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Transcending the Relevance Gap: The Accelerated Practitioner Research Approach

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Abstract

Within Academe, business and community engagement professionals still report the challenges of working with practitioners outside of Academe. Mintzberg referred to this as a consequence of 'the relevance gap' between the knowledge (and practices) produced within universities, and that which is understood and appreciated outside of them. This still seems to be the case globally, certainly within business disciplines (and is no doubt wider in social science research). However, pockets of excellence which actively facilitate pragmatic research have emerged, which go beyond 'applied' research approaches, locating the site of knowledge produce within individual practice settings. Even more scarce, is the pedagogic research of practices which facilitate this type of research. This paper specifically focuses on the pedagogic research of facilitating pragmatic research with individuals, drawing on ongoing grounded, action research. It reports the resulting model that has come to be known as APRA (the Accelerated Practitioner Research Approach), and the empirical results of using it so far.

Keywords: *relevance gap*

1. Introduction: The Relevance Gap

Academe has existed for hundreds of years. With such a rich history, it has developed a deeply engrained culture, with particular traditions and practices which may appear alien to those outside of the cultural realm of Academe. This was raised at the turn of the millennium, with a particular concern of how the prestigious MBA qualification was not creating leaders who could *practically* lead (Starkey and Madan, 2001; Mintzerg, 2004). The problem was that they knew *about*, rather than knew *how*; the 'relevance gap'. Governmental pressure around the world pressed Academe to respond, and various policy and economic instruments and incentives were devised to close the gap. Within the UK, the political agenda was variably called *employer, employee, business or community engagement*, but essentially, it was a drive to become more 'demand-driven' rather than 'supply driven' – to boost global competitiveness. Academe responded with more vocationally oriented or bespoke/corporate higher education, working with industry alliances to serve broad needs across industry classification, and encouraging more 'applied' research approaches.

Even with these shifts, the cultural dis-connect continues. For the past decade, major Governmental reviews in the UK have issued 'urgent calls' to 'reflect the reality of modern

working lives’ and to ‘meet demand’ (see Leitch Review, 2006; BIS, 2009), and researchers and practitioners alike argue for a ‘cultural shift’ towards a “business focus of ‘close connect’ with professional employment and practice” (Wedgewood, 2008: 20). The challenge of ‘bridging cultures’ emphasises the continued existence of the relevance gap (Bolden, Hirsh, Connor, Petrov and Duquemin, 2010). However, more radical forms of higher education have emerged as Governmentally-recognised pockets of excellence; the negotiated, work based programme, whereby the learning focus is tailored to the individual’s professional needs and where the learning vehicle is real work activity and coaching by tutors, rather than instruction in a classroom. As part of such programmes, research that forms part of the academic award goes beyond ‘applied’ (i.e. applying academic theory), towards being *pragmatic* – knowledge is produced *within* individual practice settings (not *applied* to it). It is from within this context that this research aspired to transcend the relevance gap, and enable professionals in business to make a real difference within their own setting. Specifically, it investigated the pedagogic practices that enable the professional learner to do this as part of their academic award.

2. Method: Action Research

A team of academics within a medium sized UK university adopted a cyclical action research methodology to research their pedagogic practices (including the author as the principal investigator) within a ‘Designing Practitioner Research’ course. This aligned with their pragmatic orientation, and focused on authentic changes in the reality of the context. Together, the academic team took cycles of planning-action-reflection-re-planning, acting as critical-peers to challenge observations during each cycle. This included reflecting-in-action (Schön, 1992) during interactions; direct instruction to groups during a ‘Designing Practitioner Research’ workshop, and interactions after the workshop (i.e. questions raised by professional learners and the coaching that was required to facilitate learning). And it included reflecting-on-action; drafts of a practitioner research proposal, formal assessment by academics of the final proposal, and critical-peer debriefings. To analyse the experiences and reflections of the team, a grounded, emergent strategy was used, enabling common themes to be identified from practice, which then formed the basis for re-planning and development of pedagogical practices (Creswell, 2009). For each cycle, academic performance was externally scrutinised and ratified within standard quality assurance procedures by external examiners. This provided a procedure for independent validation (or otherwise) of the outcomes being created through the pedagogic practices being implemented. The initial cycle started in 2010, and the team has undertaken four full action research cycles. The most important themes and practices are reported below.

