

Mending Linguistic Fences: How Professional Associations Can Re-Unite Theoretical and Practical Scholars in HRD

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This proposal is developed for inclusion as an innovative session proposed by the AHRD Scholar-Practitioner Track and Scholar-Practitioner Committee. It examines the roles of professional associations and the linguistic origins of academic and practitioner-based scholarship in the creation of professional knowledge. It asserts that professional associations, as nurturers of professional knowledge, can strengthen the alliance between academics and practitioners by providing a framework of common assumptions, values, and beliefs about professional knowledge.

Keywords: Professional Associations, Knowledge Creation, and Socialization

The session will discuss the role of professional associations in fostering dialogue among academic and practitioner scholars.

The purpose of the session is to describe how professional associations, as networks of academic and practitioner members, can create linkages between common bases of knowledge through de-constructing abstract linguistic concepts and by developing a common set of beliefs and values for developing a more inclusive corporate culture.

Goals

The goals of the session are:

1. To state the roles of professional associations in creating knowledge through theoretical and practical research
2. To demonstrate that knowledge creation is based on a continuum of theory and practice, including knowledge based on sustained and systematic inquiry, critical reflection, public declarations of knowledge, and applications.
3. To explain how linguistic theories can be used to analyze divides between theory and practice
4. To assert that professional associations can re-unite academic and practical bases of knowledge by a process of creating new linguistic concepts, emphasizing the interdependence of research and practice, and re-examining the historical and sociological roots of a field of scholarly inquiry

Session Content

Professional associations enable exchanges of theoretical and practical knowledge. But over time, theoretical and practical knowledge diverge, become highly specialized, and difficult to share. Rectifying this has become a key concern. This presentation outlines historical, social, and linguistic elements contributing to knowledge creation, examines ways some associations have managed the knowledge disjuncture, and describes implications for how human resource development may re-integrate knowledge through redefining a common base of knowledge through dialog.

Many professional associations have expressed concerns about the apparent lack of connections between scholarly research and practice among members. Examples have included behavioral medicine (Jordan & Ory, 2005); teaching (Rublin, 2002); educational administration (Riehl, Larson, Short & Retzieg, 2000); management (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001); nonprofit management (Salipante & Aram, 2003); public administration (Ospina & Dodge, 2005); library science (Lowry 2004); and human resource development (Kuchinke, 2004). Professional associations, as communities of both academics and practitioners, are crossroads for creating, linking, and disseminating knowledge. Academics and practitioners, however, seem to use different languages, have divergent cultural norms and values, and have different interests and goals for developing and using knowledge. Often, the two membership segments cannot create dialog, a fundamental requirement for research to inform practice and practice, research. One result is the dominance of one segment and the neglect of the other. The lack of

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connectivity has caused professional associations to think of ways that the gaps could be bridged and even to re-think what “scholarship,” “research,” and “practice” mean in a particular field of knowledge.

Practical and theoretical domains of research are not exclusive, however. They are interconnected points on a socially-developed and evolutionary continuum of scholarship. Scholarship is a collective body of knowledge that individuals have developed, accepted as true, and subjected to theoretical and practical tests of proof over time. It evolves through interrelated cycles beginning and ending with practice, including observation of events in particular contexts, examining what is known through empirical understanding, developing processes for testing, formulating theoretical relationships, testing theories, reflecting on results, and developing implications for further applications to practice. In the evolutionary cycles, however, knowledge construction tends to become more abstract. Practical and theoretical concepts become increasingly less reflective of the foundational areas of observation in an area of knowledge. Accordingly, practice, theory, and applications become specialty areas that both present a distinct view of a body of knowledge and have little in common with each other (see Figure 1)..

