EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Engaged Scholarship: Research *with* Practice for Impact

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Although "impact" is discussed often when considering the outcomes of research, the meaning of impact is stakeholder-dependent and multidimensional. Impact on scientific knowledge pertains to how the area under study is affected in fundamental ways that influence future progress, while impact on practice pertains to practical utility (Simon 1991). Indeed, accreditation agencies, universities, and funding agencies are increasingly applying a multidimensional perspective to assess research impact.

Engaged scholarship, defined as "a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in studying complex problems" (Van de Ven 2007, p. 9), is an approach that can be used to advance scientific knowledge and practice.

A particularly distinctive aspect of engaged scholarship is that it reframes the discourse on relevance of "academic research *for* practice" (which has been the cornerstone of much of the relevance versus rigor discourse) to "how scholarship that is engaged *with* (rather than *for*) practice can advance basic scientific knowledge" (*ibid*., p. 10). Working with practice in the research process can produce knowledge that advances fundamental knowledge and that is useful for practice.

In this editorial, I contrast different perspectives on academic research based on the role of practice, discuss how engagement with practitioners can be beneficial for different activities of the research process, and share thoughts on risks of engaged scholarship and how to mitigate them (see Table 1).

Three Contrasting Perspectives: Research Without, For, With Practice

There are different perspectives on the relationship between scientific knowledge and practical knowledge, corresponding to different perspectives on the nature of interdependence between academics and practitioners.

Research Without Practice

One perspective is that academics and practitioners have different knowledge needs and therefore knowledge production objectives and processes. Practical knowledge needs to address specific situations in a particular context, while academic knowledge needs to see the commonality across specific cases that transcends contexts. Practitioners and academicians have their respective ontologies and epistemologies, and require different knowledge-production communities. With this formulation, IS researchers see the quest for impact on practice as a trade-off with the quest for impact on academic research.

Research For Practice

A second perspective is that knowledge generated through academic research has utility for practice, but what impedes this impact is a knowledge transfer problem: academic articles are written for academic audiences and are not accessible to practitioners. Indeed, several initiatives have been taken to improve knowledge transfer from academia to practice. The IS community and, more broadly, business schools (where most IS programs are positioned) offer a range of executive education programs (e.g., EMBA, specialized master's) and short non-

Table 1. Engaged Scholarship: Research *With* Practice for Impact	
Contrasting Perspectives on the Research-Practice Relationship	• **Research *without* practice**: The quest for impact on practice is a trade-off with the quest for impact on academic research • **Research *for* practice**: Impact on practice requires dissemination of academic research to practitioner communities • **Research *with* practice**: Impact on scientific knowledge and practice can be achieved through knowledge co-production, where academics engage with practitioners through the research process to introduce and reconcile divergent perspectives
Research *With* Practice: Engagement in Different Activities	• **Problem formulation**: Mitigate Type III errors by ensuring the research question is important • **Theory building**: Trigger abductive reasoning through conjectures on assumptions that may be challenged, explanations that may break down, and construct choices that may provide the lenses to see the phenomenon better or differently • **Research design**: Generate access to research sites and subjects; develop protocols for measurement, experimentation, intervention, and data collection • **Problem solving**: Collaborate with practitioners to interpret and negotiate the meanings and uses of the findings to solve problems
Research *With* Practice: One Shoe Size Doesn't Fit All	• **Modalities**: Orient engagement based on the research purpose (to describe, explain, and predict a phenomenon or to design and evaluate a solution and learn from action intervention); structure roles and responsibilities and the collaboration process based on the extent of researcher attachment to practitioners in the problem domain
Managing the Risks of Engaged Scholarship	• **Misaligned expectations**: Develop memorandum of understanding on the objectives of the collaboration, personnel and roles, and deliverables and timelines • **Hold-up for publication clearance**: As part of an NDA that is likely to be required for engagement with companies, include the agreement on the role of the company, if any, in clearing the work for publication and the timelines for doing so • **Intellectual property rights**: Work out agreements related to intellectual property prior to embarking on the collaboration • **Loss of interest**: Schedule regular meetings to debrief on progress, share insights, and seek feedback • **All eggs in one basket**: Diversify contacts and establish multiple connections in the organizations involved in the project • **Feedback from peer review**: Build options for continued engagement; this can prove highly valuable in addressing issues that tend to come up in the review process • **Will they pull the plug**: Keep the relationship exciting and mutually rewarding to sustain commitment and develop the collaboration

degree programs on topical issues (e.g., cybersecurity, privacy). We also have seen some joint initiatives between academic and practitioner journals (e.g., the *MIS Quarterly–Sloan Management Review* partnership where practitioner versions of *MISQ* articles are published in *Sloan Management Review* for dissemination to executive audiences).

Research With Practice

A third perspective is that impact on scientific knowledge *and* practice can be achieved through co-production, where academics and practitioners collaborate in the research process.

Pettigrew (2001) eloquently notes why the dissemination (research for practice) perspective is inadequate: "The action steps to resolve the old dichotomy of theory and practice were often portrayed with the minimalist request for researchers to engage with practitioners through more accessible dissemination. But dissemination is too late if the wrong questions have been asked" (p. S67).

