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Building and Breaching Boundaries at Once. An Exploration of How Management Academics and Practitioners Perform Boundary Work in Executive Classrooms

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Abstract:	<p>Based on an ethnographic study of exchanges between management academics and practitioners in an executive program, the research articulates a process perspective on how academics and practitioners engage in boundary work -how direct interaction strategies (boundary building or boundary breaching) shape their knowledge exchanges. Findings suggest that in order to deal resourcefully with relational insecurity, academics and practitioners use a set of strategies according to trial and error logics. In the beginning of an interaction episode, they draw intentionally on boundary building strategies. If these are refused, they draw on emergent strategies of boundary breaching which connect more creatively classroom roles (in situ) with roles outside the classroom (ex situ). We show that each strategy triggers a different type of knowledge exchange, and that intentional boundary building triggers more limited knowledge exchanges (knowledge transfer) than emergent boundary breaching (new understandings). Our findings contribute to the boundary work literature and integrate arguments about a theory-practice gap with arguments emphasizing the relational potential of academic-practitioner exchanges. We also suggest that if business schools de-infrastructure and encourage trial and error interaction, they can increasingly become trading zones for academic-practitioner boundary work.</p>

**Building and Breaching Boundaries at Once. An Exploration of How
Management Academics and Practitioners Perform Boundary Work in
Executive Classrooms**

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ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study of exchanges between management academics and practitioners in an executive program, the research articulates a process perspective on how academics and practitioners engage in boundary work -how direct interaction strategies (boundary building or boundary breaching) shape their knowledge exchanges. Findings suggest that in order to deal resourcefully with relational insecurity, academics and practitioners use a set of strategies according to trial and error logics. In the beginning of an interaction episode, they draw intentionally on boundary building strategies. If these are refused, they draw on emergent strategies of boundary breaching which connect more creatively classroom roles (in situ) with roles outside the classroom (ex situ). We show that each strategy triggers a different type of knowledge exchange, and that intentional boundary building triggers more limited knowledge exchanges (knowledge transfer) than emergent boundary breaching (new understandings). Our findings contribute to the boundary work literature and integrate arguments about a theory-practice gap with arguments emphasizing the relational potential of academic-practitioner exchanges. We also suggest that if business schools de-infrastructure and encourage trial and error interaction, they can increasingly become trading zones for academic-practitioner boundary work.

Key words: theory practice gap; academic practitioner dialogue; knowledge exchange process; interaction strategies; boundary work; boundary breaching; business schools; executive education; classroom interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding how management theory and managerial practice inform each other has been part of management debates for decades. Several studies have highlighted the complex relationship between management academia and managerial practice, and respectively between management academics and management practitioners, as protagonists of distinct but potentially collaborative worlds (Ireland, 2012; Hambrick, 1994; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Susman & Evered, 1978; Van de Ven, 2007). In this study, we are concerned with how mechanisms of direct exchanges between academics and practitioners can inform the theory-practice debate in management. In particular, we inquire about how strategies that academics and practitioners use when they interact affect their ability to exchange knowledge.

Contributions to the theory-practice debate have shown that academics and practitioners constitute distinct occupational communities that produce knowledge according to different logics and mechanisms. For instance, academics and practitioners are often animated by incompatible professional interests such as explaining things and getting things done, and organize around distinct systems of expertise such as scholarly expertise and managerial expertise. In turn, these reflect different day-to-day concerns such as concerns with scientific rigor and concerns with practical relevance (for overviews see Banks et al., 2016; Kieser et al., 2015). A main concern has been the extent to which differences constrain or enable academic-practitioner knowledge exchanges (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Markides, 2011; Rynes et al., 2001). On the one hand, the promoters of the so-called gap perspective have argued that the differences between the two worlds hamper, or even render impossible, fruitful academic-practitioner knowledge exchanges (Baldrige et al., 2004; Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Pfeffer

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2
3 & Fong, 2002). On the other hand, studies adopting a relational perspective have suggested that
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5 the complexity of the relations between academics and practitioners can be a resource for
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7
8 successful negotiations and mutual adjustments (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Ireland, 2012;
9
10 Shapiro et al., 2007; Weick, 2001).

11
12 It is interesting to notice that most of these studies have referred to indirect exchanges
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14 between academic and managerial knowledge. Indirect exchanges are sequences by which the
15
16 publications of academics become known, read and implemented by practitioners in their day-to-
17
18 day tasks, or by which managerial problems inform the scientific publications of academics and
19
20 their implications for practice (Beyer & Trice, 1982; Baldrige et al., 2004; Bartunek & Rynes,
21
22 2010; Ghoshal, 2005; Pearce & Huang, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). Although indirect exchanges
23
24 are highly relevant to understanding the theory-practice debate, we here suggest that direct
25
26 academic-practitioner exchanges can also offer a fertile ground for a better understanding of
27
28 academic-practitioner relations. Joint activities such as business consulting, executive education,
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30 university-industry partnerships or multidisciplinary discussion forums have been called out as
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32 means that management scholars and practitioners may use to make sense of each other, discover
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34 potential synergies and negotiate arising differences, as they work towards a relatively common
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36 goal (Aram & Salipante, 2003; Bartunek, 2007; Pettigrew, 2001; Shapiro et al., 2007; Van de
37
38 Ven, 2007).

39
40 In this paper, we submit that adopting the perspective of boundary work in inter-
41
42 occupational settings (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003a, 2003b; Carlile, 2002; Gieryn, 1983;
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44 Lamont & Molnar, 2002) can provide useful insights about the difficulties of knowledge
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46 exchanges in direct settings and, at the same time, on strategies to accomplish them. According
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to the boundary work perspective, members of different occupational communities make, break and remake boundaries between themselves in a dance that follows occupational purposes and contexts of interaction. Boundary work has been used in sociology and management studies to explain various aspects of inter-occupational relations (Anteby et al., 2016). In the beginning, studies showed how groups of individuals manage to claim a unique occupational jurisdiction (i.e., monopoly over a type of knowledge), despite the similarities they bear with members of other occupations (Abbott, 1988; Gieryn, 1983). Later on, studies have shown how members of different occupations manage to exchange knowledge despite differences (Carlile, 2002; Kellogg et al., 2006). More recently, studies have suggested that creating and tearing down boundaries often occurs simultaneously in inter-occupational relationships (Anteby et al., 2016).

We suggest that the boundary work perspective can contribute to the theory-practice debate in multiple ways. Boundary work has been a useful lens for studying how social interactions between members of different occupations shape their knowledge exchanges (Bechky, 2003a; Carlile, 2004). Looking at how academics and practitioners build, maintain or tear down occupational boundaries in day-to-day settings can help us gain a better understanding of how, in mundane settings, the knowledge produced within academia is either made compatible or incompatible with the knowledge circulating in the world of managerial practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Beech et al., 2010). In turn, this can provide integration for the gap and the relational perspectives (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Rynes et al., 2001) and can inform the debate about the conditions and mechanisms by which academic knowledge becomes “actionable”, which has concerned many research forums and special issues (see for instance Aldag, 2012; Bartunek & Egri, 2012; Ireland, 2012).

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Therefore, the research question that drives this study is: *How do academics and practitioners perform boundary work in settings where they are called to interact directly, and in particular, how do their interactions (i.e., building versus breaching boundaries) shape their ability to exchange knowledge?*

To answer the research question, we performed an ethnographic study of two communities of academics and practitioners that came together and interacted around the topic of technological innovation management during a one-year executive program. Studying academics and practitioners as they interact in a boundary setting -a context that lies in between the socially constructed worlds of academia and business practice- can allow a fine-grained understanding of how they perform boundary work to either defend, negotiate or break down existing science-practice boundaries. Business schools in general and executive management programs in particular are useful boundary settings for studying interplay between academic-practitioner interaction strategies and their knowledge exchanges.