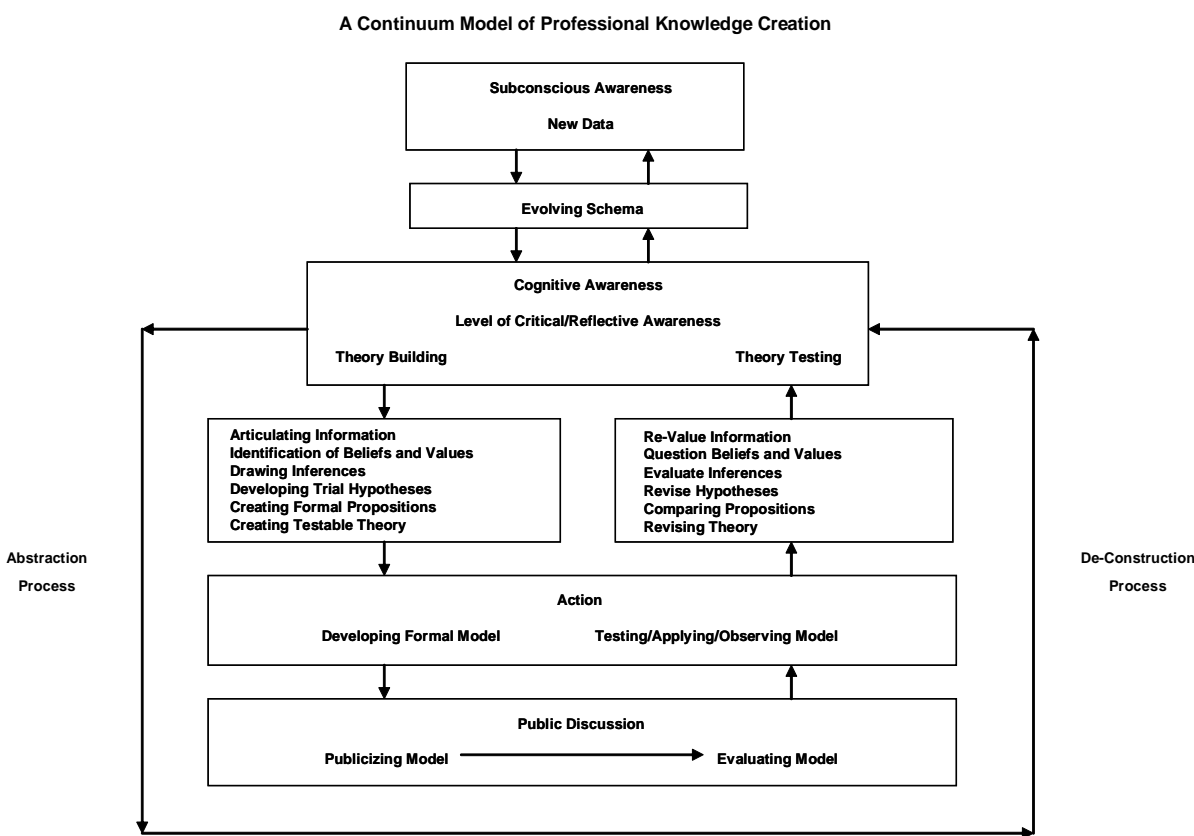


Figure 1: *A Continuum Model of Professional Knowledge Creation*

As a brokering agent, professional associations may re-connect the seemingly disparate points of scholarship. The re-connecting involves more than coordinating through bringing theoreticians and practitioners together in a common task or project. Bridging involves a process of forging new linguistic concepts—common narratives, metaphors, and symbol systems, for instance, that capture the diversities of scholarly activities. It involves re-examining fundamental areas of core knowledge and their practical and theoretical relationships and also reconceptualizing the roles of academic and practical scholars as interdependent. This paper describes how professional associations may undertake the integration of scholarship in particular fields of knowledge to recover the bonds between research and practice. It describes some strategies that the professional association for human resource development might use to transform existing linguistic terms that separate practitioner and theoretical scholars.

Professional Associations as Gatherings of Scholars

Scholars have always, it seems, had a pressing need to associate for advancing knowledge. From ancient civilizations in China, Greece, and Rome to the present, scholars have gathered to share what they knew and explore

areas they did not (Watson, 1994). Associations of professionals evolved in the West from medieval crafts guilds, but acquired a more modern form in the late 19th century (Vollmer and Mills, 1966). They appeared as study societies sprung up from a desire for social interaction among those doing the same work, sharing of papers for discussion, protection of member interests, and the development of collective solutions to common problems (Rusaw, 1995). The social aspects of professional associations facilitated social well-being, professional advancement, stimulation, and learning for the sake of learning

What is Scholarship?

The social and cultural foundations of professional associations enabled individuals to create knowledge. But knowledge, by itself, is not professional scholarship. Scholarship may be defined as a condition that establishes knowledge based on facts through sustained and systematic inquiry, critical reflection concerning conceptual linkages of facts and theory, public declaration of information, and applications for specific purposes.

