

Engaged scholarship and the experienced marketing professional: Academic relevance and marketing practice.

Authors

Kelly, Simon, [Presenter], (Sheffield Business School Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom)

Johnston, Paul, (Sheffield Business School Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom)

Nicholson, John, (Huddersfield University, Huddersfield, United Kingdom)

Key words:

Engaged Scholarship; Critical Realism; Rigour and Relevance; Scientific and practical contribution

Abstract

We propose an approach to the study and research of marketing in Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programmes that has the potential for narrowing the academic-practitioner divide. Our paper relates to a period of doctoral study undertaken by one of the authors of this paper that investigated an aspect of business to business marketing termed the sales and marketing interface (Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Malshe et al. 2016) in relation to the phenomenon of value proposition production. Insights and explanations are therefore drawn from a single explanatory case study (Yin 2008) relating to the experiences of a DBA student who was a former practitioner, now currently employed as a business school academic and commercial consultant. The case study covers the student's period of study and thesis completion on a professional doctorate programme between 2013 and 2018.

Introduction

Two aspects of interest are germane to this paper. These are the notion of the so called 'Pracademic' and the notion of Engaged Scholarship. The term pracademic is a neologism of practitioner and academic and is a term used colloquially to denote a person who is a blend of practitioner and academic. This term reflects the sense of self held by the student in the case. Engaged Scholarship (Boyer 1996; Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017; Hoffman 2016; Struminska-Kutra 2016; Van de Van 2007) is a research approach that seeks to make a more relevant and meaningful connection between scholarly endeavour and commercial practice. This approach stands in contrast to the neo-empiricist research approach found in conventional marketing literature that that prefers to downplay and remove the voice and experiences of researcher from their research (Hackley 2003, Barsalou 2003; Prinz 2002). The stance of neo-empiricism was encouraged by the student's original DBA supervisory team until a switch to engaged scholarship helped the student bridge the schism between practitioner relevance *and* academic rigour in the student's doctoral thesis (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009)

A further driver of interest in the approach of Engaged Scholarship was the student's desire to overcome their frustration concerning the nature of the core curriculum of undergraduate and postgraduate courses delivered by their university. Marketing courses were deemed by the student to uncritically follow positivistic epistemological principles and were dominated by classic normative marketing models, which in their commercial experience were barely used in contemporary commercial practice. Drawing from Corley and Gioia (2011) the Engaged Scholarship approach focused the academic contribution on thesis content that was both rigorous *and* relevant (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009) such that the academic -practitioner divide was further narrowed by following a 'route to good theory ...not through gaps in the literature but through an engagement with problems in the world' (Kilduff 2006, p. 252).

Case Context

The student's motivation

The student's motivation for wanting to understand more about how sales and marketing interact to develop value propositions was based on a history of working as a senior marketing practitioner in large organisations, who had attempted to move towards a more customer-centric approach to developing value propositions, with varying degrees of success. Having the opportunity to try and understand, more deeply unpack, and explain the phenomena of SMI interworking for value proposition production to try and help move practitioner understanding forward was an exciting prospect for the novice academic researcher.

Similarly, a motivation to understand and help provide an explanation of SMI interworking for value proposition production from an academic perspective was to help enrich B2B marketing knowledge by providing explanations as to how a market orientation can be mobilised. Further, the researcher wanted to help humanise academic marketing by providing an explanation of how sales and marketing actors help operationalise marketing, not just accept at face value the monolithic holistic organisations known as sales and marketing, as per the extant SMI literature (Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Homburg & Jensen 2007; Snyder et al. 2016).

During the early phases of the DBA the student felt their practitioner experience was seen by the programme and supervisory team at that time as a barrier to research objectivity which thus drove the student originally towards a neo-empiricist approach (Barsalou 2003; Prinz 2002). The student felt that adopting this approach led to the production of anodyne work (by their own admission) which left their vast commercial experience out of the analysis during the write up of essays which were prerequisite for the approval stage of the doctorate to allowing forward progress into the research phase. A conflict of perspectives ensued as a result.