Our findings document the resourcefulness that academics and practitioners demonstrate when they exchange knowledge in conditions of relational insecurity: those cases in which actors have little knowledge about each other and experience pervasive uncertainty regarding the outcomes of their exchanges. We show that this resourcefulness is rooted in the ability to complement classroom roles (in situ) with roles outside the classroom (ex situ). We also show that to reduce relational insecurity, academics and practitioners enact different interaction strategies that draw differently on in situ and ex situ roles, following a trial and error pattern. Accordingly, academics and practitioners try first a set of intended strategies that we refer to as “boundary building strategies” aimed at maintaining pre-established academic-practitioner roles

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such as that of teacher-student. However, as soon as the intentional strategies fail, they gradually progress toward more complex and emergent strategies called “boundary breaching strategies” which imply exiting personal comfort zones and making sense of each other’s worlds, thanks to in situ-ex situ interplays. While boundary building strategies account for modest knowledge exchanges such as circumscribed knowledge transfer or façade knowledge transfer, boundary breaching strategies enable the development of new understandings, thanks to knowledge translations and knowledge transformations.

These insights offer multiple implications for how we understand the relations between management theory and managerial practice. First, we offer a much-needed empirical contribution about how academics and practitioners engage in knowledge exchanges in direct interactions. We emphasize the role of relational insecurity in direct interactions, which might first push academics and practitioners to consolidate boundaries, and then gradually push them towards sophisticated boundary breaching. As a novel contribution to boundary work literature, we also show that boundary building and boundary breaching strategies, both planned and emergent strategies, can have different consequences in terms of the knowledge exchanges they afford. We also address the challenges and potential of business schools as de-infrastructured boundary settings to enable boundary work in a trial and error fashion.

TOWARDS A RENEWED RESEARCH AGENDA IN THE THEORY-PRACTICE

DEBATE

Boundary work in inter-occupational exchanges

Boundary work represents individuals’ attempts to create, shape, and disrupt boundaries (Gieryn, 1983, 1999). Research on boundary work has focused primarily on occupational

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boundaries and, in particular, on the ways in which occupational members work to either build occupational jurisdictions with clear-cut boundaries or to breach boundaries in order to enable collaboration (Carlile, 2002; Bechky, 2003b; Kellogg et al., 2006). The first studies in social studies of science (Gieryn, 1983) and in the sociology of professions (Abbott, 1988; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) define boundary work as strategies by which occupational members fight with competing occupational groups over occupational jurisdictions -i.e., claims of exclusivity on certain knowledge and activities- in the attempt to ensure occupational autonomy, prestige, and control of resources (see also Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Reading X-rays (Barley, 1986), repairing photocopies (Orr, 1996). Managing safety rules (Huising, 2014), curing mental disease (Abbott, 1988), making art (Becker, 1978) or keeping the books (Boland, 1982) are just some examples of jurisdictions over which various occupations have battled over time. The most pertinent example is perhaps provided by sociologist Thomas Gieryn (1983) to whom the original use of the term 'boundary work' is attributed. In a study of how scientists perform boundary work with respect to lay people, the author suggests that science exists only in as much as its members actively work to distinguish it from something else they call 'non-science'. Scientists build boundaries that can be made of technical language, esoteric disciplines or specialized publications to separate scientific knowledge (e.g., theories, models, and propositions) from lay knowledge or from the consumption of scientific knowledge by nonscientists (e.g., knowledge and models used by engineers, technicians, people in business and governments). For instance, when scientists aim at expanding their expertise into domains claimed by other occupations, they use boundary work to show the superiority of their claims over rivals. When the goal is to create monopoly over the production of certain knowledge, they

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exclude outsiders by defining them with labels such as "pseudo," "deviant," or "amateurs". Additionally, when the goal is to protect their autonomy, they use rivals and outsiders as scapegoats (see also Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

Since the late '80s, an increasing number of studies have also investigated the opposite process by which members of two or more occupational communities manage to engage in significant knowledge exchanges despite inter-community differences (Bechky, 2003a; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Carlile, 2002). This shift marks a change of perspective on occupations from competitive closed systems to cooperative open systems (Anteby et al., 2016). From such a standpoint, occupations are often called to collaborate to deal with day-to-day challenges or to extend the reach of their societal influence. Findings suggest that members of different occupations are able to enact sophisticated strategies to exchange knowledge in intelligible ways (Kellogg et al., 2006). Work roles can significantly mediate inter-occupational knowledge exchanges because they provide structure and responsibility for inter-occupational interactions (Bechky, 2003b; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). A role implies a set of standards, norms and social prescriptions about who a person is, how one should behave at work and what one knows with respect to a set of occupations. In addition, it sets standards for conformity and proper performance -i.e., behavioral specifications about how to "do this," or "do that"- and conveys matters of etiquette and manners in work contexts (Bechky, 2006). A role is relational in the sense that it cannot exist in the absence of one or more roles to which it is oriented. Consequently, when members of an occupation try to make sense of the behavior of another occupation's members, they are typically attempting to find the role corresponding to the observed actions (Bechky, 2003b). It is also

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interesting to highlight that roles are not always fixed; they can be reshaped to craft one's job, or to redesign the boundaries between one's job and those of others (Ashforth et al., 2000).

It is important to notice that roles can be used to either defend or to break down occupational boundaries, to encourage or to inhibit knowledge exchanges, according to the situation and how a relationship evolves over time (see Anteby et al., 2016). For instance, on the occasion of the introduction of the CT scanner in radiology departments, Barley (1986) describes the struggles of radiology doctors to first defend their occupational jurisdiction from the growing expertise of technicians with the scanners and then, once they realized the change was unavoidable, to open up and collaborate. More recently, Huising (2014) has shown that, paradoxically, health physicists and biosafety officers managed to obtain more easily authority over scientific laboratory personnel when they went out of their comfort zones and engaged in "scut work", rather than when they adopted an occupational "purity" approach. We thus suggest that exchanges between members of different occupations rarely imply just boundary building or boundary breaching, but rather a subtle and continuous interplay between the two.

Boundary work in management academia and managerial practice

Contributions to the theory-practice debate have either complained about the existence of a gap between organizational research and the world of practice, expressed their confidence about the multiple ways to bridge it, or even claimed this potential is already happening (for reviews see Banks et al., 2016; Kieser et al., 2015). As distant as these positions might seem from each other, they all allude to practices of academic-practitioner boundary work.

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Applying a boundary work perspective to the theory-practice debate implies seeing management academics and practitioners as members of occupations that compete and collaborate at the same time, and regulate their knowledge exchanges accordingly.

As the gap position implies, in order to cultivate a sense of professional uniqueness or defend acquired privileges, academics and practitioners might engage in jurisdictional struggles for management expertise. For instance, academics might claim that theoretical knowledge is superior to managerial knowledge, and practitioners that their managerial knowledge has advantages over academic knowledge (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Daft & Lewin, 1990; Ghoshal, 2005; Sandelands & Drazin, 1989). In turn, self-referentiality might privilege boundary building at the expense of boundary breaching (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Starkey & Madan, 2001). At the same time, however, day-to-day challenges might drive academics and practitioners in settings that require them to interact in constructive ways, trying to make their knowledge mutually understandable and actionable (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Beech et al., 2010; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Consulting projects, executive education settings or joint research forums have been indicated as settings where academics and practitioners must exchange knowledge in interdependence (Czarniawska & Mazza, 20013; Bartunek, 2007; Tushman et al., 2007; Van de Ven, 2007). From a boundary work perspective, in these situations academics and practitioners might simultaneously work to build some boundaries and breach others. However, there is little understanding in the theory-practice debate of how this occurs. In particular, we know little of how strategies that academics and practitioners use to build or breach boundaries shape the way they manage to exchange knowledge. We suggest that business education for executives constitutes an intriguing example of boundary setting between academia and managerial

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practice, as follows.

