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EXPERIMENTS IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Management researchers and management practitioners increasingly talk past each other. As a result, both research and practice are poorer than they could be and social stakeholders wonder whether they are getting value.

This paper applies a stakeholder perspective to explore how and why the interests of the parties have diverged so starkly and presents six case studies of programs and strategies where the differences are attempting to be bridged. Part of the problem lies in the fact that each party judges the others according to a basis of valuation that misses their central interests. Managers in the world of practice decide and act under time pressure and in the face of uncertainty, where 'good-enough', 'now', and 'correct it later' are often sufficient. Management academics are required to start from well-formed questions, to develop logically coherent arguments and to support these with valid evidence. Meantime society – public and private funders – are seeking outcomes from limited financial resources and want clearer justifications for their investment.

Current conditions suggest that the dissonance between the different cycle-times of research and practice are not sustainable. A potential solution lies in interactive management education that builds on and supports industry networks of management practitioners. This paper presents six case studies of alternative sites and models of management education that bridge the research-practice divide and generate new knowledge and propagate it rapidly through practice.

Key words: Management, Research, Theory, Practice, Experiment, Education

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EXPERIMENTS IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Management research and management practice seem to be in danger of losing touch with each other and with their social stakeholders. Universities reward academics' for developing theory. Society expects the management faculty to educate capable practitioners. And yet practitioners argue that the theories and the teaching coming from universities do not address the challenges they face each day. This situation satisfies Stark's definition of a 'perplexing situation' – a "principled disagreement about what counts" (Stark, 2009; p.5). We are confronted by a heterarchy comprising several alternative conceptions of what is valuable in management research, where different bases of value are being offered to justify particular identifications (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). The paper presents a pragmatist view that this constitutes a real problem. We briefly outline the causes of the problem, the likely consequences of leaving it unchecked, and we discuss potential solutions with reference to several case studies of Australian experiments in using education as a as a bridge that may reintegrate the interests of all three parties, applying Boltanski and Thévenot's notion of 'composite objects' as stepping stones towards joint action (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

THE SHRINKING COMMONS

To support our claims, Figure 1 shows an ideal in which the interests of researchers, practitioners and social stakeholders overlap, applying a 'triple helix' framework (Etzkowitz, 2008) 'Social stakeholders' includes the work of governments that fund universities as the main providers of research and tertiary education, as well as the actions of regional communities with a stake in general economic prosperity, taxpayers and employees. 'Research' includes all the activities conducted by tertiary institutions, both those specifically directed towards research and those directed towards higher-education. 'Practice' includes all the activities undertaken by management practitioners, namely, deploying and managing assets and resources on behalf of corporate entities both large and small. Each domain represents complex networks of actors joined by a common interest: social stakeholders by the pursuit of the common social good; research by the pursuit of knowledge; and practice by the effective use of resources in the pursuit of economic prosperity. The three domains and their associated networks are also jointly interested in vital areas where their interests overlap: Social stakeholders have a stake in how both research and practice can advance the social good. Research has a stake in social stakeholders as subjects of inquiry, and also as funders of their efforts. Practitioners have a stake in social stakeholders as markets (consumers), as resources (employees), as regulators (government), and as arbiters of corporate conduct (public interest).

