Competing paradigms of social knowledge creation

We exist in two worlds. There is the world that we work and live in and the world inside our minds that we sometimes share with others.

The world that we live in is replete with continuous and confusing experiences that confront us with intractable dilemmas that we surf and half solve, just enough just to move on to the next pressing issues. As a result we exist within dysfunctional families and frustrating organisations that provide us with the perfect motivation to try and do better than those who went before.

The world inside our heads is no less complete. It is where we try and make sense of these experiences. We try to take the complexity of the real world and draw from it some 'truths', some assumptions, about how the world works to guide us in the future. We try and turn our experiences into conceptual understanding. We theorise about how the complexity outside really does work. Naturally our data is often thin and incomplete but, in discussions with others, we generate concepts and theories that help us survive more effectively. Forming theory may be a conscious or unconscious process, making tacit or explicit or codified knowledge or knowing. First we identify phenomena in the field of practice we then trace the patterns or conceptual relations that continually appear, and then finally we produce theories about how these relations operate.

In fact, we may take these concepts and theories to others to help themselves in their lives. We generate discussions and manuals, or technologies, that apply the theory to the world of practice. In doing this we unite the two worlds, by extracting from experience, conceptualising and then applying our learning back to the daily lives we live.

Research is about formalising this activity and about trying to achieve outcomes that are not just responses to our immediate context but tap or locate strong enduring social patterns that may echo or reverberate in, and inform, diverse contexts.

Research exists as a tension between these two worlds. The world of practice needs conceptual input to instigate change. Conceptual relations only exist because of our experiences in the world of practice. As in many debates of tension, polarised approaches deny and fail to be informed by the 'other' perspective. Research that lives in theory, uses theory to define problems, frameworks and patterns of analysis, then tries to use the world of practice as a laboratory, parachuting in to gather data as hygienically as possible, is often associated with the production of theory that fails to engage with practice.
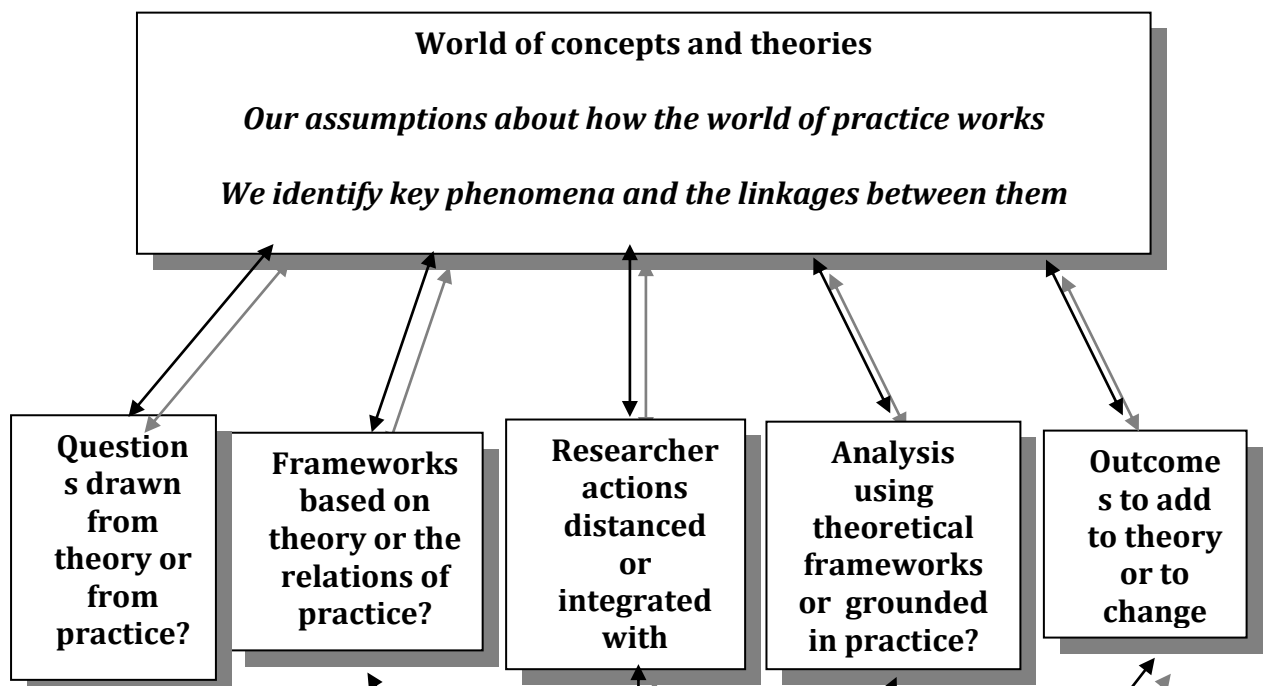
Similarly, research that grounded in the world of practice often fails to integrate with existing theoretical frames and provides conceptualisation that is anchored to a specific context. Most research practice weaves between these two polarised approaches. Knowledge can be generated from both within the experiences of practice and from the codified texts that researchers generate. It is this rich platform of experience and theory that should inform all research processes. It is impossible to explore what is happening in practice without being influenced by the multiple discourse of knowledge that have flowed thorough your mind previously. Similarly, it is foolish to constrain what can be learned from practice by venturing forward with a framework that is based on codified past experiences. It is in the interaction between existing knowledge and current practice that knowledge is generated. There is a symbiotic, iterative relationship.

