practice in top (FTSE 250) companies that might be of value to other organizations striving to improve their own practices. They argue that research that is co-produced between academic researchers and practitioners to produce actionable research needs to be both rigorous and make a contribution to knowledge (as it was driven by government policy and steered by a Working Group of practitioners). Different types of opportunities and constraints were encountered than might be the case in conducting Mode 1 research. These included the more complex environment, the broader range of stakeholders, the socio-political/interpersonal skills required, the need to attend to methodological and meta-theoretical issues, the size of the problem, the timescales involved, and how to manage dissemination pressures and relationships with the working group. For example, Mode 1 research will often address ‘smaller’ more focused questions than Mode 2 research; it also often has a longer time orientation, focussed on research rigour, whilst Mode 2 research is often more concerned with deadlines and an urgent need to address a current problem or issue. There is usually a customer/client problem-owner (such as a Working Group) in Mode 2 research which is actively involved in the co-production of knowledge, with its own concerns, not necessarily shared with others, over research usefulness, relevance and justifiability. This process often involves dialogue and disagreement across possibly competing paradigms, as practitioners and researchers may not share the same ‘world views’ (e.g. practitioner preference for normative/prescriptive research focussed on ‘what needs to be done’ versus analytical or critical research focused on understanding or critique). Views about action, cause and effect and the legitimacy of any conclusions may not align with researchers’ preferences for complexity, reservations, and an acknowledgement of research limitations. Recognition that
output type and end-user perspectives are integral to all phases, that dissemination is an integral part of the research process; and that tensions will result from diverse/implicit epistemological and ontological assumptions is imperative in such Mode 2 research. In a discussion of a project aimed at developing 'technology translators' able to bridge the knowledge gap between academics and key staff in SMEs, Iles and Yolles (2002) raise similar points; such translators may be practitioners with academic research backgrounds (e.g. DBAs, PhDs) or academics with practitioner knowledge and experience.

According to Storberg-Walker (2006), the evolving discipline of HRD needs theory-building research methods that are able to legitimise and accommodate multiple paradigms. She suggests that two frameworks, The General Method of Theory Building and the Diamond Model, both offer potential solutions. Lynham’s (2002) General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines (such as HRD) suggests five phases in theory building which include both conceptual development and application (see Figure 2). Conceptual development requires that theorists formulate ideas in a way that reflects the most informed understanding and explanation of a phenomenon within a relevant world context. The building of conceptual frameworks is not bound to any, single epistemology, and can embrace both hypothetico-deductive and inductive/qualitative approaches. The next phase, operationalisation, is to make an explicit connection between the theoretical framework and practice, in order that the theory can be empirically tested in a real-world context. The third phase, confirmation or disconfirmation, involves the planning, design and implementation of a research study to intentionally confirm (or otherwise) the theoretical framework which, once done, the theory can be used with greater confidence to inform action and practice. But a fifth phase, application is also required, in which further studies are used to refine the theory, and where practice gets to judge the usefulness and relevance of the theory. Lynham (2002) notes that the process of applied theory building can begin with any of the phases mentioned, and is less orderly than the model might suggest.

![Figure 2 The General Method of Theory-Building Research in Applied Disciplines (Lynham, 2002)]
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

While acknowledging that the General Method addresses the role of paradigms and advocates multi-paradigm research, it does not offer explicit steps for completing each phase (Storberg-Walker, 2006). The Diamond Model, however, does just this (see Figure 3). Van de Ven (2007) uses the model as part of what he terms ‘engaged scholarship’, a participative form of research that seeks to obtain the perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors and practitioners). It is an engagement with stakeholders rather than, as with much research, engagement for. The Diamond Model engages stakeholders at the four stages of study activity, namely:

- **Problem formulation.** This means talking to those who experience the problem, as well as reviewing the literature.
- **Theory building.** Create the theory either inductively or deductively, but then have conversations with knowledge experts from disciplines and functions who have addressed the problem.
- **Research design.** Formulate an appropriate methodology, but also share this with technical experts, and talk to people who can provide access to data, as well as respondents or informants.
- **Problem solving.** Communicate and apply the findings, and engage with the intended audience to interpret meanings and uses.

As Van de Ven (2007) asserts, social research is an intensely social process, so stakeholders have to be engaged in problem formulation, theory building, research design and problem solving.