A change of direction

The appointment of a new Director of Studies, Professor John Nicholson, facilitated a re-examination of the research methodology and methods that placed the 'pracademic' student's commercial experience as central. After a watershed conversation between the researcher and the Director of Studies the realisation of the absence of the researcher's commercial identity led to the deployment of a novel research methodology in which an Engaged Scholarship approach was combined with a Critical Realist philosophy (Bhaskar 2008; Easton 2010; Fletcher 2017; Sayer 2010) and an individual actor focus. Adopting an Engaged Scholarship approach allowed the

student to put themselves back into the interpretation of respondent data (Boyer 1996; Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017; Hoffman 2016; Struminska-Kutra 2016). Thematic analysis was used for the interpretation and analysis of data which felt like a formalised natural progression of what the student did intuitively as a practitioner and consultant, looking for themes from qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The student's travails at the pre-approval phase of the DBA process led them towards an aspiration which went beyond the subject focus of the thesis, to provide a recommendation for an educational approach to DBA study and thesis production that takes account of, and optimises, previous practitioner experience. With this aspiration came a resolve to find a pathway for practitioners that follow the DBA that helps them feel that interpretive ability is enhanced by their previous experience. This stance resonated with selecting to undertake a DBA instead of a PhD and was based on the wish to produce something of worth for practice, whilst achieving the academic rigour required at a doctoral level of study (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009).

Case Experiences

We will now explore in more detail how the student's research methodology and methods were deployed, with attention being paid to Engaged Scholarship and how the pracademic student engaged their whole-self in the research. Consideration is given as to whether personal bias can be suspended during the research process and if rigour and relevance is enhanced by an engaged scholarship approach (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009).

Engaged Scholarship

Engaged scholarship can be defined as 'a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders in studying complex problems' (Van de Ven 2007, p 9). Engaged scholarship can be seen as a reaction to an ongoing discussion relating to academia utility for the 'real world' (Boyer 1996). Boyer (1996) observes that one hundred years ago the Presidents of US Ivy league universities cited the mission of higher learning as practicality, serviceability and reality. Boyer (1996) contrasts this mission with Jacoby who observed that the influence of US academics had declined because it had come to mean holding a faculty appointment and writing in a certain style understood only by one's peers. The quest for rigour and relevance has recently taken sharper focus due to the 'impact' debate driven by research funding bodies (Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017). Traditionally 'impact' has been taken to mean translating academic theory into practice. In line with Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017) the the notion of impact as 'social utility' was carried into the DBA research an aim that the thesis should have utility for both practice and science (Wilmott 2012).

Finding a contribution to science and practice

In setting out to achieve this social usefulness some principles of engaged research were adopted in an attempt to embed impact and relevance in the process of generating knowledge (Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017). This type of engaged scholarship is based on the premise that both practitioners and academics possess expertise, tacit and explicit knowledge about lived experience in context that needs to be surfaced and understood (Polanyi 1966).

Using the framework set out in Fig.1 provided by Corley and Gioia (2011) was helpful for the pracademic student as it provided a wide field of vision for both practical and scientific

contribution that can be incremental or revelatory. This was liberating as looking for a 'gap' in the literature, which the student felt he was being driven towards, felt akin staring at an academic brick wall. The Corley and Gioia (2011) model helped provide a 'route to good theory ...not through gaps in the literature but through an engagement with problems in the world' (Kilduff 2006, p. 252).

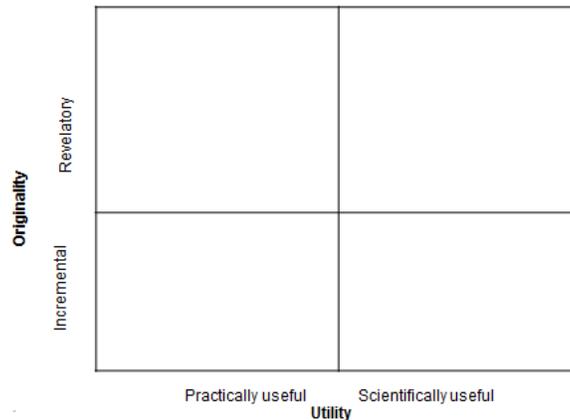


Fig.1 Contributions to knowledge adapted from Corley and Gioia (2011).

Engaged scholarship adopts a critical realist (CR) philosophical position which was carried into the DBA research (Bhaskar 1978, 2008; Easton 2010; Fletcher 2016; Sayer 2010). Sayer (2010) offers three basic assumptions of CR ontology: The world exists independently of our knowledge of it and our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory laden, there is necessity in the world where we have particular powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities, and the world is differentiated and stratified consisting of events, objects, structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These may or may not be present even where, as in the social world, they do not generate regular patterns of events. CR takes on a realist ontology that recognises that there is a world that exists independent of the researcher. From an epistemological perspective CR sits between positivism and relativism as a bridging mechanism that draws on objectivist and subjectivist views of the world.

