



Assessing contribution of research in business to practice[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This editorial offers some thoughts on wider criteria of evaluation than journal and article impact metrics. The editorial suggests that the measurement of journal and article impact metrics simply confirms the *status quo* rather than the promotion of resonance between practice, research and theory. The editorial proposes a more holistic recognition of impact, influence and usefulness that elevates the importance of three further dimensions of application, context and involvement. The editorial considers the value of scientific research to business practitioners and students concluding that an ingenuous and on-going scheme of exchange between scholars and practitioners would lead to cross-fertilization of ideas and experience and enhance empathy, learning and understanding. The alternative pursuit of scientific “respectability” by scholars in the most myopic academic sense has become less and less useful to students as well as the business community leaving the suspicion of business schools obsessed with making money whilst pretending to pursue knowledge and produce future citizens to make the world a better place.

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The publication of business papers in learned journals is the outcome of scholarship, even perhaps the ultimate acclamation of application, contribution, knowledge, and skill. The application of approved (in the sense of reliable and trustworthy) research processes punctuated by fashionable (in the sense of current and popular) etymological and epistemological derivations and formulaic patterns of rude (in the sense of robust) paradigmatic proportion is surely a productive (in the sense of useful) and noble (in the sense of contributing or making a difference) pursuit. Yet the evaluation of such academic contribution remains illative and moot, subject to diverse, conflicting and contradictory patronage, and controversial in application.

The number of author citations alongside journal ranking as a measure of scholarly contribution, impact, influence, and usefulness are increasingly the touchstones supported by investment of time and effort by senior members of educational institutions (see *Editorial: Journal and author impact metrics* by Woodside 2008). If research success dictates hiring, promoting, and firing of faculty candidates, then perhaps the wider rationale for such diligent yet monopolizing application within an assumptive scholarly and prospectively intellectual environment requires more critical and rigorous examination.

The evaluation of impact of scholarly contributions of journals and authors is typically contentious and not least because most journals depend upon the readership and the support of the academic

community. A citation system of measurement of research output in combination with journal ranking offers one form of measurement to identify the impact of an author's work. The use of multiple metrics for evaluating journals and scholarly contributions has the appearance of being informative, objective and tangible as well as an independent confirmation of impact, influence, and usefulness.

The value of any writing must be the ability to communicate thoughts and understandings. The impact of those understandings is a matter of degree and may shape future action, attitude, belief, emotion, knowledge, sentiment, thought, or perhaps a combination of these and other components. Outcomes may include action and improvement, anger and dismissal, argument and discussion, shame and disgust, thought and creativity.

A citation system does not necessarily delineate the respective contributions of researcher, scholar and intellectual unless popular acclaim is a measure of value. Faculty candidates looking to make their mark (with recognition of the ascendancy of H G Wells one-eyed man in appropriate circumstances) may be forgiven for confusing quantity and ownership as subservient to, for example, learning and practice. Only a more holistic recognition of impact, influence and usefulness can accurately evaluate the impact of journals and an author's contribution and scholars should not relegate business research as a living discipline to philosophical insignificance by simplistic measurements of scholarly and intellectual prowess.

The mission statements of business schools provide rich evidence of an essential and fundamental dictionary of perceptions of excellence. Words such as “leading”, “successful”, “international”, “challenging”, “rigorous”, “relevant”, and “high quality” abound. The words represent how an institution would like to be perceived and represent a fundamental positioning statement of business education and research. A declaration of excellence

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is of course simply a declaration of intent. Anyone can make a statement of intent and, whilst behavioral psychologists for many years believed that intention was the primary antecedent of future behavior, increasingly, the importance of attitude, past behavior, experience and involvement receive recognition as better predictors of future behavior. So, perhaps, whilst the intention (or possibly a desire to be perceived in a certain light) may exist, statements of intention are no guarantee of attainment or even necessarily commitment.

These institutional statements of intent are often paralleled by authors' biographical contributions on book jackets and websites. Outsiders might be excused for believing that business authors have had successful careers in the business world. Whilst some academics have indeed had successful and productive careers in business, the importance of context and application of business research is not dissimilar to the derived advantage and contribution of practitioner medics and other symbiotic professional relationships of mutualism rather than parasitic or commensalism. This observation is not to demean but rather to highlight the importance of a positioning image that reflects a meaningful impact for business through practical output, influence and usefulness rather than a tendency to perpetuate isolation within the existing confined paradigm.

Self-perception of business education lacks the wider context of education and social policy, driven by potential insularity and guarded by a passion for research output, often forgetful of basic business tenets such as change, flexibility, enterprise and the importance of application, experience and practice portrayed by the same research outputs. Academics often lack the experience of practitioner and business needs, the dichotomy of business practice, and the "scientific truth" of business research, the remoteness and small readership of most academic business journals, and the lack of relevance and practitioner exposure often shade theory. Real practical problems do exist. Who is going to teach business practice if practitioners are practicing and academics are teaching and researching? How is the experience of business going to be acquired by those teaching and learning within higher education? What form of assessment would be most appropriate to the practice of business?