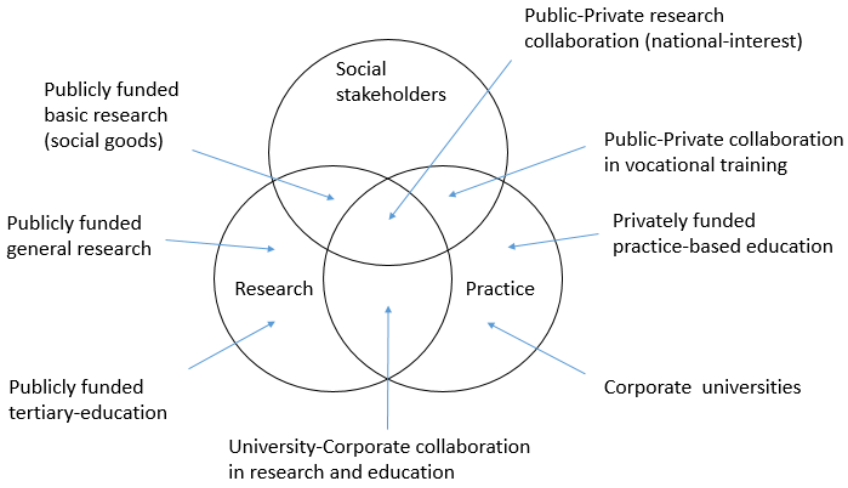

FIGURE 1 Stakeholders in Management Research and Education

However, while the 'triple helix' model – and others like it such as 'quadruple helix' (Kriz et al. 2017) – suggest the interactions and overlaps become stronger over time, in management education at present, the reverse is happening; the parties are pursuing divergent goals and the common ground is shrinking (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; Posner, 2009; Storbacka, 2014). This process is shown in Figure 2.

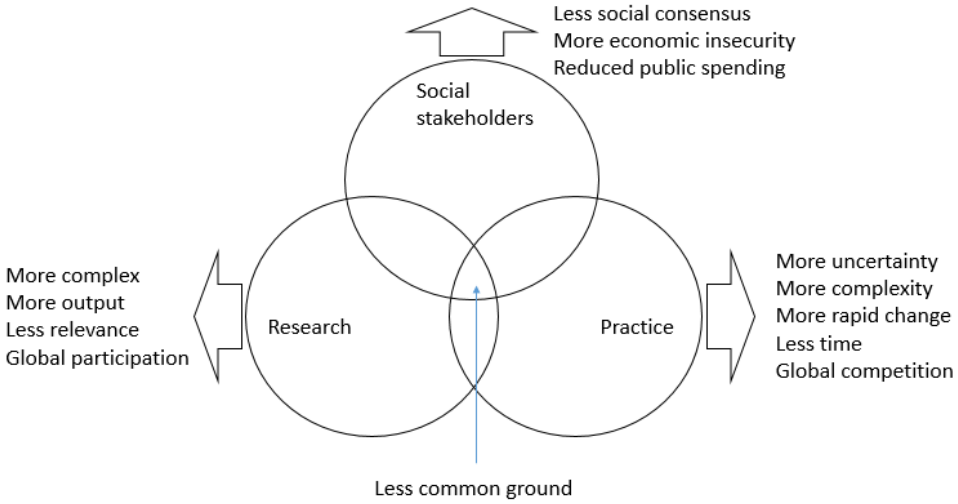

FIGURE 2 Divergent Pressures Shrink the Commons

As a consequence, all domains increasingly complain that the others are less and less serving their vital interests. Social stakeholders complain that Research is not relevant and demand to see measures of impact as a condition of funding decisions; they also complain that practitioners need to place more emphasis on community and social goals in addition to economic ones. Researchers complain that social stakeholders are not investing enough in vital, long-term research; at the same time, they complain that practitioners are satisfied with quick-fix fads and ignore fundamentally sound theories. For their part, practitioners complain that social stakeholders are over-regulating the pursuit of prosperity, while researchers provide theoretical answers that have lost touch with contemporary exigencies. And all parties are largely correct in their concerns.

A. Social stakeholders face increased complexity in the demands placed on the state and on community. Social stakeholders look to corporate practitioners to share the burden through taxation and pro-social actions, and to research to help address these wicked problems.

B. Research institutions compete for global prestige and resources using their prominence in elite research journals as the main measure of their worth, with a closed community of other researchers as principal audience and gatekeepers. As a result, what is produced may have less and less relevance to social stakeholders and practitioners.

C. Meantime management practitioners face increased uncertainty as technological developments change the business environment at an accelerating pace and as competition becomes global. The lead-times for decision-making have become shorter and the margin between effective and ineffective strategic responses has become narrower. Social stakeholders and research lead-times now hinder, rather than help, practitioners.

NEW DARK AGE OR RENAISSANCE?

It could be argued that the dissonance is simply manifestation of the social specialisation of labour, of relative comparative advantage. Is it not best, overall, if each party focuses on excellence within its own domain of activity? This argument is seductive but flawed. Left unchecked, the continued divergence of focus threatens the essential interactions upon which knowledge-creation and prosperity depend.