Business education as boundary work setting

Business schools are seen as indicators of the direction in which the management discipline is heading at large in the society and of the quality of the relationship between academics and other stakeholders (Birkinshaw et al., 2016; Khurana, 2010; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Starkey & Tempest, 2005). Generally, scholars have indicated that academic-practitioner interactions in business schools reflect the dilemmas of the theory-practice debate. Accordingly, business schools often remain caught between two different goals -knowledge exploration through rigorous research and knowledge exploitation through instruction, respectively (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Friga et al., 2003; Mitchell, 2007; Pearce & Huang, 2012). In this sense, it is interesting to notice that the roles of teacher and student that academics and practitioners enact in business schools during executive education can both build academic-practitioner boundaries and breach them. For instance, it has been suggested that academics try to turn (current and future) practitioners into like-minded scientists, instead of preparing them to become leaders in their own settings (Armstrong, 2005; Moldoveanu & Martin, 2008; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). Other studies have emphasized, by contrast, boundary breaching behaviors. For instance, it has been argued that most educators barely use management research in executive classrooms because they fear students would consider it irrelevant (Rubin & Dierdoff, 2009; Trieschmann et al., 2000). Since business schools are more interested in customer satisfaction than in promoting scholarly research, academics draw from non-academic sources such as folk wisdom in popular press or models developed in the consulting industry to offer executive students the immediately applicable knowledge that they seek (see Baden & Higgs, 2015; Gioia & Corley,

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2002; Stambaugh & Trank, 2010). As contrasting as these findings might appear, they suggest that executive education is a boundary setting in which sophisticated boundary work occurs.

While most contributions direct their attention to what business schools ought to be, fewer studies investigate knowledge exchanges in business schools and delve into the mechanisms that allow (or obstruct) successful accomplishments. This is surprising because executive management education represents one of the most frequent forms of direct interaction between organization scholars and practitioners (Augier & March, 2011; Burke & Rau, 2010). For instance, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) have referred to business schools as identity workspaces in which practitioners switch between roles inside and outside work places. Empson (2013) and Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) have made the same argument about academics that enter in contact with practitioners. They have shown that liminal spaces such as executive classrooms or consulting projects encourage academics to question the way they position with respect to practitioners. Yet there is still little evidence on how academic-practitioner interactions unfold in liminal spaces and with what consequences for the knowledge base of each party.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

The research setting

To explore the aforementioned issues, we conducted an ethnographic research in an international business school that offered a one-year part-time executive program: the Executive Master in Technology and Innovation Management (ETIM). The program brought together two communities of academics and practitioners to interact around the topic of technological innovation management. Thirty-one professionals with an average of ten years of work experience

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in technical areas of large companies operating in a variety of industrial sectors (e.g., automotive, ICT, energy industries) enrolled in ETIM under company sponsorships. The fourteen educators were academics with different levels of expertise, doing research and teaching in different areas of innovation management (e.g., industrial innovation management, new product marketing, entrepreneurship, people management in innovation-driven industries). The program unfolded over 12 months in a part-time format and involved over 200 hours of classroom lectures, 350 hours of e-learning sessions, 24 hours of seminars and workshops, 6 company visits, and 4 collaborative projects.

There were different reasons for choosing ETIM as the research context. ETIM gave us the opportunity to examine empirically how academics and practitioners perform boundary work in a boundary setting where they interacted directly and thus could provide immediate information about what academics and practitioners think of each other, and, respectively, of their knowledge repertoires; as a consequence, we could also observe how they decide to manage their interaction. ETIM gave us access to both communities within the same context so that we might compare and contrast the strategies they employed to exchange knowledge. While these strategies might not be identical in other contexts of direct interaction such as industry-research partnerships or consulting projects, they can provide evidence of a common pattern: that by which academics and practitioners try to make sense of each other and to give a shape, and a structure, to their face-to-face interaction.

Although they were part of an executive education program, our informants reflected most of the characteristics of academics and practitioners contemplated in the theory-practice debate. As it emerged from the semi-structured interviews (described in detail in the following

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sections), ETIM academics defined themselves as “typical academics”, as they termed it. While research and teaching undergraduate and graduate courses were their main roles, they also secondarily engaged with some executive education. Specifically, academics were based in a research department and collaborated only occasionally with the business school for executive education. In the same manner, practitioners defined themselves as members of occupational professions (e.g., engineers, technicians, IT developers) and members of the organizations they worked for. The program was part time, such that practitioners continued to work on a full-time basis in their organizations. Their participation in the program was subordinate to career development opportunities provided by the HR departments in their organizations. With the exception of two participants who had explicitly asked their companies to consider them for enrollment in executive education, all the participants had been selected to participate in the program by the HR departments of their companies. This excluded the self-selection bias by which only highly motivated practitioners might enroll in executive education (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004).

Data sources

We collected data through multiple sources such as: classroom observations, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and other program-related activities such as online platform interactions, company visits and seminars.

Observations. The first author observed and audio-recorded 225 hours of classroom activities (150 hours of classroom lectures and 75 hours of other activities such as company visits and seminars). While observing, the researcher took field notes and transcribed all of them into extended files at the end of each day of observation. She did not avail herself of an observation

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protocol but tried to track down chronologically all that was happening in the classroom setting. Both authors read several times the field notes and re-listened to the recorded material. Together we selected and transcribed verbatim 16 hours of recorded classroom interactions. Since we were interested in understanding how academics and practitioners made sense of each other's knowledge, we selected interaction episodes in which they actively asked questions and provided answers related to topics discussed in the classroom. In particular, we typically selected episodes in the beginning of the class when home readings and assignments were discussed, at the end of the class when academics provided clarifications about the lecture and the assignments, and during the class, each time clarifying questions were raised.

Interviews. We conducted 45 in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the 14 ETIM faculty members and the 31 participants. We interviewed all academics before they started teaching their own module in the program. Interviews with practitioners were conducted from one month before to the first two weeks of the program, according to their availability. We asked both academics and practitioners questions about their background, including whether they had engaged in previous academic-practitioner interactions, their motivations for being part of ETIM, what they expected from the program and from each other, their typical day at work and the people they worked more closely with. We also asked academics to talk about their understanding of and research interests in technological innovation management, and invited practitioners to talk about how they approached and managed technological innovation issues at work. As we conducted participant observations in the classroom, we also conducted 24 unstructured ethnographic interviews with 7 academics and 17 practitioners who had taken part in the classroom interaction episodes which we selected as meaningful (see above). During

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unstructured ethnographical interviews, we asked questions to clarify interaction episodes that we had witnessed in classroom. To give an example, we asked practitioners why they had asked the instructor a given question, what they thought about how the latter replied, whether the conversation was useful, whether he/she had thought about it ever since, and we applied the same procedure to academics. Each unstructured interview ended with questions about academics’ and practitioners’ experience in the program and their opinions and expectations of each other. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

Archival data. In addition, we had full access to the materials and documents produced during the program. These comprised brochures, lecture handouts, PowerPoints, articles, textbooks, projects, written assignments and learning logs provided by a sample of practitioners. We used them every time we wanted to gain a better understanding of classroom interaction episodes. For instance, if we observed a classroom episode in which academics and practitioners actively negotiated the meanings of a home reading or assignment, we would retrieve the parts of the document mentioned in that particular episode and then code them.