3. Findings and Outcomes: An Accelerated Practitioner Research Approach (APRA)

A key outcome for APRA has been a significant change in the level and consistency of the learning achievement in the Designing Practitioner Research course, as measured by academic grades and feedback on the learner’s proposals, by the academic team. Most professional learners now achieve what is recognised as a ‘*strong pass*’ in the grading system, which is one classification below the highest grade boundary (the ‘*distinction*’). In comparison to other courses, this is a higher level of achievement, but has been consistently validated by the external examiners. Less measurable, but noticeable for the team, was a shift in focus from a ‘nice to know’ type of academic research to strategic pragmatic research which is focused on addressing important organisational challenges or opportunities. In turn, though not discussed

here, this has led to more strategic changes and impacts within organisations. The pedagogic practices that have influenced these outcomes include: a new course design which embeds a new practitioner research process; coaching questions which directly link to this process; heuristics to help communicate options and possibilities through the process; and new assessment criteria for the course, to emphasise the nature of practitioner research for learners and markers. The process, along with key pedagogic practices, is outlined below.

Stage 1: Specifying Focus

This stage facilitates the professional learner to focus on an issue of importance. Typically, learners tended to start the course with *method* without a clear issue to focus on. The questions and concepts in this stage resist thinking about method, and instead, focus on change or development. The questions are:

0. What alternative perspectives or positions are available here?
1. What needs to change or develop in my setting?
2. ‘Who’ has said ‘what’ about addressing my focus?
3. What do I want to achieve in my situation?
4. How can I approach this?
5. What specifically do I need to find out?

A detailed discussion of each question is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are some important points to note. Question 0 is about the professional learner developing a critical awareness of their assumptions and choices throughout; it encourages critical thinking and acts as an ethicality check at each decision point. For question 2, learners focus on reviewing professional and academic literature to *inform* and *illuminate* a solution to the change/development specified in question 1, rather than academic theory determining their focus (finding a *gap* in the literature is not a concern for this type of practitioner research). Within question 3, we use the heuristic to hone in on, and be precise about, the professional learner’s *purpose for the research*: we ask them to finish off various sentences such as “To identify recommendations...”, “To enhance...”, “To recommend a course of action...”. This represents the Research Purpose to which all decisions relate to; we do not use words such as research aims, objectives or outcomes. In question 4, we use the heuristic of seeing approaches as researching something *before* action is taken, *during* action, or *after* action has been taken. These imply particular methodological choices, but their intention is to enable learners to think quickly about broad alternatives such as decision analysis, action research, or evaluation research. And finally, the answers to all of these determine question 5; the Research Questions.

Stage 2: Specifying Methodology

A great emphasis is placed on getting clarity in Stage 1 before progressing into Stage 2. This stage is about considering alternative methodological options, and then clearly specifying methodological choices. The questions here are:

6. What data do I need?
7. How will I collect the data?
8. How will I interpret or analyse the data to create action?

9. How will I ensure ethicality?
10. 'Who', will do 'what', 'when'?

Question 6 encourages the professional learner to consider the actual data that are needed which will then be collected and analysed in questions 7 and 8. This can be challenging, but enables the learner to be clearer about methods of data collection and analysis (questions 7 and 8). Within APRA, we found that many professional learners started their journey conceiving 'research' simply as question 7, but through the above process, emphasised a much wider process of strategic thinking. Similarly, we found many professional learners would not think in depth about question 8, but rather focus on methods for data collection. For the academic team, they encouraged the professional learner to think of analysis in terms of 'what else needs to happen' to the data to meet the actionable outcomes of the Research Purpose above. The final two questions are final checks for ethicality and a specific action plan to implement the practitioner research.

4. Implications

APRA has proven outcomes for professional learners in an attempt to transcend the relevance gap of Academe – professional learners learn how to make a difference to business practices *through research*, and they also benefit through academic reward. It is especially relevant for those educational establishments working with professional learners in real world contexts, such as work based learning, and others may want to explore how they can integrate the pedagogic practices into their own facilitation. Though not designed for other educational contexts, other communities have expressed an interest in APRA, including traditional teaching contexts, and more radically, organisational consultancy and organisational development. APRA embeds the capability for professionals to investigate strategic issues, using both practitioner and academic theories and research, to make a difference. This is an emergent practice (or theme) which will be important to consider over the next decade.

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