(1) For social stakeholders: The pressures will continue to intensify; more timely and relevant research is needed to help address them. The situation is made worse by the high impact and extreme speed and noise of the public opinion-cycle, amplified by means of social media, rapidly propagating incomplete, incorrect, and at times deliberately false information, making it even harder for policy-makers to develop and build consensus around effective policy based on well-formed evidence (Nailer et al. forthcoming).
(2) For researchers: Their increasing isolation from the social phenomena they study reduces the quality of what they produce. Knowledge is created through the continuous interaction of ideas, theories, schemas and empirical data in a continual dialogue, not only amongst researchers but also through engagement with others in the social, communal and corporate domains where humans live and work. Research careers increasingly require individuals to choose the academic path at a young age, making it ever more difficult for them to learn about the other domains; this, together with the exclusivity of the peer-review audience for research publications makes Research increasingly inward-looking.
(3) For practitioners: The time pressures acting on practicing managers drive them towards simple decision-tools, leaving them prey to fads and pseudo-science that offer little real guidance. Everything we know about strategizing under uncertainty tells us that managers need to draw on multiple sources of insight in order to develop innovative strategies that address unique and complex problems. Prior experience, rules-of-thumb and intuition provide poor guidance for addressing unforeseen, complex, wicked problems. The challenge for practitioners is worsened by the popularisation of formulaic approaches: ‘Dashboards,’ ‘Seven ‘S’s, ‘Six-Sigma,’ ‘Five-Forces,’ ‘Four-Ps,’ ‘Triple-bottom-line,’ ‘Ambidextrous organizations,’ ‘Balanced Scorecard,’ ‘Lean,’ ‘Agile,’ ‘Scrum,’ and a host of others.

Left unchecked, these trends further reduce the interaction between domains, leading, first, to a casual ignorance about the knowledge created in other domains, and ultimately to a wilful rejection of ideas that are not endorsed by ‘my’ domain, by ‘my tribe’. This is how a Dark Age begins. Throughout history such challenges have led to a rebirth as a domain (or all domains) rebel. A short-term renaissance would be ideal but is unexpected.

RECLAIMING THE COMMON GROUND

It is symptomatic that the research vs. practice debate barely mentions education. In Brennan et al. (2014) and in Storbacka (2014) the word ‘education’ appears only in the bibliography, in journal titles. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) only mention ‘education’ five times. Researchers seem to be abdicating responsibility for the propagation of knowledge. Meantime, practitioners have largely turned their backs on understanding and are only interested in skills. In a report on the future of education by Australia’s peak business lobby group (Business Council of Australia, 2017), the word ‘skills’ appears 68 times (omitting page headers and the proper names of specific skill development programs) while the word ‘research’ appears only three times. Practitioners no longer believe in it.

Reclaiming the centre requires researchers and practitioners to agree on a higher-order logic, a ‘composite object’ that unites their interests and acts as a bridge between them (Boltanski &

Thévenot, 2006). We suggest that education constitutes such a logic in the context of management Research and Practice. Management education can be the factory of knowledge-creating interactions that enable both innovative business strategies and breakthrough theories. Social stakeholders already know this but there is little they can do about it. With other vital claims on their resources, there is little more social stakeholders can do other than to preserve state funding for education, as much as they can, within the constraints imposed by other legitimate social priorities, and to keep some flexibility in the regulation and accreditation requirements for education developers and providers. The initiative must come from new dialogue between the domains of Research and Practice.

INTERACTIVE SITES AND MODELS OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

All three authors research and teach post-graduate management courses at the Australian National University (ANU); all three have been practitioners earlier in their careers and all three consult to industry. Our experience in the six case studies following demonstrates that innovating with the sites and models of management education offers the potential for reunifying the domains of research, practice and social goods and reclaiming the common ground. Management education programs developed and delivered by the authors at the Research School of Management in the ANU suggest ways in which education that bridges the three domains advances the goals of research and practice simultaneously, with positive potential for social stakeholders also.

LIVE PROJECT-BASED PROBLEM LEARNING ON GROWTH STRATEGY, INNOVATION AND INTERNATIONALISATION

The first and third named authors have developed education programs that apply action learning and action research approaches connecting practitioners' preference for 'learning-by-doing' with a 'more involved' approach to research that also serves social stakeholders (Kriz et al., 2018).