Data analysis

To analyze our qualitative data, we followed Strauss and Corbin (1998) guidelines to build a grounded model, and employed an iterative procedure of constant comparison, going back and forth between data collection, coding, and analysis.

Since our main interest was to understand how academics and practitioners exchanged knowledge in context, and which were the main outcomes and challenges of the process, while reading the field notes we identified episodes when informants interacted (i.e., they asked questions and provided answers to others’ questions) in relation to a discussion topic and

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segmented our conversations in interaction episodes. In each interaction episode academics and practitioners dealt with one specific topic such as product complementarity strategy, market segmentation techniques, indirect cost allocation in R&D projects, and steps in developing a minimum viable product, among others. We delimited each interaction episode in relation to a beginning, middle, and ending phase. We coded a beginning phase whenever an academic or a practitioner initiated a discussion topic. To do so, we chose the point where the topic was first brought up in the conversation. The middle phase was coded whenever there were punctual indicators that the topic was carried forward, such as when we identified that academics and practitioners were interacting through questions and answers back and forth. We also counted cases where a topic was temporary interrupted and mentioned again at a later point in time. We identified the ending phase whenever a change of topic occurred, either on academics' or practitioners' initiative. Overall, the total number of complete (beginning-middle-end) episodes amounted to 120. Since our ultimate purpose was to understand *how* academics-practitioners exchanged knowledge during their interaction, after identifying the interaction episodes, we further refined codes to understand whether the episodes entailed consensus or disagreement. With consensus, we coded instances where academics and practitioners agreed to a common viewpoint about a topic and moved to another topic. Conversely, disagreements entailed moments in which either academics or practitioners raised doubts, objections, or asked for clarifications about a given topic. We interpreted consensus as an indicator of the fact that academics and practitioners managed to accept each other's viewpoints and somehow conveyed their knowledge through to the other side. Disagreements offered us information about challenges such as tensions and conflicts that academics and practitioners experienced during

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face-to-face interactions, and indicated that the knowledge they offered was questioned or refused by the other party. Some examples of disagreements are the following: “practitioners lamenting that handouts do not address their questions”, “academics refusing to provide consulting-like solutions”; “academics asking practitioners why they won’t enter in the depth of an argument”, “practitioners lamenting academics underestimate their experience-based knowledge”.

We also distinguished between episodes in which consensus was explicit and episodes in which consensus remained implicit. In the first case, academics asked practitioners whether they agreed with their point of view, or *vice versa*, practitioners asked academics whether they supported their opinion, and the latter voiced a positive answer (e.g., “yes”, “agreed”). In the second case, academics or practitioners replied to a question and, since the other party did not reply back, they changed topic. To avoid the ambiguities of implicit consensus -i.e., cases when implicit consensus might have actually been an implicit disagreement- we decided to check them one by one with our informants. To this purpose, we conducted unstructured interviews in which we asked informants to recall each of the episodes, then relate what they thought of them and whether in the end they agreed or disagreed with their conversation partner.

We followed how each episode moved from disagreement to consensus. This allowed us to understand how academics and practitioners struggled to negotiate their knowledge. In particular, by focusing on transitions from initial and middle phases that were typically characterized by one or more rounds of disagreement to ending phases which were largely characterized by consensus, we identified the strategies that academics and practitioners used to interact. By combining information from interaction episodes with information obtained during unstructured interviews,

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we also tried to understand what type of knowledge exchange was triggered by each interaction strategy. Additionally, the coding of the semi-structured interviews conducted in the beginning of the program indicated the recurrence of a theme we labeled “relational insecurity”, which was often cited by informants to explain why they interacted in a specific way. Figure 1 describes the data analysis process, specifying how we passed from one stage to the next, and what type of data sources were used in each stage. Additionally, the data structure of our grounded model can be found in the appendix.

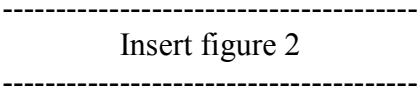
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FINDINGS

We found that from the very beginning of the program interactions between academics and practitioners were pervaded by relational insecurity about how to present themselves to interaction partners and what interaction partners expected from them. To reduce relational insecurity, academics and practitioners grounded their interaction on the interplay between two types of roles: in situ roles -use of positions that academics and practitioners held in the classroom, and ex situ roles -use of positions that academics and practitioners occupied in their communities of reference and that were used to facilitate interaction in the classroom. In particular, we documented a trial and error process by which academics and practitioners employ different strategies that combine in situ and ex situ roles in a unique way. We show that these interactions follow a trial and error process because actors first try to enact the strategies that draw entirely on in situ roles, and if these fail, they move to more sophisticated strategies that draw increasingly on ex situ roles. We also show that each strategy has different consequences

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in terms of actors’ ability to exchange knowledge. To facilitate readers in following our account, we include here Figure 2 that reports the grounded model.



Relational insecurity

The semi-structured interviews that we conducted before and in the very beginning of the program showed that both academics and practitioners manifested relational insecurity: uncertainty about how they should have behaved during the program, what others expected of them and what they themselves expected from the others. In particular, academics and practitioners were required to work together to deliver immediate results in the classroom. However, they did not know each other beforehand, and given the limited time and the institutional constraints of the program, they had limited opportunities to study each other in advance. Although there was a pressing need to take immediate courses of action such as teaching and giving assignments, on the academics’ side, and learning and carrying out assigned tasks, on the practitioners’ side, there were almost no indications about how these courses of action would have been received by the other side. Therefore, both academics and practitioners were confronted by many sources of doubts and uncertainty. We exemplify relational uncertainty through the words of one academic and one practitioner in our sample. From now on, each time we provide excerpts from an interview with an academic we will use the abbreviation “A”, and each time we refer to a practitioner we will use the abbreviation “P”, followed by the progressive number that each informant received in our sample (e.g., 1,2,3). The same applies to excerpts coming from class observations. For

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instance, the following excerpts are taken out of interviews with academic A1 and with practitioner P5:

A1: *"In the beginning, I was quite worried about the fact so many people with different backgrounds had to come together. I did not know what to expect of my colleagues and I did not know what they expected of me. I mean, of course, I had some ideas based on previous experiences but when you do something new it's always a challenge [...] More importantly, I didn't know how students would have perceived the whole thing, whether they would have liked it or not. [...] They come (here) for one year, spend money to learn new things, but what is really new for them? [...] Will they accept new viewpoints and is there anything we can do to make this happen?"*

P5: *"I think we are all excited about this program, first of all because our companies invested in us; at least this is how I see it and the other guys I talked to. Second, we can interact with people that have different work experiences and hopefully learn new things. However, so many things leave me puzzled. For example, the other participants have such a different background: how will they (academics) teach things that are useful to me, to the guys working in (name of automotive multinational), or to the guys in the renewable resources business? I'm afraid they will just say generic things that I won't use at work, and I feel (at work) they're expecting a new, improved version of me [...]"*

As these excerpts suggest, academics and practitioners were uncertain, first, about what the others expected of them and, second, of what they could have offered to live up to their expectations. Unfamiliarity played an important role in feeding relational insecurity, as emphasized by the following interview excerpt with practitioner P26:

P26: *"Once a month you take a fish out of its pond and put it in a tank with other fish that are nothing like the ones he usually swims with (laughing), it feels new, I guess, and strange. Leaves you wondering about what's next in store and how to prepare for it [...]"*

To reduce relational insecurity, academics and practitioners struggled to build a common ground on which classroom interactions could have safely travelled, a sort of common denominator, as some of our informants termed it. This is exemplified by the following excerpt from the semi-structured interview with academic A13:

A13: *"There's just too much going on, too many different interests, our participants have such different profiles every time, you just cannot hope to deal with all that complexity*

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one case at a time, it's too stressful. You need to adopt some strategies that hopefully will go well for most people, possibly for everybody, and for yourself, as well".