---

**Figure 3 Practising engaged scholarship (adapted from Van de Ven, 2007)**

The question remains, however, if theory (whether though the General Method of Theory-Building or other approaches), is made more relevant to practitioners, what do we mean by relevance? What constitutes practically relevant research should be
seen as subject to negotiation between stakeholders, and will shift between different points of time, depending on the particular stakeholders (researchers, practitioners, sponsors and fund holders, etc.) Similarly, what constitutes methodological rigour is a site of contention. What constitutes valid evidence or argument depends on the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research. While Mode 1 research relies on the methods of traditional science, which includes the use of controls and the manipulation of variables, the problems confronting contemporary organisations require methodological alternatives that combine rigour with relevance. Unfortunately, researchers are pulled towards Mode 1 research, mostly because the most reputable academic journals are considered to reside in the USA, and these set stringent standards that favour methodological rigour above anything else (Anderson, et al., 2001). Next, we will explore some examples of academics and practitioners working together, firstly by examining the operation of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, then analysing ‘research for use’ within the NHS, and finally looking at management research in general and HRD research in particular.

Academic-practitioner partnerships in action

In principle, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) should an ideal model of Mode 1 and Mode 2 collaboration. First launched as Teaching Company Schemes, in 1975, and based upon the teaching hospital idea of ‘learning by doing’, KTPs today cover a wide spectrum of projects in both the physical and social sciences and in sectors such as the arts, the media and the social environment (Ktponline, 2010). The aim of the KTP programme is to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, technology and business skills through collaboration between businesses and universities. Knowledge Transfer (KT) was identified as essential to innovation in knowledge-driven economies by the DTI’s Innovation Report (2003), the Lambert Review (Lambert, 2003) and the Race to the Top report (Sainsbury, 2007). Essentially, Knowledge Transfer is seen as a two-way transfer of ideas, research results, expertise or skills between one party and another.

A study by Lockett, Kerr and Robinson (2008), however, raises concerns about the barriers that exist to knowledge transfer within KTP projects. They point to the bias within universities towards teaching, the perceived lack of interest in ‘third mission’ activities, and Intellectual Property Rights issues. Furthermore, stereotypes abounded: academics, in the study, viewed the SME sector as incapable of generating ‘cutting edge’ research, while the perception of industry (particularly SMEs) was that universities were ‘ivory towers’, and academics detached from the ‘real world’ (Lockett et al., 2008). Academics and businesses also worked to different timescales, the academics looking to projects that continue over several years, while companies seek immediate results. Academics were seen as lacking a sense of urgency. “We need to solve these issues now otherwise we don’t eat next month. Whereas I get the impression... in the academic world the time-scales are ... a lot longer and are tied to an academic year and such like (Respondent in Lockett et al., 2008:668). Another problem is that academic advancement has been structured around the research assessment exercise (RAE) with its bias towards the publication of research in top refereed journals. This means that for some academics there is even a risk involved in participating in a knowledge transfer project. Certainly the RAE has given academics a financial incentive to participate in research rather than knowledge-based partnership activities (Davis, 2009).

Another example of where Mode 1 and Mode 2 research, in principle, combine is health service research which explores health needs and provision, and the use and effectiveness of health services. Primarily funded by the NHS, it involves both ‘research for use’ as well as pure research, and is mainly produced by university-based researchers. Ferlie and Wood (2003) report on an exploration of four case
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

studies to examine whether university-based health service research resembles Mode 1 or Mode 2 research, including the development and dissemination strategies adopted. They conclude that, although there were signs of Mode 2, in the main, the research was conducted according to traditional principles based on formal protocols, and writing for peer-reviewed publications. Their survey revealed, for example, that peer reviewed articles were seen by academics as important, but were viewed as least important by health managers. Conversely, Mode 2 knowledge (which could be applied) was seen as the most important by managers and by nursing groups. However, at dissemination stages there was evidence of customization of feedback for different user groups; the employment of multiple engagement strategies as well as more conventional academic dissemination. But overall, researchers faced a Mode 1 ‘pull back’ towards their academic institutions, suggesting that basic disciplines retain a greater defensive power than Gibbons et al (1994) believed (Ferlie and Wood, 2003). They conclude that the interactivity of the worlds of research and practice are still not well understood and are more complex than has so far been assumed (Ferlie and Wood, 2003: S2: 57).