Since 2003, the ANU's post-graduate management programs have required final-year program participants to complete, as a capstone project, a live consultancy brief for a local company, focused on the development of an innovative growth. As at 2018, the first author has mentored 83 of these live projects for 62 local client organisations. The strategy challenges are posed as unstructured, complex problems requiring participants to deploy and adapt multiple frameworks learned across their management program. The projects have yielded rich research insights into the growth strategies of local companies across multiple industries as well as accelerating their development in practice by embedding novel strategic frameworks beyond the direct program participants into the local business ecosystem.

The ANU's global marketing course launched an International Business Plan Competition, which brings together triple helix partners (industry, government and university – Kriz et al., 2018) to create export ready outcomes for local companies. Students develop global marketing plans for local companies and pitch these in the ACT International Business Plan of the Year Award, which is sponsored by the ACT Government and judged by a panel of industry practitioners. The companies benefit from well-developed internationalisation plans, students gain real-world insights and faculty members gain access to current research data.

In 2008, the ANU launched InnovationACT, a network-based program that encourages students, staff, academics and industry mentors to collaborate in new local venture initiatives. The program has gradually expanded to include other educational institutions in Canberra. Over the past four years, the program has awarded over AUD$200,000 in seed funding and other resources to innovation initiatives. In 2017, InnovationACT's online platform was viewed over 30,000 times and

a record thirty teams completed the program, which includes a series of practice-oriented workshops based on the ANU's research into new venture processes (Potocnjak-Oxman, 2018).

In 2014, the ACT Government launched the Canberra Innovation Network (CBRIN) to further consolidate collaborations between the local government, local innovators and Canberra's education and research institutions (CBR Innovation Network 2018). InnovationACT has built strong ties to the Canberra Innovation Network, as well as with the Griffin Accelerator, which supports local high-growth firms, and the Federal intellectual property agency, IP Australia, bridging research, practice and social stakeholders (Potocnjak-Oxman, 2018).

RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER CO-DEVELOPED TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

The first and second authors of this paper are delivering an executive education offering at the ANU in partnership with the Australian Transformation and Turnaround Association (AusTTA) – a professional association of transformational change practitioners – which combines academic theory, evidence-based management, and practical expertise in transformational change. The project-based course builds on action-learning approaches to accelerated executive development (Tichy et al., 1992) but the intention from the outset was to use the educational context to go beyond current theory and practice and to co-create new knowledge applicable to both domains.

The course is organized around three face-to-face modules of four days each, with a final module of two days, delivered over a nine-month period, with time between the modules for application and practice. The first module, entitled 'Understanding', introduces participants to the current state of research into transformational change. Two external program sponsors pose wicked transformational challenges, which the participants work on as members of one or other team, for the entire program. The second module, 'Activation', presents theoretical lenses for interpreting the wicked challenges and focuses on scoping the project work. Module 3, 'Implementing and Adjusting', deepens participants understanding of transformational change by bringing in the insights of transformational leader-practitioners. Dialectic debate through Modules 1 and 2 brings to the surface conflicting cognitive frames between the researcher view and the practitioner view. In Module 3, intensifying deadline pressure exposes participants to their assumptions and blind spots, which brings frustrations into the open as they grapple with the tension between theory and practice. As the date for delivery looms, pressure to articulate a strategy resolves the tension into synthesis. Module 4 wraps up the program with the presentation of findings to the challenge sponsors and to a broader audience of practitioners, as well as team and individual reflections on the learning journey.

Along the way, the ANU and AusTTA teams have experienced their own version of a pressure-cooker challenge: what seemed clear and straightforward at the outset brought to the surface unexpected tensions that have taken the joint learning in new directions. We set out with the shared goal of collaborating on a common educational platform to co-create knowledge, frameworks, and tools that would benefit both research and practice in transformational change. Although there was general agreement on the overall goals, the methods for achieving them varied significantly across the two domains. The academics prioritised theory and learning, while the practitioners emphasised tools and solutions. The practitioners believed that the academics were unaware of current practice and unable to respond quickly to opportunities. The academics assumed that practitioners would find theory and abstract thinking valuable. Much time was spent building a common language for 'meeting on the common ground' between contrasting viewpoints.

The most useful tools for bridging the theory-practice divide were ones that were theoretically based, but practically useful. For example, causal loop diagrams, based upon systems theory, were an abstract, yet applicable lens for understanding complex dynamics associated with

transformational change. Similarly, an evidence-based management framework provided a practical context for methodological rigour in data gathering, critical appraisal, and reflection.