From a pracademic perspective three compelling features of CR stand out. Firstly the notion of stratified reality suggests there are aspects of organisational reality beyond the merely observable. This perspective seems to be accurately describe the constitution of the commercial and organisational world. From this point of view there is more going on in organisations than visible tasks, interactions and processes. Secondly a recognition of so called generative mechanisms that have the potential for real world impact dependant on idiosyncratic combinations of particular circumstances. This perspective is more sceptical of seeking causes and effects that can be predicted and judged to be rather naïve because organisations are complex systems that defy quick and easy solutions. Thirdly the inferential role of abduction (recontextualising) and retroduction (seeking generative mechanisms) which seem to better reflect how practitioners make sense of their world compared to a mere descriptive and shallow analysis of empirical data. (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen and Karlsson 2002)

Benefits and challenges of the Engaged Scholarship research approach

Adopting an Engaged Scholarship approach with a critical realist position was instrumental in helping the pracademic student engage their whole-self in the research where previously their commercial experience had been absent. In addition to this there are a number of anticipated benefits, and challenges associated with an Engaged Scholarship approach (Shawcross and Ridgman 2018):

Benefits of Approach	Challenges of Approach
B1 - Facilitates understanding of real-world complex problems	C1 -Being reflexive and objective as a researcher
B2 - Increase in likelihood that the research will advance knowledge for theory and practice	C2- Creating and managing an effective engagement between researchers and stakeholders
B3 - Increased chance that the benefits will be applied in practice	C3- Spending sufficient to interacting in the study

Table 1 - Source Author - based on Shawcross and Ridgman (2018)

We will now examine how the challenges were overcome by the student and speculate as to whether the benefits have of Engaged Scholarship have been realised.

Challenge C1 - Being reflexive as a researcher

As stated above adopting an Engaged Scholarship approach allowed the student to put himself back into the interpretation of respondent data (Boyer 1996; Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017; Hoffman 2016; Struminska-Kutra 2016). During the data gathering phase to set aside and suspend personal bias a stance akin to 'bracketing out', which is a technique for preventing researcher knowledge from prematurely defining the direction of respondent input was deployed (Rennie 2000). The combination of bracketing-out and engaged scholarship helped the student deal with the schism in values of relevant practitioner *and* a rigorous academic (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009) and allowed him to be both observational and clinical by drawing on both academic knowledge and lived experience (Schein 2010).

In presenting a personal autobiography the student openly declared their values. The biography was a demonstration of epistemic reflexivity which refers to efforts by researchers to 'Make research accountable to the reader through a detailed presentation of the ways in which results were obtained' (Gomm & Davies 2000, p.8). Further reflexivity was achieved through transparency about the research methodology and the student's thesis journey.

C2- Creating and managing an effective engagement between researchers and stakeholders

Given the primary purpose was to re-engage that commercial half of the student's identity into his thesis the main point of engagement was during the research conversations which were Semi-structured interviews. Consistent with an engaged scholarship approach semi-structured interviews are seen to be of utility when the student knows something about a topic, but gives participants the opportunity to raise new issues. This allowed the activation of conversational

resources (Cunliffe & Scaratti 2017) by using structured flexibility to: clarify meaning, test taken for granted assumptions, invite respondents to build on striking moments, and surface apparent contradictions in responses to the set questions (Haraway 1988). At the same time the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed 'bracketing out' the student's own views by simply asking questions, not offering opinions (Rennie 2000).

C3- Spending sufficient to interacting in the study

The main point of interaction was the research interview. Given the time pressure of completion of a DBA thesis the student did not opt for continuous engagement with the research participants or in theory building primarily down to time constraints. One of the criticisms of Engaged Scholarship is that ongoing practitioner dialogue can lengthen the research process (McKelvey 2006).

B1 - Facilitates understanding of real-world complex problems

The decision to re-engage the commercial half of the student's experience proved liberating at the problem formulation stage of the research. The student felt he was being driven towards a view that only peer-reviewed academic literature was of utility for Doctoral study. Following the engaged scholarship approach enabled the student to engage commercial or 'grey' literature that is read by sales and marketing practitioners. Credible research from analysts such as the Aberdeen Group (2011), Forrester (2011), and Corporate Executive Board (Adamson and Dixon 2013) demonstrated that how the SMI works to produce value propositions was a real-world-complex problem (Kilduff 2006). The decision to pursue a thesis focused on how the SMI works to develop B2B value propositions was certainly timely as the Marketing Science Institute (2010, 2014) identified customer value as a research priority for the marketing community (Payne, Frow & Eggert 2017). Around the same time B2B managers voted value quantification and communication as the number one trend in a 2011 Institute for Study of Business Markets (Lindgreen et al. 2012).

