The role of theory adaptation in the making of a reference discipline

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Information Systems (IS) scholars repeatedly debate the nature of the IS discipline. A series of articles have debated whether the IS field has become a reference discipline. While many scholars have argued this question from a perceptual point of view, we address it by examining the role of theory adaptation in the making of a reference discipline. Based on a review of how the sensemaking theory from organization studies is adapted and used in IS research, we show that papers that adapt and use sensemaking theory as a central construct in the theoretical framework – in other words – engaging in theory adaptation, have a higher probability of being referenced by other disciplines. Finally, we discuss the implications of the manner in which IS scholars borrow theory regarding the IS discipline's prospects of becoming a reference discipline.

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1. Introduction

Over the past for almost thirty years, IS scholars have debated the status of the IS discipline. Many leading IS scholars have contributed to the debate, and while they do not necessarily agree on the current status of the IS discipline, the dominant position is that it has matured significantly since the 1980s (see, for example, Baskerville & Myers, 2002). The debate covers a number of sub-debates ranging from problems of legitimacy and recognition from other research fields (Benbasat & Zmud, 2003; Lyytinen & King, 2004), to the lack of a clear definition of the IS field (Avgerou, Siemer, & Bjørn-Andersen, 1999) and to the problems related to the absence of a theoretical core of the field (Benbasat & Weber, 1996; King & Lyytinen, 2004; Weber, 2006). While some have historically questioned the legitimacy of the discipline as a field on its own (DeSanctis,

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2003; Hirschheim & Klein, 2003), others have been less conclusive, inquiring about initiatives and measures for developing and improving the discipline and the criteria for doing this (Baskerville & Myers, 2002; Lucas, 1999; Wade, Biehl, & Kim, 2006).

A central sub-debate is the IS reference discipline debate. From around 1980 until 2002, it focused on what disciplines should serve as reference disciplines for IS. Articles with this focus include Keen (1980), Hamilton and Ives (1982), Culnan and Swanson (1986), Culnan (1987) and Lee (1991). In 2002 the debate took an important turn as two articles, Baskerville and Myers (2002) and Vessey, Ramash, and Glass (2002), initiated a debate about IS as a reference discipline on its own merits, and thus, from 2002, the reference discipline debate began to focus on the IS field's external influence and how referencing to IS research by other disciplines could be measured and strengthened.

Three studies have set a direction for this controversy. Initiating this debate, Baskerville and Myers (2002) reviewed the citations of two pieces of IS research (Davenport & Short, 1990; Markus, 1983) proven valuable to scholars from other disciplines. They concluded that the IS discipline was ready to serve as a reference discipline because it had developed its own research tradition and perspective, thereby becoming of interest and value to scholars from other disciplines. Further, Vessey et al. (2002) looked at what reference disciplines IS scholars rely on in their publications and the diversity across journals, suggesting that IS had already become a reference discipline. Finally, Wade et al. (2006) investigated what they call the IS field's proclaimed status as a reference discipline, and concluded that IS had yet to attain the status of a reference discipline based on the understanding that other disciplines must reference a discipline for it to be a reference discipline.[1] Together, these three articles provide valuable insights into what to expect from a reference discipline, and they maintain that its importance to other fields is central to sustain the legitimacy of the IS field.

The authors subscribe to the idea put forward by Hambrick and Chen (2008) that, in part at least, the success and legitimacy of a young academic field depends on its ability to convince more established fields that it has a contribution to make. The reference discipline debate addresses the issue of legitimacy building by a young field, as it examines whether other fields have been convinced that the knowledge it produces is worth referencing.

To further the visibility and the legitimacy of the IS discipline, different IS scholars have formulated varying proposals for initiatives to be taken in order to increase the likelihood that scholars from other disciplines will reference IS research in their own research. Lee (1991) and Baskerville and Myers (2002) suggest publishing IS research in journals from other academic fields or focusing on co-publication with scholars from other research fields, for example, in joint special issues. Lucas (1999) suggests pursuing a constant strive for quality, while Wade et al. (2006) propose increasing the quantity of articles in leading IS journals. Galliers (2003) advocates for the IS discipline to accept and embrace pluralism, while Hirschheim and Klein (2003) promote the development of a discipline-wide body of knowledge. For Baskerville and Myers (2002), it is important to ensure that IS research is readily accessible to scholars in other fields, whereas Benbasat and Zmud (2003) encourage; a) IS scholars to attend other areas' conferences and b) scholars from other fields to attend IS conferences (for a list of these proposals see Appendix A).

While these proposals might increase the external referencing to IS research, we find that foremost they focus on promotion of IS research, building on the assumption that there is an audience to it. Hence, it seems that none of the proponents mentioned above has considered whether the manner in which a piece of IS research is conducted influences the number of citations it receives from outside the IS discipline; thus, the above-mentioned proponents have not looked for factors that could influence the number of citations articles get from outside their discipline of origin. We suggest that further investigation into factors that can potentially influence the becoming of a reference discipline is an important step for the advancement of the reference discipline debate.

In our search for factors that might influence how often research publications get cited, we consulted Judge, Cable, Colbert, and Rynes (2007), who found that articles reporting empirical studies which clearly extend the theoretical base of existing literature increase the number of citations by other scholars as well

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[1] A fourth paper (Katerattanakul et al., 2006) claims that IS has become a reference discipline. However, the results are not compatible, because the paper solely categorizes Communications of the ACM as an IS journal, and thereby, it concludes that IS is a major reference discipline for computer science.