Although the first iteration of the program is still unfolding, we have made great strides in bridging the research and practice domains. Interestingly, it has been quite easy to communicate the value of the course for stakeholders and to demonstrate its impact. All relevant stakeholders see value in this process of meeting on the common ground. Participants in this first cohort have experienced growth in their jobs and broader perspectives as their transformational skills and tools expand. Academics have found new ways to explain their value proposition. Both academics and practitioners have established new techniques for creating a shared mindset and understanding change.

BUSINESS-COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN REGIONAL TOWNS

The third named author of this paper created a program at the University of Newcastle that builds tight links between management education and management practice with measurable impacts for social stakeholders. A capstone Masters course on Entrepreneurial Strategy involves students working on wicked problems (McMillan & Overall, 2016) with local industry and communities in the Newcastle and Hunter regions. In the first iteration of the program, students worked with Hunternet Cooperative of 170 local businesses, established after the BHP steelworks closed down 25 years earlier, to sustain and build their training operations – Hunternet Group Training (HNGT). A second wicked challenge focused on the future of Central Coast Industry Connect on the Central Coast (CCIC), which represented over 200 firms but was still struggling in building a sustainable funded business model. Both challenges required students to devise strategies to support prosperity in the local region and the program also generated research outputs (Connell, Kriz & Thorpe, 2014).

The industry partners briefed the students and the students then workshopped the challenges and discussed potential options. Initial briefs were developed individually before student teams integrated their work into optimal courses of action for the two clients. The clients were briefed by the academic program leaders and the students to ensure the proposed plans were addressing the key issues. The students were then tasked to develop their final plans individually with the best two plans for each organisation (judged by the lecturers and an independent assessor) presented by the winning students to the boards and senior executives of HNGT and CCIC. These plans are now being used as a basis for action by the two clients.

The third author has researched regional university-industry linkages in Germany and is working on another project with international implications potentially integrating two regions on opposite sides of the globe. Australian engineering students have been studying abroad through links created by La Trobe University's Entrepreneur-in-Residence, which has led to links between the Fraunhofer Institute and the Bendigo region of Victoria, Australia. The next step in this program will link businesses, academics, students and communities in an international cluster of innovation (Engel, 2015) between Kaiserslautern in Germany and Bendigo in Australia.

HOW EDUCATION REBUILDS THE COMMON GROUND

Common to all three groups of initiatives are the following four characteristics that we believe are necessary to increase the common ground. First, each of these cases uses overarching educational goals and processes to integrate the mindsets, interests and approaches of research, practice and social stakeholders, bridging and advancing understanding across the three domains and delivering valuable outcomes to each. In so doing, a common basis for valuing is established (Stark, 2009).

Second, their processes are multidirectional; they do more than apply the established theoretical frameworks derived from management research into the practice and social domains; they integrate

the value of the practitioner's and social stakeholder's experience as contributors to new knowledge. In doing so, they force researchers and their students to generate unique adaptations of theory that stretch them beyond the established foundations, reframing them into unique client-specific outcomes. In the process, they also challenge practitioners and social stakeholders to engage with theory in hands-on interactions that deepening their portfolio of mental models.

Third, they require a core team of research-practitioners willing to experiment across the three domains (Posner, 2009). This is often at some personal cost to the careers of those individuals, because efforts devoted to the goals of the 'other' domain, or in leading initiatives that bridge between domains, attracts little recognition within their main career. But as the value of shared outcomes becomes more visible, bridging domains comes to be recognised as a solution to the individual pressures each domain faces, rather than as a competing resource demand. 'Engagement' is increasingly seen to be a key process for reigniting 'relevance', for generating research funds, and for enhancing graduate employability. Over time, these experiments catalyse the development of more individuals who function as change agents across the three domains in a minor social movement that gradually, by example, influences others to reclaim the common ground.