Knowledge Based on Sustained and Systematic Inquiry

What we know has been the result of repeated observations, inference making, conceptualizing, reflecting, and public discourse over time. Kuhn's (1970) seminal exposition, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, describes this process as the accumulation of "normal science." Over time, core concepts emerge as theories that attempt to explain, predict, and control the behavior of factually-based information. The core concepts become linking pins that construct "paradigms," or accepted frameworks by which one views, classifies, and uses emergent information.

Critical Reflection

Scholarship involves making conceptual linkages between what is known and what is unknown. It makes connections between categories of information by establishing and verifying criteria by which to evaluate characteristics and their classifications into new or expanding knowledge categories. Part of the process of developing and verifying information is critical reflection. Critical reflection is a scholarly activity which Brookfield (1987) describes as involving questioning one's own basic assumptions, analyzing the influence of context in shaping meaning, and embracing alternative ways of categorizing information. Critical thinking promotes fluidity and deters what Kuhn (1970) describes as a tendency for paradigms of "normal science" to reject discordant or contradictory information.

Public Declarations of Knowledge

Scholarship is not an isolated process, but occurs within community contexts. Communities of scholars attempt to create meaning of knowledge through the construction of common language or symbol systems. Scholars may use the accepted concept and theories of normal science paradigms to frame information and create meaning as well as develop unique vocabularies and grammars to describe emergent structural relationships. The hierarchical positioning of new information and relationships—indeed the process of meaning making as a whole—involves public discourse and debate (Weick, 1995). The public aspects of establishing significance are critical elements in the process of socially constructing what people view as real or believable (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Applications

The theorized relationships between and among concepts based on repeated and systematic observation, experience, testing, reflection, and meaning making, as they become public, require exemplification. Abstraction requires concrete examples as part of the process of becoming believable. Applying theories entails establishing proof in practice. "Practice" implies re-connecting abstractions to specific contexts or for specific purposes. Accordingly, the marriage of theory and practice needs to engender additional cycles of scholarly inquiry. Applications thus provide justification for knowledge creation. The provability involves two interrelated levels of knowledge: "knowledge that" (based on inferential and theoretical claims) and "knowledge how" (based on instrumental value) (Meslin, 1994). In applying conceptual knowledge to specific purposes and contexts, scholars verify and expand meaning.

Roles of Professional Associations in Socialization

As professional association members develop scholarship, they also develop schemes for classifying both scholarship and their own roles in relation to creating and using it (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Professional associations become as Bourdieu (1977) describes, a "habitus" or place where members fashion social roles, routines, and relationships. Associations become frameworks on which individuals construct orders of knowledge and individuals relationship in terms of how much they have gained. As in the old orders of guilds and universities, professional associations differentiate beginning, intermediate, advanced, and mastery levels of scholarship and members' identifications based on the orders. The progression of scholarship moves from acquiring practical knowledge of the field of knowledge to developing internalized propositional and theoretical relationships (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). An apprentice or newcomer develops a broad understanding of what a field of knowledge entails, its basic domains, its relationships to other fields of knowledge, and tools and skills for using information for particular ways. As individuals gain competencies, they become more proficient in understanding broader relationships of more

abstract knowledge and develop models for using the abstract information to help define or explain new or puzzling situations. When individuals have spent years mastering the concepts, skills, and theoretical models of professional scholarship, knowledge becomes tacit, or specific to a particular context. Tacit knowledge enables members to adopt roles of mentoring, span boundaries with interfacing organizations, and facilitate connecting theoretical information with new areas of practice. Professionalization is a cumulative process of attaining higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978) through becoming a social “insider” (Lave & Wenger, 1990).

Linguistic Roots of Splits Among Professional Scholars

The progression of scholarly knowledge becomes increasingly abstract as it changes from explicit and concrete to implicit or tacit. In becoming more abstract, scholarly knowledge tends to omit many of the more concrete features of categorized “bins” of information (Forte, 2002) and become more specialized and linked to specific contexts (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). With this also comes the tendency for individuals to solidify, rather than expand, their socialized identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1991). This often produces an “in-group/out-group” division and the reluctance to share information across social boundaries (Weick, 1996). Boundary definitions, characterized by labels of “practical” and “theoretical” knowledge and conveyed in linguistic symbol systems of specialized codes, metaphors, and terminology (Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988) demarcate members as “practitioners” and “academics” (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; and Creamer, 2005).