IS scholars are engaging *with* practitioners in different ways: for example, we see a diversity of interventionist approaches (e.g., design science, action research) and examples of IS scholars engaging with organizations for empirical aspects of research (e.g., conducting experiments, collecting archival and primary data).

The engaged scholarship approach advances the perspective that impact on scientific knowledge *and* practice can be achieved in professional schools such as business schools by researchers engaging *with* practitioners (and other stakeholders) over the course of a study. This engagement, by injecting plurality of knowledge and creating tension from the use of different perspectives, expands the researchers' capabilities to take on complex real-world problems than going it alone or with colleagues that bring similar perspectives. Engaged scholarship is a pluralistic method: it can involve engagement with practice in different research activities, and can enhance the impact of IS research that is undertaken with different objectives, as is described in what follows.

Research With Practice: Engagement in Different Activities

Researchers can interact with practitioners in key activities of the engaged scholarship process: problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solving (Van de Van 2007). Each of these activities has a different objective and consequently orientation of interaction with practitioners*:* *relevance* for problem formulation, *validity* for theory building, *trust* (verisimilitude) for research design, and *impact* (on scientific knowledge and practice) for problem solving; the overall process has to have *coherence*, making it a cross-activity objective (*ibid*.).

The researcher can initiate the process with any of these activities, but what is important to underscore is that the process is nonlinear and unfolds iteratively through the activities.

I briefly enumerate some benefits that IS researchers can achieve for each activity through interacting with practitioners.

Problem Formulation

Through interactions with diverse stakeholders in practice who are experiencing the problem up-close, the researcher can ensure that they are not focusing on a pseudo-problem (Simon 1991). They can ground the problem in reality and flesh how it is experienced and interpreted by different stakeholders.

Interacting with individuals in practice who can provide an "up-close" practice world view to a problem can challenge the "afar" theory world view of a researcher (Van de Ven 2007). Grappling with different world views can mitigate the risk of a "boxed-in" perspective to problem formulation, where the researcher's lens to a problem may be obscured based on their expertise and interactions with peers who are likely to be informed by similar sources (e.g., journals, conferences, workshops, etc.) (Alvesson and Sandberg 2014).

The process of juxtaposing the two world views can also be a useful strategy to spot anomalies, where a theory or model does not accommodate what is happening in the world. By spotting anomalies that challenge assumptions underlying theories and models, the researcher can formulate questions to resolve the anomaly by advancing novel conceptualizations of the phenomenon.

Collectively, interactions with practitioners can be useful in mitigating the risk of Type III errors, which occur when the answer to the research question is inconsequential (Rai 2017a).

Theory Building

One of the most critical decisions in theorizing is determining the relevant concepts and constructs to represent the phenomenon. Making this decision requires *traversing up and down the ladder of abstraction*—from the abstract to the concrete, the concrete to the abstract (Rai 2017b). This process for a complex phenomenon is typically iterative, fraught with uncertainty on which constructs to move to the foreground and background and on the level of abstraction of the constructs to meaningfully represent the distinctive concrete aspects of the phenomenon.

Interactions with practitioners can generate insights on whether the lens of theory misses the distinctive aspects of the phenomenon, thereby promoting conjectures on assumptions that may be challenged, explanations that may break down, and construct choices that may obscure or make intelligible distinctive elements. Of course, these conjectures have to be worked through formalisms of deductive and inductive reasoning, but they can trigger abductive reasoning to challenge the lens of existing theory and catalyze new theory.

Finally, the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders in practice, who tend to be problem-driven, can lead the researcher to identify the blind spots in disciplinary perspectives and evaluate how these perspectives may be enriched with interdisciplinary perspectives.

Research Design

A key part of research design involves establishing access to research sites and subjects, developing measures, and collecting data. Interacting with practitioners can not only generate access to these resources but can also generate ideas related to measurement, experimentation, intervention, and data collection that may not have been considered by the researcher. For example, by looking at system logs on IS use, a researcher may identify multiple measures for the same construct, providing for a more robust measurement approach.

Problem Solving

Impact on scientific knowledge and practice is achieved through solving problems based on the research findings. With much research, problem solving involves discussing the implications of the findings for theory and practice in an academic journal. In some instances, researchers go further and disseminate the implications for practice by presenting to practitioners and publishing in practice outlets. With engaged scholarship, the process involves collaborating with practitioners to interpret and negotiate the *meanings* and *uses* of the findings to solve problems—a stark departure from the dissemination perspective where the researcher makes the findings accessible through the use of practitioner language and channels. As Van de Ven (2007, p. 25) observes: "It is one thing to write a research paper, and quite another to transfer, interpret, and implement study findings at the communication boundaries of both scientific and practitioner communities."