This complexity is central to Mitev and Venters’ (2009) analysis of a project which brought together academic expertise and business in civil and building engineering, construction management, information systems and software engineering. The EPSRC funded project sought to foster practices in the construction industry (through the development of knowledge management tools) which enable the creation, sharing and re-use of knowledge to promote sustainability. In undertaking a retrospective reflexive account, Mitev and Venter (2009) argue that this Mode 2 kind of research programme failed to achieve transdisciplinarity. This was because there were unresolved tensions between the private and pubic sector organisations, and crucially, because of institutional pressures and instrumentalization from academia, industry and government and a restricted notion of what business-relevance looks like. Academic instrumentalization took the form of playing the bidding ‘game’, and in the problems that emerged in aligning the divergent research agendas of different partners and disciplines, and in the fragmented agendas between academia and business. Within the project, functionalist epistemologies were shared by industry, academic engineers and the funding body, narrowly aligned to technological goals and outputs. This meant that alternative perspectives, for example, designing simple systems for the public sector or to support green contractors were not considered. Marginal voices were ignored.

Some of the lessons of the Mitev and Venter (2009) study are of relevance to management (and HRD) research in general. Firstly, the boundaries between Mode 1 and Mode 2 research are not rigidly fixed. Instead, broader criteria (simple business relevance on the one hand and academic rigour, for example representative sampling on the other) need to be found. Secondly, the change implied by Mode 2 research is not easily achieved, and the problematization of practice by academics (as in the Mitev and Venter, 2009 study) is essential. This includes the need for reflexivity in surfacing tensions and challenging the nature and purpose of management research – including what ‘business relevance’ means.

In turning attention to examples drawn from an HRD perspective, an example of HRD research that is firmly connected to the world of practice, is provided by Hamlin (2007) who took a series of general statements of manager and managerial leader effectiveness derived from six public sector case studies, and tested these against behavioural statements derived from three similar studies. These studies included an NHS Trust hospital, a private sector ‘professional communications services’ company, and a ‘telecommunications’ Group plc. Hamlin (2007) found that the new cases yielded broadly similar behavioural statements to the original general statements. This high level of commonality means that the model could be
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

Transferable to both public and private sector organisations in the UK, and is an example of how both Mode 1 (conceptual knowledge) and Mode 2 (instrumental knowledge) can be brought together. In terms of application for HRD practice, the behavioural statements could be used to inform and evaluate the content of management and leadership development programmes, create competency frameworks, or to develop HRD intervention tools. However, although the study is a relatively uncommon example of evidence-based practice in HRD, it was undertaken by an academic and ‘qualified researcher’, with no suggestion that practitioners were involved in the design or execution of the study. This, then, is an example of research for practitioners rather than with practitioners – although the results of the study provide plentiful opportunity for implementation by practitioners.

An example of ‘research with practitioners’ can be seen in the development of a the Research Consultancy Framework© created by Edinburgh Napier University (Francis, Reddington and Amati, 2009). This framework (see Table 1) is structured to achieve a balance of diverse quality controls that reflect the concerns of both academic and practitioner communities of interest. It has four main attributes as shown in the table below. The framework of action is based on the partnering of university-based expertise and experienced practitioner-consultants to create ‘pracademic’ project teams, as termed by Francis et al (2009), able to navigate the practitioner-academic worlds. Focus is placed on co-operative inquiry and ‘co-creation’ of ideas and solutions both within the project team and in working with the client. The effective ‘conversion’ of complex concepts and ideas into more simple and practical forms is critical to the co-creation process. It rests on the achievement of a balance between the clients’ need for convergence of ideas and presentation of ‘line of sight’ models, and situations that call for the opening up of alternate interpretations and questioning (i.e. challenging of ‘taken-for granted’ assumptions and current ways of doing things which have been mostly informed by practice-based experience).

Table 1 Research Consultancy Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actionable Knowledge</td>
<td>Actionable knowledge characterized by high quality scholarship and high value as perceived by the client, which has two components - ‘use value’ in terms of the quality of tangible and intangible benefits and ‘exchange value’ in terms of the investment the client is prepared to make to achieve these benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of Disciplines/Perspectives</td>
<td>A framework of action is characterised by ‘pracademic’ project teams able to navigate the practitioner-academic worlds and allow a blend of multiple disciplines and theoretical perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Driven Collaboration</td>
<td>Focus on co-operative inquiry and ‘co-creation’ of ideas and new solutions to problems. It requires a high level of partnership working between consultants and client, based on transparency, honesty and openness in all exchanges - characterised, by increased client learning and understanding and by a greater flexibility on behalf of the consultant to meet the clients’ potentially evolving needs and requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Effective ‘conversion’ of complex concepts and ideas into more simple and practical forms is critical to this co-creation process. It rests on the achievement of a balance between the clients’ need for convergence of ideas and presentation of ‘line of sight’ models, and situations that call for the opening up of alternate interpretations and questioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on sustainable change, based on a complex mix of theory and practice – it requires a leadership orientation that seeks clarification of meaning and purpose, recognition and freedom to express and experiment in ways judged to have sufficient rigour and relevance for the purpose of the project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

Through this framework, the authors believe that they can embrace many of the features of Mode 2 Research as presented by Gibbons et al. (1994) and address tensions inherent in this hybrid mode of activity. However, what is less clear from this framework is the extent to which generalisable theory can be generated, – although this will be explored further as the framework is developed. However, Maclean et al. (2002:202) suggest that Mode 2 research outputs should be concerned with transfer of generative ‘interim theory’ to new contexts that are capable of illustrating ‘theoretical abstraction and meaningful contextualisation’ rather than generalisable theory.