Interaction strategies and knowledge-exchange consequences

The need to lower relational insecurity promoted actors' attempts to turn unfamiliar people and events into familiar ones. Statements from interviews and classroom observations revealed that in order to face relational insecurity, academics and practitioners tried to present themselves in ways that were self-favorable and at the same time acceptable to each other. To this purpose, they enacted four strategies which drew differently on the social and professional roles they occupied inside and outside the classroom. The strategies were often initiated by academics, who, as instructors, had to trigger and maintain classroom interaction, and were promptly answered by the practitioners who were called into question. Each strategy had different consequences in terms of actors' ability to exchange knowledge, as follows.

Infrastructuring in situ roles

To reduce relational insecurity, actors first attempted to build infrastructure around the classroom interaction. This implied taking up the teacher-student roles that were typical of the classroom context, and putting brick and mortar around them. We found that academics and practitioners used the business school toolkit to introduce order into each other's expectations. The business school toolkit entailed the dedicated staff, the learning platform and the course materials that the business school made available for executive training.

First, academics appointed business schools staff as tutors for their courses. The latter were required to interact frequently with practitioners about assignments and final projects and, in some cases, to serve as education counselors. Academics also worked with some business

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consultants affiliated with the business school in order to organize seminars that were expected to make the course contents more accessible and appealing to executive students. Additionally, academics used classroom objects such as textbooks, assignments, PowerPoints and blackboard drawings to create structure inside the classroom. In particular, these objects allowed academics and practitioners to discuss a set of predetermined distinctions, to communicate following well-defined schemes and to stick to plans during lectures. As shown in the following excerpts from semi-structured interviews, academics infrastructured in situ roles in a programmed, intended way:

A7: "The materials I use for this course are not new, of course. I have put together some of the lectures in the graduate and undergraduate courses, my book, and some practitioner papers, to name a few. I use it each year, just like all my other colleagues do but with variations, of course. Without a bit of standardization we'd go crazy and our service level would be all over the place".

In the same way, practitioners entered the business school with the expectation that their learning experience would have been guided by competent instructors and professional tutors and supported by adequate and accessible classroom material:

P19: "It's confusing, and challenging, actually. I am here 3 days a month, and the rest of the time in my normal life [...]. When you need to become a student all over again, with assignments, exams and the like, it is important that teachers provide the kind of information needed to perform well in classroom. I can't imagine how it's going to work, probably a bit weird to sit in a school desk all over again [...] I expect a professional service, and guidance for fast and efficient orientation [...]"

An online platform was created to support academic-practitioner communication for the whole duration of the program. It served as a virtual space where to receive program announcements, exchange course resources, and clarify issues with assignments. As our practitioner informants explained, the platform was a way to "bring structure and continuity to what happened in classroom", specifying "what exactly professors expected" and helping

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practitioners to orient “*while away*” (P15, P3 and P19’s words, respectively). The following excerpt from a classroom interaction episode describes how academics and practitioners employed course tutors, the online platform and course materials to consolidate their positions in classroom, and to establish the terms and conditions on which their interaction was expected to unfold. In particular, Academic 4 announces practitioners that the course tutor has posted on the website a business case about decision making in corporate innovation strategy. After distributing the assignment for the next class, she goes quickly through it. Among others, the assignment included questions about how practitioners defined their companies’ choices in terms of disruptive or incremental innovation, how the definitions resonated with the industry in which they operated, and asked them to configure a portfolio of different types of innovation for their companies. In classroom, the conversation about the assignment picked up as follows:

P18: “I am not sure I get where the boundaries are between incremental innovation and disruptive innovation; is it on our side, consumers’ side or customers’ side?”

P2: And can’t one evolve into the other? Doesn’t it usually imply an architectural innovation and some change in the business model too?”

A4: Well, there is not one straightforward answer. You will find more information in the material uploaded on the platform. You can also post something on the forum if you have other doubts and I can upload other research papers that discuss these relations.

P13: But in the business case posted on the platform there are questions about these strategies and I think there would not be univocal answers, you know what I mean?”

A4: Of course I do. (Course tutor name) will be available at all times to answer your questions as you go through the case. Hopefully after doing the readings and talking to her you will understand how to make more aware innovation decisions as far as portfolio assessment, resource allocation and product portfolio management are concerned [...] Is that ok, can we move on?”

P3: Yeah, sure”.

(silence)

As these excerpts suggest, academics held tight to their teacher role by clearly distinguishing their tasks from those of the students, and used classroom infrastructures to establish complementarity between their position and that of practitioners. The latter also

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mentioned their preference for classroom infrastructure because they sought for an environment where requirements would have been clear, concise and easy to perform.

If, on the one hand, infrastructuring teacher-student roles was envisioned as a mean to clarify academics' and practitioners' positions, it also put some distance between them. Specifically, classroom infrastructure strengthened the boundaries between teacher and student roles, putting the first in a position of dominance with respect to the latter. For example, whenever academics found difficulties during classroom interaction with practitioners, such as situations when they received questions they were not sure how to answer, they made reference to textbooks and articles, and indicated the business consultants or the course tutors they worked with as referents for further clarifications. As a consequence, practitioners frequently turned to course tutors and program coordinators in search of counseling and advice on what to expect from the program in general and from academics in particular.

Consequences of infrastructuring in situ roles: Transferring circumscribed (in situ) knowledge

As suggested above, the strategy of infrastructuring in situ roles was used by academics and practitioners to reduce the initial relational insecurity. However, this strategy led to consensus only in 20% of the interaction episodes where it was used. Its main consequence in terms of knowledge exchange was the transfer of circumscribed knowledge for solving in situ problems. By using consultants and tutors affiliated with the business school, course materials and program platforms, actors provided structure to the life in classroom: they clarified task requirements, synchronized classroom interventions and overcame operative misunderstandings. However, our data show that although the strategy facilitated classroom functioning, it played

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only a modest role in rendering knowledge exchanges satisfying for both academics and practitioners. We found that in 80% of the interaction episodes in which academics and practitioners used this strategy, they ended up in disagreement and had to turn to more resourceful strategies to achieve consensus.

For instance, when we interviewed P2 and P9 who were involved in the interaction episode described above, they brought up the course material indicated by Academic 4 that reads as follows:

“Analysis of innovation investments and returns reveals two striking findings. Firms that outperform their peers tend to allocate their investments in a certain ratio: 70% to safe bets in the core, 20% to less sure things in adjacent spaces, and 10% to high-risk transformational initiatives. As it happens, an inverse ratio applies to returns on innovation [...] Targeting a healthy balance of core, adjacent, and transformational innovation is a vital step toward managing a total innovation portfolio, but it immediately raises an issue: To realize the promise of that balance, a company must be able to execute at all three levels of ambition. Unfortunately, the managerial toolbox required to keep innovation on track varies greatly according to the type of innovation in question. Few companies are good at all three”

However, business school tools and staff rarely provided academics and practitioners the kind of information that they sought. The comments of P2 about the course material above exemplifies this situation:

P2: “In classroom professors tell us we must open our eyes and see things from a different point of view, but then they send us to the materials on the platform which are full of distinctions and I don’t know what to do with them exactly. The incremental and the radical, the price and differentiation strategies, the market or non-market driven; I just think they are over simplistic (...) I have in my mind endless situations in which the two are not separable at all, I wish in classroom we sat down and talked about these cases”.