Social pressures exist. Higher payments for education through loans, taxation, parental contribution and part-time work are understandable stimuli for students and parents' specific expectations of a relevance of business education. This context *should* provoke an active exchange that questions the relevance of business school teaching and learning and provides some reassurance to the expectations of students, parents, and indeed business and society. Business is a series of contradictions; complex, simple, exciting and yet sometimes dull, a confusion of events, ideas, values and beliefs. Collaborative and synergistic research is not possible without the opportunity to "crawl inside companies to observe carefully the causal processes at work" (Christensen and Raynor, 2003: 70) and "increase cross-functional perspectives in management research and practice" (Wind, 2005: 863).

A business school operating in isolation from and without authentic involvement in business lacks personal awareness and identity, suffers from an introverted, inward-looking, egotistical, ideological, and self-righteous predisposition. Business schools tend towards conforming to these norms and behaviors — and they bring new revenue streams, attract more students, and supported by perceptions of "leading", "successful", "international", "challenging", "rigorous", "relevant", and "high quality". A heavy reliance on scholarly contribution, impact, influence and usefulness measured by the number of citations is not convincing to students, parents, business and society that performance is serving the intention.

Business schools are poor practitioners of their own research limited perhaps by long-running divisions on the nature of "scientific" and "scholarly" contribution. The debate initiated by Pfeffer and Fong (2002, 2003, 2004) with wider contributions and reactions of Connolly (2003), Ghoshal (2005) and Pfeffer (2005) are important contributions to discussion about impact, influence, and usefulness. The debate is perhaps more about issues of extrinsic and intrinsic

contribution to business, even maybe the distinction between research, scholasticism, and intellectualism. The debate must include consideration of the relevance of business schools and business research to business practice and should compare with the application of other living disciplines. A myopic preoccupation with measurement of research based more on quantity and ownership is perhaps the result of mistaking the effect for the cause. Business research is the consequence of business practice.

1. Ideology and shared values

If the dominant ideology is merely the shared values of the ruling elite (Abercrombie et al., 1980) and the learning society is an ideological concept serving ideological purposes (Hughes and Tight, 1995), then identifying the elite and the concept is important. The collegiate environment and scholarly tenure of institutions of higher education sustains the ideology on the basis that, "When people are asked to describe their ideology, they start with examples that imply patterns of belief within which those examples make sense" (Weick, 1995: 131). The development of business schools within a university environment is subject to the established norms and acceptable behaviors often steeped in history, tradition, established practices, and a professorial elite with a sturdy adeptness for and contumely habit of inside-out thinking rather than outside-in thinking. An increasingly limited dependence on government funding, a growing competitive market to attract high-fees paid by international students, and demands for collaborative links and knowledge transfer turns into an akrasian journey for the ill-equipped or unwilling.

Johnson (1984) proposes "professionalism" as an ideology based on claims of superior knowledge, and "professionalization" as the process by which an occupation seeks to advance its status and progress within that ideology. An emphasis on process and propositional knowledge without application and context has led to teaching a more mechanistic and "less skilled" business role. The adoption of strategies dominated by bureaucratic demands and political expedience merely asserts and emphasizes claims of prepositional knowledge and professionalization. A lack of regular contact and experience with business and practitioners pronounces and favors the adoption of professionalization rather than professionalism.

Some indications of professionalization include a lack of practical experience and skills in the business environment; a high regard for quantitative research that seeks "scientific truth" in preference to participation and observation; a priority of research over teaching activity endorsed by reward structures, status, and expectations; a propensity for the classroom or lecture hall rather than the office or factory; courses and modules that emphasize an inflow of funds rather than an outflow of practical skill, knowledge and understanding; and narrow pedagogical learning and teaching methods. This Pirandellian pedagogy (i.e., abandoning ties with reality) may be validation of professional recognition claiming the guardianship of knowledge.

Different pedagogical methods undoubtedly exist amongst institutions of higher education teaching business including the constituent use of business placement schemes recognizing that participation and reflection is an essential formative and experiential learning experience. Henry Mintzberg's advocacy of alternative pedagogical frameworks (as well as concepts of strategy) is well-known. However, in the main, the teaching of business takes the form of book-teaching by the book-taught supported by normative assessment. This method combines knowledge, though not necessarily application or skill, with an emphasis on the "right" way of thinking usually within well defined boundaries.

2. Problems of outside-in experience and inside-out thinking

Whilst the recruitment of business practitioners into higher education is not unknown, salary structures, lifestyle, teaching, marking, emphasis on academic qualification and involvement in

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