Research With Practice: One Size Doesn't Fit All

Engaged scholarship is a pluralistic approach and can be used for different research purposes. The purpose of IS research projects (and generally in business schools and the social sciences) can be broadly characterized as seeking to describe, explain or predict phenomena or to address questions related to design, evaluation, and action intervention (Van de Ven 2007). The substantive purpose of the research needs to be considered in meaningfully pursuing engagement with practice in the activities of problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solving. For example, a researcher seeking to describe and explain an IS phenomenon (e.g., influence of a novel approach to govern online collectives on contribution behaviors) may find it particularly beneficial to engage with practitioners in problem formulation and theory building, while a researcher concerned with design and evaluation research may find it more beneficial to engage with practice in problem formulation, research design, and problem solving.

Moreover, IS researchers may see their role as external observers or as internal participants (e.g., part of a team that includes industry collaborators) in relation to practitioners in the problem domain. Such differences in researcher perspective can become quite important in determining the respective roles and responsibilities and how to effectively manage the collaboration.

Managing Risks in Engaged Scholarship

Based on personal experiences in working closely with practitioners on research projects and discussions with colleagues who have done so, I identify salient risks that can arise in the engaged scholarship process and offer some approaches to proactively mitigate them.

Misaligned Expectations

Like any collaboration, there can be misaligned expectations between parties on the outcomes, roles, and processes that can impede the engaged scholarship approach. For instance, a researcher may seek to develop a fundamental understanding of the phenomenon while the manager may want a quick consulting solution. Developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) at the onset can be quite useful to avoid such misalignment in expectations. The MOU can be used to document the objectives of the collaboration, the personnel involved from both sides and their respective roles, and the deliverables and timelines.

Hold-Up for Publication Clearance

Companies typically require non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) with researchers before they proceed with a project. It becomes particularly important to include, as part of this agreement, the role of the company, if any, in clearing the work for publication. It is also important to agree on the scope, process, and timelines for such a review. For example, company review may be limited to ensure that the terms of the NDA are adhered to in an article (e.g., names of customers or organizational personnel are not revealed). The researcher should take the necessary steps to establish shared understanding so they are not in the uncomfortable position where an accepted article is pending company clearance but the timeline and process for such clearance is in conflict with the timeline and process of editors and publishers.

Intellectual Property Rights

Agreements related to intellectual property created through the research should be worked out prior to embarking on the collaboration. This can be a particularly salient issue to address with design science work that is conducted in collaboration with an organization, as researchers or the company may seek to patent the solutions that are developed.

Loss of Interest

Out of sight, out of mind is a much more likely scenario than absence makes the heart grow fonder. Prolonged periods of disengagement are counter to the idea of engaged scholarship. Regularly scheduled meetings to debrief on progress, share insights, and seek feedback are likely to promote shared understanding and sustain interest as well as create opportunities to not miss blind spots—be it in problem formulation, perspectives employed, research design, or interpretation of findings. These meetings can be brief with more time allocated for discussion and the exchange of viewpoints and should not devolve to monologuing.

All Eggs in One Basket

What happens when you receive an email that the key contact in the organization is no longer with the organization? This can obviously jeopardize the continuation of the project. An effective approach to mitigate against this risk is to diversify contacts and establish multiple connections in the organizations involved in the project. This can typically be done quite organically through a research process and without much overhead. It is also useful to engage with people who support the key contact as these individuals are likely to share their first impressions about the project and the researcher with the individual who comes in as a replacement. In fact, one of these individuals may very well be the one that steps into the key contact's role!

Feedback from Peer Review

Interleaved with the uncertainty of the engaged scholarship process is the uncertainty of the feedback that will be received from the peer review process. When articles are submitted for peer review, researchers may receive feedback from editors and reviewers that requires the researchers to re-engage with their contacts at the research site. For example, common critiques pertaining to lack of novelty (the review panel may point to work that has made similar contributions) and credibility of the evidence (the review panel may need additional empirical assessment which may entail additional experiments or primary/archival data collection and analysis) may call for further engagement with stakeholders at the research site. Building options for such continued engagement can prove highly valuable in addressing issues that tend to come up in the review process.

Will They Pull the Plug

As with any research relationship, there is the risk that the practitioner may walk away from the project. Some colleagues have expressed that this risk has led them to conclude that engaged scholarship is too risky an approach for them. Although avoidance makes this risk moot, it also results in the lost opportunity to realize the benefits in the different activities of the research process outlined earlier. Taking the steps to keep the relationship exciting and mutually rewarding can go a long way to sustain commitment and develop the collaboration.

Concluding Remarks

The impact of research is multidimensional and stakeholder-dependent, making it important to differentiate impact on scientific knowledge from impact on practice. Engaged scholarship is a method to achieve *both* types of impact and involves researchers interacting *with* stakeholders in practice across the activities of problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solving. Engaged scholarship is about conducting research *with* practice, a sharp contrast to the viewpoint of conducting research *for* practice, which has been the underlying perspective of much of the discourse on rigor versus relevance. As a pluralistic method, IS researchers can determine how to engage with practice in different research activities based on the research purpose and the extent to which they are attached or detached from the practice context in which the problem domain is investigated. It is also prudent to anticipate and proactively manage the risks of engaged scholarship in order to realize the upsides of conducting research with practice.

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