In the same way, although course materials and the use of tutors and learning platforms were useful to academics because they facilitated their roles as instructors, they gave them limited information about practitioners’ goals, their viewpoints on classroom experience and

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their professional activities outside the classroom. This is well exemplified by Academic 8 in the following excerpt that we have drawn from unstructured interviews:

A8: *“The school’s staff and (course tutor names) play a very important role. I know students will have doubts, raise concerns, ask for support, it happens all the time. So we tried to invest in tools that can facilitate this process. However, unfortunately or fortunately for what matters, in classroom things rarely go as planned”.*

As practitioners struggled to understand how to apply classroom knowledge outside, they invited academics to engage in more personalized interactions that would have contributed to this end, and the same happened with academics who invited practitioners to talk more about themselves rather than just asking for classroom tools:

P10: *“However, the big picture, sometimes is not there. What would happen if I really tried to apply what is written in the handouts? Is it applicable at all? [...] I would like to know more about how professors see it, but out of the classroom I feel the connection is gone. (Business consultants’ names) seminars are always helpful but I already know how they think, I’ve been working with consultants for years [...]”*

A5: *“The business school offers great tools, and the staff is so supportive, I could not live without them, but none of that helps me understand who’s standing in front of me in classroom, and what knowledge one needs, this is something I always have to find out for myself”.*

In sum, in situ role infrastructuring triggered consensus in 20% of the episodes. The main knowledge consequence was allowing academics and practitioners to transfer very circumscribed knowledge which was instrumental for classroom problem solving such as doing assignments, solving exercises or preparing for exams. When academics and practitioners manifested dissatisfaction with this strategy, they moved to more sophisticated strategies which were fueled by ex situ roles.

Imposing familiar role dyads

When in situ role infrastructuring generated disagreements, actors passed to a strategy we

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labeled as “imposing familiar role dyads”. This strategy implied using both in situ student-teacher role dyads and other role dyads that academics and practitioners held ex situ, such as researcher-informant and client-consultant roles, which belonged to other familiar contexts such as research departments and classroom, in academics’ case, and company sites and R&D labs, in practitioners’ case. Accordingly, academics and practitioners rendered unfamiliar interaction partners familiar by constraining them inside roles that they had already experienced. For instance, academics treated practitioners as if they were undergraduate students or research subjects. This allowed them to evoke well-known situations such as the peer review process, research sites or scholarly journals and to feel more at ease during classroom interaction. Just like in situ role infrastructuring, imposing familiar role dyads was used by academics as an intended, programmatic strategy. This means that when we asked academics how they intended to interact during the program, they explicitly mentioned the strategy in their own words. The words of Academic 5 in the following excerpt from a semi-structured interview further exemplify this strategy:

A5: “I am quite confident about teaching executives because I have done it before but every time it’s hard, and the hardest part is the beginning. First, you know almost nothing about these people. You don’t know what they know and what they do not know. Moreover, you don’t know what they would like to know. Can I be honest? My biggest fear is that at the end of a class someone will look at me and say: S-o-w-h-a-t? Do you think you are telling me something new? (laughing) And sometimes it happens. Then I try to draw not just on what I have in classroom but also on the papers I read and the ones I write (...) on everything I normally do in my life. I always try to do a mix but I never know how much it will be appreciated”.

In the same way, as practitioners asked questions to academics, they brought in their own work practices and situations. For instance, practitioners often evoked the client-consultant role dyad. In particular, they described R&D lab work or explained how they usually managed

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innovation projects and assigned tasks in their work groups. Additionally, they explained what their organizations commonly expect from outsiders such as business consultants that are hired to help them deal with specific organizational challenges. As practitioners put themselves in the role of clients, they pushed academics in the role of consultants and invited them to virtually enter their offices and laboratories, and provide customized solutions to their day-to-day problems. As shown in the following excerpt from a semi-structured interview with P24, practitioners planned for this strategy upfront, and used it intentionally:

P24: "My goal is to turn this into something as useful as possible. For work, I mean. Lately we've been thinking [whether to] invest in this new technology called RVM [but] what does it mean? How much can you invest? How risky is the investment? When do you have to stop risking? When is it that you must insist? And which are the market signs telling you're going in the right direction? As R&D manager, I'm used to reading market signs, but I don't have answers to all these questions [...] About one year ago we used a group of consultants from [name of strategy consulting firm] that analyzed the market and provided a report with suggestions. Then we didn't actually implement them yet, for many reasons. But this is what I expect from academics during this year, pretty much to give me the answers I need to deal with the problems that concern us".

The following dialogue extracted from a classroom interaction episode illustrates the dynamics of this interaction strategy. Academics try to assign practitioners the roles of undergraduate students or research informants, and, *vice versa*, practitioners try to push academics in the role of business consultants. In other words, both academics and practitioners try to consolidate their preferred positions and push interaction partners in complementary positions. It is interesting to notice that each actor frames one's position as dominant, and that of interaction partners as subordinate. Situations that were once part of undergraduate classrooms or research studies, work offices and R&D labs, were evoked in the classroom to persuade interaction partners to acknowledge their dominant position and accept their complimentary, subordinate role:

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P27: “We have this project called (name of project). We are trying to understand how much to invest right away, also based on how much (name of competitors) are trying to invest. If you were to give us a consulting opinion, what would that be?

A2: I know you want solutions, who doesn’t? My students want to know exactly the essence of each lesson; when I conduct a research project, people expect me to tell them what is wrong in their company and how to fix it, and that is nothing compared to the solutions my wife expects from me (laughing).

P11: It is not about asking for solutions, it is about trying to incorporate viewpoints of third parties. I think about our relations with consultants. You probably consult sometimes yourself, right?

A2: Yes, I sometimes do. So I learned that managers are happier to receive clear cut directions from consultants about what to do next rather than what I normally offer, that is, invite people to read new things, talk to new people and reflect (...) not on how to change from today to tomorrow but on how to improve, and find alternative ways to do things, too.

P11: But it is not true that we expect consultants to solve our problems. Nevertheless, to understand what is wrong with us, you should do a thorough diagnosis and let us have it, right?”

Consequences of imposing familiar role dyads: façade knowledge transfer

The fact that academics and practitioners drew on familiar role dyads to support classroom interaction animated their relationship and kept different bits and pieces of information from falling apart. Yet, this process was neither linear nor straightforward because it triggered multiple disagreements. We found that only in 35% of the observed interaction episodes, actors accepted the familiar role dyads that their interaction partners imposed on them.

In terms of knowledge exchange consequences, we identified façade knowledge transfers in which one party pushed some familiar knowledge towards the counterparty who accepted and enacted it passively, without further development, and moved away from the request immediately after having complied with it. For instance, academics imposed knowledge frames that were uncritically accepted by practitioners out of courtesy, or the other way around. From such standpoint, the façade transfer resembled a role play in which consequences ended as soon as the scene was over and actors moved to another scene. The following excerpt from an

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interview with A11 explains how transferring façade knowledge occurred:

A12: “When they [practitioners] do the ‘I want you to play the consultant, oh wait, and the guru, and the fortuneteller for me’, I always try to show them why this is not what they need. Nobody knows their work situations better than they do. They must be the ones who apply this knowledge. But compromises must be made, they are used to different kind of situations, like the consulting relationship. So I must give them some consulting knowledge, even if I know it’s useless. If they want it, who am I to say no? [...] I just wrap up and pass over the kind of knowledge they ask for”.