Professional Associations as Menders

Professional associations are central gathering places for re-integrating theory and practice. Under their aegis, practitioners and academics can tap multiple streams of knowledge that would be unavailable for knowledge construction and meaning making otherwise. Vygotsky’s Activity Theory (Vygotsky/1977, in Thorne, 2005) explains that concrete knowledge becomes transformed into understanding and understanding takes on greater ranges of application when individuals with different social groups collaborate. In combining different socio-culturally-based knowledge, association members may produce knowledge that may be stored, transmitted, and communicated (Yorks, 2005). Collaboratively-based knowledge becomes tools for further application (Heron & Reason, 2001; Grenfell, 1998; and Bourdieu, 1977). How, then, can professional associations reduce the gaps practitioners and researchers create and re-define the utility of both practice and research in scholarly activity?

There have been few studies of the actual collaborative work between practitioners and scholars. In one of the most comprehensive, Tenkasi and Hay (2004) conducted a qualitative study of how practitioner-scholars used research and specialized knowledge in designing and implementing organizational projects. They discovered that practitioner-scholars used combinations of theory and research in four ways: (a) as framing devices to help define a problem; (b) as influencing or mediating tools to justify particular action or ideas; (c) as confirmations of conclusions established by “sensemaking;” and (d) showing impact of change interventions. Yorks (2005) similarly conducted an inquiry into practitioner-based collaborative action research at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Yorks found that the process enabled each participant to see themselves as learners as well as researchers and to generate a new vocabulary to reflect common areas of engagement, interests, goals, and outcomes. The provision of a common learning space or public arena was instrumental in producing a non-parochial context that enabled transformation of differing viewpoints of roles, actions, and specific interest areas.

Although there is high interest in bringing practitioner and academic scholars together, there have been no documented research studies to date. Professional associations may begin to address the dearth by re-developing what it means to be a “community” of scholars. Barab and Duffy (2000) suggest that this involves building upon three primary characteristics: (a) common cultural and historical heritage, including shared goals, meanings, and practice; (b) emphasizing the interdependence of individuals in creating meaning that is larger than the sum of individual components; and (c) smoothing the socialization processes by which newcomers can become seasoned professionals so that the community creates bonds for maintaining coherence and reproduction. Professional associations need to create a “habitus” or “scaffolding” (Tenkasi & Hay, 2004) from which to re-conceptualize and design scholarly knowledge. In addition, Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988) conducted a content analysis of how concept terminologies particular to areas of research and specific practices were transferred in scholarly journals in organizational cultures. They suggest that organizations can assess the degree to which practitioners and academics can accommodate transference of values and beliefs through sharing common terminologies, paving the way for additional collaboration in projects of mutual interests.

To Create Habitus in HRD

Human Resource Development, which is re-examining the parameters of its field of scholarship and the roles of practitioners and academics in helping shape these boundaries (Kuchinke, 2004), may incorporate suggestions reflected in this paper to begin a dialog. One implication is to establish an agenda in which scholars (both academic and practitioner) examine the various fields, studies, and critical events that have contributed to the development of HRD, what their main contributions were, and the roles that both practice and theory played. In addition, scholars

might undertake interviews and observations of collaborative learning projects, such as noted here, and how theoretical and practical research have been used. Through providing a common base of theoretical and practically-oriented scholars, the Academy of Human Resource Development would engender a habitus for co-constructing an expansive framework for dialog and action.

Description of Format, Style and Agenda

The session will be structured as follows:

The format of the proposed session will include a lecture/discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the linguistic divide between academic and practitioner-based research as well as questions designed to discover audience perceptions of “scholarship” and “research.” It will analyze common themes in the perceptions and suggest that differences in roles, experiences, and professional domains evolve over time. It will also ask the audience to suggest some core values and beliefs within the field of human resource development that could be used to generate cross-sectional dialogue among AHRD members.

Agenda: (90 min. presentation)

Introductory activities

- icebreaker (10 min)
- create small groups to define “scholarship” and “research”: facilitator writes definitions on flipchart (15 min.)

Slide discussion (30 min.)

- linguistic basis for divisions among definitions; charts of processes of abstraction
- roles of professional organizations in creating knowledge of field:
- continuum of knowledge from practice to theory and theory to practice
- research possibilities for bringing academic and practitioner scholars together for creating common values and beliefs about knowledge creation

Small group discussion (15 min)

- Return to small groups: some areas of common values and beliefs of human resource development and suggestions for how AHRD can facilitate dialog; reporting out information to large group

Debriefing: (5 min.)

- Facilitator to share group-developed ideas with committee on practitioner/academic collaboration

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