Another example of ‘research with practitioners’ can be seen through the work of Watson, Farquharson, McMillan and Naismith (2010), who have been working with Investor in People(IiP) Scotland to explore leadership in action in member organisations. Initially client driven, the research aims, objectives and questions were jointly agreed. Following desk research focusing on leadership behaviours and actions, the methodology was proposed. Through discussion with the ‘practitioner partner’ the approach and content were revised to achieve data collection methods that were seen to be appropriate for the practitioner audience. As a result of piloting, changes were made to language and terminology to ease understanding for respondents. Data collection access was facilitated through the ‘practitioner partner’ which resulted in an extremely sound return rate. Dissemination has to date been twofold: reports and presentations to practitioners focused on the key findings; whilst presentations to academic audiences have been more closely related to particular aspects of leadership theories and approaches, for example, servant leadership and collective learning.

Whilst the main reporting of the survey could enable anonymity of respondents, reporting of focus group results to host organisations, involved careful consideration to ensure that comments could not be attributed to individuals. This involved the researchers adopting a constructive reflective reporting approach that would allow areas of improvement to be identified. Although the researchers consider that many benefits were derived from this approach, including access to respondents and practice informed data, the success was dependent on ongoing dialogue with the practitioner partner, which was time consuming. There was a high degree of ‘trust’ in this relationship which enabled clear demarcation regarding ownership of roles and activities, which enhanced the research progress. From the practitioner’s perspective, this research project is in theory complete, but the researchers are still interrogating the various data sets to produce academic papers for publication.

What of the future?

Stewart (2007) argues that, for the UK at least, a growing engagement between research and practice is evidenced by the increased number of empirical studies commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development amongst members of University Forum for Human Resource Development universities. In addition, the UK based Research Assessment Exercise (2008) explicitly argues that research across the spectrum of applied research, practice-based and basic/strategic research should be treated by panels on an equal basis, wherever the research is conducted. However, the use of journal rankings and other metrics, which favour Mode 1 research, does little to encourage a real shift towards a practice-based research approach (e.g. the problems studies based on ‘action research’ have historically had in getting published in high-ranking journals). Such a divide could increase if the practice continues of appointing full time academic staff recruited directly from PhD studies with no HRD experience or practice-base from which to draw their understanding.
HEFCE (2009) have announced that the next research assessment exercise planned for 2013, the Research Excellence Framework or REF will give greater priority to ‘impact’ or the apparent social and economic ‘pay-off’ of research. The proposal is to assess the ‘demonstrable difference’ made by research during the assessment period, using a combination of narratives – e.g., case studies and impact statements – and indicators of the impact of research on such areas as inward investment, high-level skills, better-informed public policy-making, new business start ups, so as to include evidence of collaboration with research users. HEFCE had planned to make greater use of ‘metrics’ to quantify the impact of research, but has encountered difficulties in identifying suitable metrics, and has been continuing to consult throughout 2010 on its final plans, using pilot studies. HEFCE (2009) recognises that the assessment of ‘impact’ raises many challenges, such as addressing time-lags, attribution and corroboration problems, and the limitations of existing metrics, but has proposed that impact assessments should have greater weighting in assessment of research excellence (25%) than research environment (15%), but lower weighting than research output quality (60%). Some leading physical scientists have objected to the use of short-term impact measures, arguing that no-one can predict what impact ‘curiosity-driven’ or ‘blue-skies’ research would have in the long-term; the use of such measures risks restricting research to projects that seem to have immediately identifiable business benefits. Researchers in the arts and humanities have objected that the whole concept of ‘impact’ is not relevant to their fields, as well as being in practice extremely difficult to judge in the short-term. Proponents of impact continue to argue that publicly-funded research needs to be accountable to the community and to tax-payers. A further issue in assessing impact is over who makes the judgment over the ‘impact’ of a research project—is it to be academics, managers, policy practitioners, or some combination of stakeholders? Is it likely that, however the debate is resolved, ‘impact’ will become a stronger criterion for research assessment in HRD, and this may encourage greater dialogue and collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