Since consensus often implied a proactive behavior by the proposing party and a passive acceptance by the other side, no efforts were made to negotiate knowledge, which was just transferred in the form required by the other side. This meant that whenever academics asked practitioners for theoretical definitions in class, the latter would answer using concepts from slides and teaching notes. *Vice versa*, whenever practitioners asked academics for a more consultancy-like communication, they were offered TED videos and synthetic consulting reports, instead of textbook and article readings. However, once the specific request from one party ceased, so did the compliant response of the other party. Thus, since this strategy implied transferring knowledge at a superficial level, we labelled it as transferring façade knowledge.

We found that in 65% of the cases in which it was used, this strategy created disagreements that pushed academics and practitioners to draw on new interaction strategies. When disagreements manifested, we tried to discuss them with our informants during subsequent unstructured interviews. These served to reconstruct the reactions that academics and practitioners had every time their interaction partners assigned them a predefined role. We found out, for instance, that practitioners refused to take up passively the roles of student or research informant because they considered these roles reductive, or even offensive, in comparison to roles they actually performed in day-to-day situations. Similarly, academics

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refused the consultant-client dyad that practitioners felt more comfortable with, for two reasons: first, because it placed them in a dependent position with respect to practitioners and, second, because the role of consultant contrasted with their academic identity. A meaningful classroom example is provided in the interaction episode excerpt above in which Academic 2 refuses to enact the consultant role that students had assigned him on spot. During a subsequent unstructured interview when we asked about this episode, Academic 2 further explained this reaction as follows:

A2: "I know they want tools, just like the ones consultants give them, so sometimes I try to give them what they want. And I would do it more often, if I didn't know that once they get back to work they will not know what to do with my recipes".

Similarly, the following excerpt shows how Practitioner 12 greets with skepticism Academic 9's initiative to conduct simulations of research experiments in the classroom, because it implies taking up the role of research subject that she is not fully comfortable with:

P12: "I like the questionnaire (A9's name) had us take the other day. He wanted to show us a new way of approaching it. But what use does it have? Are we part of a secret research experiment by chance? I surely know professors like to play the scientist-mouse lab game, they think about Ivory Tower research more than anything else. I can do that sometimes, it's fun [...] but right now I expect something more than playing lab games, I want to see facts [...] that put me in the condition to learn new things".

As these excerpts suggest, when disagreement occurred, academics and practitioners signaled the need for more authentic knowledge exchanges, based on more equal role distributions and more personalized interaction schemes.

Quasi role switching

Our evidence suggests that when academics and practitioners met resistances and tensions such as those described so far, they avoided relational breakdowns by constantly injecting new ex-situ roles in support of classroom interaction and temporarily extending

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their knowledge and practices into each other's worlds, pretending to see the world through each other's eyes. We called this strategy quasi role switching.

Quasi role switching consisted of academics and practitioners temporarily taking up each other's roles. For instance, as shown in the following classroom interaction excerpt, academics temporarily performed the roles of business managers to get closer to practitioners and make them feel understood. In a similar way, practitioners put themselves in the shoes of academics, suggesting they understood the complexities involved by the roles of educator or researcher. In doing so, academics and practitioners drew on what they knew or imagined about each other's roles, in the attempt to win each other's trust. These processes required empathy -putting oneself in others' shoes- and perspective taking -trying to see life as they thought the others saw it. The following excerpt coming from a class observation shows Academic 6 taking distance from his community of reference (academic operations researchers) and adopting a managerial perspective:

All: "Many of my colleagues doing research on operations spent their lives studying the alternative ways in which production people can save 10% of a second to render the production more efficient, I mean, sometimes I feel like telling them, come on! You analyze egg yolks all day but cannot tell the difference between an ostrich and a chicken egg? What I'm saying is that academics often go chasing for details and forget what the real world is all about, they should take more example from you guys because, yes, operations is about pulling up sleeves, getting dirty, fixing problem and sweating hard in the process. And I know that too".

After putting themselves in the shoes of practitioners, academics struggled to instill in practitioners their world vision by presenting it as if they were practitioners themselves. In order to do so, they framed their knowledge in ways they thought practitioners would appreciate, by contextualizing it and by adding a performative dimension to it. Practitioners also tried to put themselves in the shoes of academics, tried to make sense of their abstract

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worlds and to bring them closer to their managerial concerns. The excerpt from the following classroom dialogue testifies to these efforts on both sides:

P1: Ok, but for you it's simple to talk about decision making buffers and biases because you read books and get the whole picture, right?

A7: Yes, but the whole picture is not so easy to grasp neither for us.

P5: Yes, but I am an academic, when I contact companies to do research I get to talk to all the people I need and gain access to all the information I want, don't I?

A7: Not always, you can have good access, but if you do not know the environment, it is hard to see what is wrong, it is the same thing with business consultants, right?

P5: True but like you said, at least you don't live in a bubble, you have a fresh eye that you lend to insiders when they need it, right? What I want to say is that things are not as black and white as you suggest. I too know our decisions are not perfect and we too try (to) remediate the best we can, by being self-reflexive, by hiring consultants, by coming here".

Throughout, exchanges appeared as a subtle yet constant oscillation between working to understand the other and working to make oneself understood. Academics and practitioners travelled between multiple in situ and ex-situ role positions and malleably shifted between being educators and students, searchers for meaning and solution providers.

It is interesting to notice that unlike the previous strategies, the quasi role switch was not an intended strategy. For instance, although informants were aware that once interaction partners refused to take up pre-existing roles, they had to 'adjust' and come up with 'more adequate interaction strategies'; they were not able to go beyond what we had witnessed in classroom and did not describe the strategies in their own words:

A7: "Do I treat practitioners as students? Probably the answer is yes; I am here to teach and they are here to learn but I try to pay attention to their needs as much as I can. The way they react in classroom tells me a lot about the impact of my teaching, if they feel offended when treated as students or research subjects, then I try not to, you can't act as a mystic sage when what they want is a cowboy, we must speak the same language. I don't know, I guess I try to adjust, you know what I mean? Probably with time you learn that also [...]"

P10: "I am aware academics are not consultants. Actually, I'm glad they aren't. In classroom, we're often told we must open our eyes and see things from a different point of

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view, reflect, think about causes, consequences, all that stuff. So I guess the more this (program) goes on, the more I fall into it, or at least I get used to these other languages [...] I don't know how to explain this, it's pure empiricism, actually".

Consequently, we deduced that the ability to rapidly adjust to the needs of interaction partners was largely unintentional (i.e., reactive).

Consequences of quasi role switching: co-developing bridges of understanding

We found that quasi role switching led to consensus in 78% of the cases in which infrastructuring in situ roles and imposing familiar role dyads had caused disagreements. In terms of knowledge exchange consequences, the strategy led actors to co-develop bridges of understanding. In particular, the more actors struggled to understand each other, and thus tried to step into each other's roles, the more they began also using each other's knowledge and terminology.

For instance, while academics became more and more involved in episodes of interaction with practitioners, their theorizing acquired a performative dimension: it became almost tangible, like a practice in its own right. In order to get through to practitioners, academics embellished theoretical concepts with improvised experiments and managerial anecdotes that allowed them to connect to practitioners' knowledge:

A7: "You know what I'm saying, every day I try to see where my main competitor is. Did he sell less this month? In this case, I can chill. Did he sell more? Does he have a new product out? In this case, I can worry. Our market share goes down by 2% and we worry. Then we invest money. In R&D. Or in marketing, perhaps. But do I actually know why I am investing the way I am? Do the marketing guys know? Does at least the CEO know? (laughs and students laugh as well) Do you know what I am saying? Yes? (no answer) One thing you must realize is that companies are like frogs. Only the paranoids survive. (...) Closed in my little academia bubble I often don't think about less tangible threats either but I can use analytics, I can borrow an outsiders' perspective like you do now with me. If I read a new research, I enlarge my horizons. You can do the exact same thing (...) I'm trying to show you that yours is just one way, and that now we must find a new way, let's call it our way, if you like.