B2 - Increase in likelihood that the research will advance knowledge for theory and practice

While it is too early to say whether the research will advance knowledge for theory and practice a measure of this could be the options generated by adopting the Corley and Gioia model (2011) as opposed to the traditional academic view of looking for a gap in the literature.

Originality	Revelatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual Layering and sophistication gap • Non-normative factors for SMA working • Marketing competence manifesto • Cohesive spiral • Fragmented nature of SMA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual Layering • Integrative model of generative mechanisms • Absent generative competencies • Cohesive Spiral • Holistic SMI replaced by fragmented SMA
	Incremental	<p>Customer exposure is virtuous</p> <p>Marketing and sales as contextualising entity</p> <p>Need for systemic approach to value propositions</p> <p>Value themes and value proposition translation</p>	<p>Distance and utility</p> <p>SMI competencies for Dynamic capability</p>
		Practically useful	Scientifically useful
		Utility	

Fig. 2 Contributions to knowledge: adapted from Corley and Gioia (2011, p. 15).

Figure 2 shows contribution of both practical and scientific utility that is both incremental and revelatory in nature. Practitioner contributions have been made at professional conferences such as Association of Professional Sales (APS) which is the largest body of professional sales people in the UK. Three papers have been accepted to academic conferences: two by The IMP Group, which is an informal international group of scholars concerned with developing concepts and knowledge in the field of business-to-business marketing and purchasing, and the other by the first global academic-practitioner conference on value creation.

B3 - Increased chance that the benefits will be applied in practice

The student has co-authored a book entitled 'Value-ology: Aligning sales and marketing to shape and deliver profitable value propositions' (Kelly, Johnston, Danheiser 2017). To some extent informed by doctoral research, this book is being used in client engagements in an attempt to apply the research benefits in practice. However, the student does have a level of trepidation in relation to the perception of research contribution made to the world of practice. Gorley and Gioia (2011) recount a story of a piece of work that was reviewed by an academic as a marvellous contribution and by a practitioner as 'trivial and obvious'. Having been the 'so what' muttering practitioner sat across from respected academics during his time as a full-time commercial practitioner he does not want this to happen to him.

Finally, despite adopting an Engaged Scholarship approach the student did feel he had to adjust to a formulaic doctoral writing style that appeared to require more narrative than practitioners would willingly produce or consume. Again Corley and Gioia (2011) recount a story of an academic who, concerned about losing touch with practitioners, brought a few people into academia for discussions. When the academic asked for feedback from practitioners, he was told 'you people talk funny!' As a recent practitioner and someone who prides himself as a pracademic the student does have some trepidation about being viewed in this way.

Conclusion

In order to bridge the perceived growing gap between practice and academia a useful first step is to ensure that practitioners and pracademics undertaking doctoral study feel that they can engage their whole-self into the research process. Engaging their previous commercial experience is a necessary precondition of whole-self engagement. Adopting an Engaged Scholarship approach along with a Critical Realist philosophy can facilitate whole-self engagement while playing to a practitioner's tendency to want to look below the surface for 'generative mechanisms' that influence normative outcomes (Bhaskar 2008; Easton 2010; Fletcher 2017; Sayer 2010). Semi-structured interviews allow for conversations that build on the practitioner experience, while bracketing out can help mitigate against researcher bias (Rennie 2000). Thematic analysis, as a method for data interpretation and analysis, is natural progression for senior practitioners who intuitively look to develop themes from qualitative and quantitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using frameworks that allow consideration of practical and scientific contribution that help focus on the traditional academic 'literature gap' can both liberate the pracademic researcher by broadening their field of vision and help bridge to academic-practice divide (Corely and Gioia 2011; Nicholson et al. 2018).

Taken together this novel research methodology and methods can mobilise whole-self engagement from practitioners and pracademics and lead to research outputs of utility both for science and practice. The remaining challenge can be the translation from doctoral academic writing to accessible practitioner language.

Bibliography

Aberdeen Group. (2011). Analytics for the CMO; How best-in-class marketers use customer insights to drive more revenue.