Finally, multidirectional interactions, in the context of experiments in management education, generate knowledge that propagate and extend the new insights beyond the direct participants to other members of their domains through network interactions both during and after the programs themselves. The experience of business innovation (von Hippel, 1988) suggests that researchers who expose their emerging theories to early testing in an educational context will generate more novel and more robust theories faster than those who try to perfect their work in individual research silos. Participants who have learned to adapt theories and create unique client-specific frameworks rapidly create networks of 'converts' or 'advocates' across the surrounding business ecosystem as the benefits of the novel approaches become evident in each domain. Research-practitioner experiments in management education are thus highly effective means of disseminating new knowledge more rapidly than via the conventional means of academic publication.

THE CALL TO ACTION

More can be done, and needs to be done, to reduce the dissonance and to build a shared overarching logic for valuing Management Research and Practice that delivers benefits to Social Stakeholders.

(1) Advances in media and information technology offer many new tools for bridging research, practice and social goods, accelerating their processes and disseminating the benefits of new knowledge. In fact, our capacity to generate data has sometimes outpaced our capacity to use that data wisely. The associated problems (The Economist, 2018) can only be solved jointly. If mined intelligently and ethically, the vast oceans of data now available offer unparalleled potential for research, understanding and social good. But harnessing Artificial Intelligence for the common ground will require more intelligent discussions of 'intelligence' across all three domains.

(2) Unlike business innovation, where there is a 'fuzzy front-end' (Koen et al., 2001), experiments in management education have a 'fuzzy middle' that we need to understand better. We start out on the solid ground of current theory, practice and policy but as the intensity of interactions increases, the solid ground gets fuzzy and we have to discover entirely new pathways through the fog. It is in the struggle of those dialectics that the new knowledge is created. But the 'fuzzy middle' makes direct measures of the cause-effect relations between program and outcome inconclusive. For example, entrepreneurship education programs often measure the new ventures launched by participants. In our experience, very few of the ventures designed in

entrepreneurship programs get launched. But anecdotally, we often discover, two or three years later, that individuals who met, interacted, and learned together in our programs have stayed connected and launched completely different ventures afterwards. The 'fuzzy middle' of the educational experiment has catalysed latent insights that blossomed later. We need better measures of the longer-term impacts of educational experiments when the outcomes are mediated by an indeterminate 'fuzzy middle' process.

(3) All three domains need to reinvigorate their commitment to the pursuit of understanding, recognising that the huge store of what is already known and the complexity of the current challenges humanity faces are now so vast that they are beyond the capacity of each domain to deploy individually to achieve its own goals without interaction with the others. This needs to be a value-based strategic commitment because the economic pay-off from new knowledge cannot be predicted or judged in terms of a conventional return on investment. The pay-off from experimentation is new knowledge, which leads ultimately, via the 'fuzzy middle', to beneficial outcomes. But the process is lengthy and indeterminate; we cannot predict which experiments will lead to which outcomes. And all parties' preference for the predictable and the measurable tends to compromise the fuzzy discovery process. Incentives and rewards in all three domains need to recognise that experiments, involving interactions across the domains, increase the likelihood of new knowledge being generated faster, even though they do guarantee always to yield immediately measurable benefits. Columbus set out to find Indonesia. He failed. No more funding for voyages? Indeed, the conquest of America by Spain was not wholly beneficial. But beneficial learning has been generated since then and we to progress by measuring voyages not landfalls. Halting of Zheng He's voyages abroad by the Ming Dynasty is another example of stultifying outcomes when we stop exploring.

(4) Finally, we need to conduct more experiments because, bounded by our present understanding, we cannot know what is going to work next (Rice et al., 2008). Trial and error creation of business models is what makes humans human. We need to go beyond what we have done in the past that yielded success to develop the tools and methods for challenges we have not yet begun to ask ourselves.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

At the outset, we thought we had material for two case studies and a short note to present at the IMP 2018 Conference. As we interacted as a team to develop this paper, we discovered a whole range of experiments that we had been individually and jointly working on as management educators that had direct relevance to the topic, and as a result we can present here six case studies of ongoing programs that bridge the research-practice-social-goods domains. These initiatives were initially developed piecemeal and opportunistically, as the interests and priorities of the individual authors emerged over time. In writing them up for this paper, we realise that the three of us have shared an implicit model of the world of research and practice that is now made explicit through this process. We will share the insights from this paper amongst our colleagues and hope to articulate these separate initiatives into a coherent strategy for using management education experiments to benefit research and practice. And we hope that readers find it helps them do that also.

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