In moving forward further opportunities to involve practitioners in the research process can be explored; for example, the DBA degree seeks to develop not ‘professional researchers’, as does the traditional PhD, but ‘researching professionals’ (Sankaran 2006; Bareham et al 2000: 397). Research problems are less likely to arise from a gap in the literature, and are more likely to arise from professional, managerial or organisational practice. Such ‘scholar-practitioners’ /‘practitioner-scholars’ (Salipante and Aram 2003; Hay 2004) can act as boundary-spanners, moving between the academic and practitioner worlds to develop both new knowledge and organizational improvements; that is, knowledge that is both rigorous and relevant as an original contribution to practice. In contrast to the traditional PhD, where the thesis is assessed in terms of its original contribution to knowledge through Mode 1 research, in the DBA the thesis is assessed in terms of how new knowledge is used to bring about changes in practice, such as organizational or public policy or management or professional practice - a process much more akin to Mode 2 research. More could also be done by HRD courses and programmes to increase the research skills of Masters and even undergraduate students (Huff and Huff, 2001).

How feasible is the growth of Mode 2 research within HRD? Certainly, an increase in the demand for evidenced-based research may be realised with the growing number of qualified HRD practitioners who can see the value of research informed practice, consultancy, CPD and development interventions. While it may be argued that these are out with the realm of research, they do fall under the rubric of Knowledge Transfer (KT) activities. Through engaging in KT, academics can enhance the educational experience of students and be better equipped to undertake practice based research and/or support others in undertaking this. However, currently the
Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

Rewards associated with a good research assessment rating may outweigh benefits derived from involvement in KT: a cultural shift accompanied with appropriate rewards (e.g., promotion of practice-based professors, ranking of practice-based journals, sustained funding for scholarly engagement with practice) may be needed for practice based/informed research to be seen as fundamental to developing the field of HRD. The success of HRD Mode 2 projects, may also be dependent on their size. For research agendas to be relevant, more projects need to operate at a scale and scope typical of today’s global organisations (Huff and Huff, 2001). This may mean bringing together researchers from world-wide universities. Eliciting corporate sponsorship for research is also part of the answer – but this will require business schools finding topics of more direct relevance to businesses (Starkey and Madan, 2001). However, this should be within the context where Mode 1 research continues to be sheltered. An important element of Mode 1 is the unfettered development of knowledge that has no immediate commercial application (Huff and Huff, 2001).

Advancing the use of Mode 2 research will become more embedded in HRD practice, if researchers make themselves more familiar with practitioners’ needs and interests (Rynes, 2007). They could also seek to write articles for practitioner journals and agree to serve on editorial boards of bridge periodicals, that is, journals that inform the community of practitioners about scientific research (Latham, 2007). Indeed, researchers should lead with their strengths, by conducting research into the translation processes between academics and practitioners (Rynes, 2007) by creating a ‘theory of diffusion’ (Latham, 2007: 1049). Academics need to spot trends (while avoiding the latest management fad) and get research findings out more quickly (Cascio, 2007). It would help here if research journals, as a matter of course, required articles to specify the implications of their findings for practice (Cohen, 2007). Even research methods might play a part. The use of more qualitative, intensive methodologies such as grounded theory, case analysis and ethnography, is likely to generate greater interest amongst practitioners, because it tends to generate the kinds of richer stories that resonate with them (Rynes, 2007).

Mode 2 research can offer many benefits to practitioners, such as enabling them to develop critiques of contemporary HRD practice. Many concepts and techniques in HRD have been subjected to little sustained critique, with claims made for them that are not necessarily borne out. Through such critique, practitioners can identify theoretical and empirical starting points and outline the context, history, and current usage of such concepts and techniques. Identifying and examining taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning practice and evaluating the claims made for such practices in ways which go beyond the descriptive or prescriptive focus of much ‘popular’ or ‘practitioner focused’ literature, and the many claims of consultants and specialists can help practitioners develop comprehensive, critical examinations of, and reflections, on contemporary HRD theory, research and practice.

References

Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide


_Burgoyne, J. and James, K._ (2006) ‘Towards Best or better Practice in corporate leadership development: operational issues in mode 2 and design science research’. _British Journal of Management_ 17,303-316


Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide


HEFCE (2009) Research Excellence Framework: Second Consultation on the assessment and funding of research
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_38/


Spanning the HRD academic-practitioner divide

the actKM Seventh Annual Conference 2006