<http://www.aberdeen.com/assets/report-preview/7065-RA-marketing-business-analytics.pdf>

Adamson, B., & Dixon, M. (2013). *The challenger sale: How to take control of the customer conversation*. London, Portfolio Penguin.

Barsalou, L. W. (2003). Abstraction in perceptual symbol systems. *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London: Biological Sciences*, 358 (1435), 1177–1187.

Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. London, Routledge.

Boyer, E.L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49 (7),18-33.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Corley, K.G., & Gioia, D.A. (2011). Building theory about theory building: What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, 36(1), 12-32.

Cunliffe, A.L., & Scaratti, G. (2017). Embedding impact in engaged research: Developing socially useful knowledge through dialogical sense-making. *British Journal of Management*, 28, 29–44.

Danermark B., Ekstrom M., Jakobsen L., Karlsson J.Ch. (2002) Explaining Society. Critical Realism in the social sciences. Routledge.

Dewsnap, B., & Jobber, D. (2000). The sales–marketing interface in consumer-packaged goods companies: A conceptual framework. *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 20(2), 109–119.

Easton, G. (2010). Critical realism in case study research. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(1), 118-128.

Fletcher, A. J. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(2), 181-194.

Forrester Research (2011). B2B sales and marketing alignment starts with the customer. Retrieved from

<https://www.forrester.com/report/B2B+Sales+And+Marketing+Alignment+Starts+With+The+Customer/-/E-RES58165>

Gomm, R., & Davies, C. (2000). *Using evidence in health and social care*. London: The Open University.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.

Hodgkinson, G. J., & Rousseau, D.M (2009). Bridging the rigour–relevance gap in management research: It’s already happening! *Journal of Management Studies*, 46(3), 534-546.

Hoffman, A.J. (2016). Reflections: Academia's emerging crisis of relevance and the consequent role of the engaged Scholar. *Journal of Change Management*, 16:2, 77-96.

Kelly, S.J., Johnston, P.R.& Danheiser, S. (2017). *Value-ology: Aligning sales and marketing to shape and deliver profitable customer value propositions*. London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Kilduff, M. (2006). Editor’s comments: Publishing theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 31, 252–255.

Lindgreen, A., Hingley, M.K., Grant, D., & Morgan, R.E. (2012). Value in business and industrial marketing: past, present and future. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(1), 207-214.

Malshe, A., Johnson, J.S., & Viio, P. (2016). Understanding the sales-marketing interface dysfunction experience in business-to-business firms: a matter of perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management* (in press).

Mckelvey, Bill. (2006). Van de Ven and Johnson's "engaged scholarship": Nice try, but.... *Academy of Management Review*, 31(4), 822-829

Nicholson, Laplaca, Al-Abdin, Breese, & Khan. (2018). What do introduction sections tell us about the intent of scholarly work: A contribution on contributions. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*

Payne, A., Frow, P., & Eggert, A. (2017). The customer value proposition: evolution, development and application in marketing. *Journal of Academic Marketing Science*, 45, 467-489.

Polanyi, M. (1966). The logic of tacit inference. *Philosophy*, 41(155), 1-18.

Prinz, J. J. (2002). *Furnishing the mind. Concepts and their perceptual basis*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

Rennie, D. L. (2000). Grounded theory methodology as methodical hermeneutics, reconciling realism and relativism. *Theory & Psychology*, 10(4), 481-502.

Sayer, A. (2010). *Method in Social Science*. Revised 2nd Edition, London, Routledge.

Schein, E.H. (2010). *Organisational culture and leadership*. 4th Edition, London, Wiley.

Shawcross, J., & Ridgman, T. (2017). Linking practice and theory using Engaged Scholarship. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 1-14.

Strumiska-Kutra, M. (2016). Engaged scholarship: Steering between the risks of paternalism, opportunity, and paralysis. *Organization*, 23 (6), 864-883.

Van de Ven, A.H. (2007). *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Wilmott, H. (2012). Reframing relevance as 'social usefulness': A comment on Hodgkinson and Starkey's 'Not simply returning to the same answer over and over again'. *British Journal of Management*, 23(4), 598-604.

Yin, R. (2008) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods (Applied Social Research Methods)* SAGE Publications, Inc

The substantive content of this paper is 8 pages

Authors

Dr. Simon Kelly – Sheffield Business School sbfsjk@exchange.shu.ac.uk

Dr. Paul Johnston – Sheffield Business School pj6181@exchange.shu.ac.uk

Dr Dennis Duty – University of Huddersfield d.duty@hud.ac.uk