The myth of the independent researcher should be long dead. We infect what we research and often the product of the research is generated by that infection.

Forming a research programme or path is a conscious process that is mediated both by what already exists as knowledge and what the issues are in the world of practice. The eventual path is formed by tensions between the two worlds and is illustrated in the following diagram which shows the choices made in a research project as it is informed by both practice and theory and attempts similarly to contribute both to practice and theory.

At the top and bottom of the figure are the two worlds we in habit. Are success in both depends on continually reconciling the tensions between them. A formal research process has its genesis in a question or a problem – as search for better understanding. This can be a gap in the literature or a workplace issue, or both. Similarly, the framework for the research and the researchers role may be generated by existing theory or by existing field relations[1]. Data collected from the field may be inductively analysed building grounded concepts or it may be related to existing theoretical frameworks. Finally, key statements emerging form the research about what has been found can be made specifically for a field of practice or may be linked to existing theory.

Researchers must wander between the two worlds and travel just far enough into each so that they maintain a thread of contact with the other. As a student of mine expressed it, 'every day I walk towards the organisation and I am a researcher planning what I need to extract, and every day I walk inside and become one of them as their needs and perceptions radically alter the hygenically crafted plans I had built. This switch form the etic to the emic perceptions, that is from being a detached researcher to being an interacting being, is part of the natural research cycle, and part of the researchers dilemma.

World of concepts and theories

Our assumptions about how the world of practice works

We identify key phenomena and the linkages between them

| Questions drawn from theory or from practice? | Frameworks based on theory or the relations of practice? | Researcher actions distanced or integrated with | Analysis using theoretical frameworks or grounded in practice? | Outcomes to add to theory or to change |

[1] Many studies have a theoretical framework using existing theories to map the territory. For some studies a conceptual framework proposes a conceptual map of the relations of interest to the research study. Finally a research framework may map the actual bodies of practice that will be interrogated by the research process.
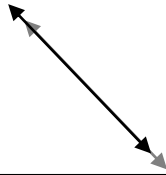
World of practice – society and organisations

Our experiences of multiple social interactions

We identify patterns of relations and outcomes

The trick is to keep a foot in both worlds, and to keep your head continually moving between those worlds, to make practical outcomes and conceptual statements. Our job is to integrate the world of practice and the world of knowledge for others.

In your VET projects, focus first on making relational comments about what was happening in your filed of practice locally and how it might be improved. Think about messages for different stakeholders. Work with your supervisor or mentor to develop these statements to suggest any broader conceptual statements that relate to the wider Australian VET field. You might at that point also consider how your study confirms, extends, modifies or contests the findings and models in the literature you reviewed. How does your local knowledge making add to the stock of knowledge?

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