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P1: So what you are saying is that we should use a sophisticated version of SWOTs to think about external market position but also about internal organizational structure, right?

A7: Sort of, yes. I mean you must take into consideration many variables.

P10: And at the same time try and understand how each of these variables impacts on the organizational structure and the decision process.

A7: Exactly.

(...)

Similarly, in order to get through to academics, practitioners often passed from an operative mode of knowing to a reflexive, almost theoretical mode that resembled to a great extent that used by academics. The ‘academese’ definition of innovation management that P14 uses to communicate with the instructor and the other students in the following excerpt from a classroom interaction episode exemplifies the dynamics of co-developing bridges of understanding:

P14: “Let’s say we are not always able to do what we want to do. I don’t know how to explain this to an outsider and I don’t want to get into the mess our company is dealing with right now (...) I’d rather define technological innovation in ways that can be intelligible for everybody. To me innovation is partly a function of operators’ freedom to act -by operators I mean technology specialists that prevalently deal with R&D- and partly a function of the rules, norms and constraints of each organization. So, if we imagine a two-coordinate graphic, uhm, innovation would lie in between the x coordinate, on which we have innovators, defined as those who would like to use skills and initiative to move freely in order to innovate, and the y coordinate where we would have the structural and contractual constraints of the organizations in which they operate”.

However, in 22% of the cases where it was employed, the strategy led to disagreements. These disagreements occurred each time academics misrecognized practitioners’ attempts to put themselves into their shoes, and *vice versa* for practitioners. As shown in the interaction episode between A7, P1 and P5 presented above, quasi role switching was based on approximations and as such, it sometimes generated conflicts. When this was the case, actors employed an alternative strategy that, just like quasi role switch, followed an unintentional pattern.

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Universal role evoking

In those interaction episodes in which previous strategies had failed, academics and practitioners evoked universal roles. These were roles of a broader kind that academics and practitioners used in their day-to-day lives such as knowers, doers, parents, colleagues, friends and citizens. Because of their universality, such roles served as consensus tools, helping them identify what they had in common. Since academics and practitioners temporarily renounced all their previously employed professional roles, they were able to overcome differences that derived from therein. Additionally, evoking universal roles brought along universal principles such as, for instance, the benefits of diversity, the concurrence of viewpoints for the sake of the common good, the blurriness between right and wrong, or the lack of one best way.

The following chain of agreements and disagreements inside a classroom interaction episode exemplifies how, after the other strategies were contested, academics and practitioners call upon universal roles to reconcile inter-occupational differences:

A6: "Let's take either case, of homogeneous or heterogeneous markets. As much as I tried to cut out triangles, sometimes the reality does not let me do it (She draws equally distributed asterisks in the graph). However, fortunately not all of us search for the same thing. Let's pretend this here is John and this other is Jack, they're both going to the supermarket to buy salad. John is looking for a cheap salad and John for a high quality one. [She draws inside the graph two clusters she names "A" and "B" that she closes inside triangles]

P19: But must I always have this polarization? Why can I not position in the middle, for instance?

[She goes to the graphic and draws a new asterisk in the middle of the graph, at equal distance from the two clusters. Then she starts drawing arrows to indicate movement of A and B and changes the position of the triangles]

A6: If I do that, when B arrives I lose market share, like this, you see? When C arrives, I lose market share again, this time like this, right? Remember last time I was making the sugar example? You had something related to that also in the business case and [tutor name] probably helped you with that. Remember we saw how undifferentiated the sugar market was? And what have [company name] done out of this market?

P9: They placed their products there, right in the middle, but in a different way... "

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This excerpt shows that after practitioners asked the first questions, Academic 6 referred first to in situ roles, then to role dyads related to past classroom experience. However, since consensus is not reached and questions continue being asked, the interaction episode continues:

P9: Different because they created a new necessity? Of course, that is the ideal case, I mean, who doesn't want to create a new need? [starts laughing and the academic and the other students start laughing as well], but when that is not possible? I mean, the sugar example is a very good one, but sugar is still sugar.

P16: Still, I don't understand why we must make this distinction, what good it does. I mean, we also use plethora of criteria to segment the market but why must I build a matrix like that one? [points to the blackboard]. Price, application, product class, competitors, product trajectories, cultural symbols and meanings, apart from the last two, we also use these when we launch a new product, we use them all to analyze the situation. I just want to understand the added value (...).

Practitioners 9 and 16 try the quasi-role switching strategy. They take up the point of view of Academic 6 and use the knowledge she had just taught in classroom to talk about their own work experiences. As a consequence, Academic 6 finally evokes universal principles that invite practitioners to set aside role distinctions and search for consensus in role equality. Following this invitation, Practitioner 16 voices his consensus and adheres to the strategy proposed by Academic 6:

A6: The difference is not in the number of strategies we employ but in the way we manage to understand them as a whole and use them synergistically. Let me put it this way so that you can see we are actually talking about the same thing because we agree more than you probably think. In this course I talked a lot about product positioning and brand positioning and about the relation with segmentation, but I guess we all know what positioning is, right? And not only because we read textbooks or do research about it; what we do in our professional lives, and even in our personal lives, is still a kind of positioning, don't you think so? We write research hoping to be acknowledged by certain people, hoping other scholars will tell us, hey, you're the guy who did that piece on disruptive innovation, aren't you? And you too, you're not just positioning products, you're positioning yourselves in your companies, you too want to be the guys who did a piece of disruptive innovation, right? We even do positioning in the society, when we are with family and friends: we must face competition and re-position time after time, according to needs (laughing and the others laugh along). It is funny, but from this perspective all we ever do is positioning! And

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yet, each of these situations gives you a different feeling, teaches you something you didn't know, doesn't it?

P16: Of course, there is no right and wrong, and no one best way, not at home, not with friends, not to mention when you do research or when we launch new products. Keeping an open mind is essential, perhaps the most essential, so to say (...) I know there are no recipes, I just hope I'll know how to make a good mix when the right moment comes”.

Consequences of universal role evoking: Discovering new dimensions of understanding

Universal role evoking was successful in 82% of the cases where it was applied. The strategy had several implications. First, it invoked the equality of interaction partners and thus reconciled inter-occupational differences, prevented reactions to disagreement and expedited conflicts. Second, it catalyzed actors' attention towards a common goal.

As far as knowledge exchanges are concerned, as actors invoked universal principles, they frequently referred to developing new ways of seeing things, and used the term 'the third dimension'. This implied renouncing jargon, specialized terms and specific labels and instead looking for knowledge that was in line with the universal principles they invoked. Accordingly, actors acknowledged that the time spent negotiating some topics in the classroom allowed them to gradually learn from each other's viewpoints and to discover a new dimension of understanding that did not belong either to academic or to managerial expertise, but was rather a hybrid understanding of day-to-day life. For instance, during the unstructured interviews, practitioners narrated cases in which, while going through reports or participating in meetings with other colleagues, they would notice new things such as budget indicators or consumer reports, and would engage in Q&As similar to the ones in a classroom. They also argued that whenever universal roles were evoked in the classroom, they identified new ways to think about a topic that differed both from what they already

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knew and from what the academics wanted to teach them. Similarly, when they evoked universal principles to debate a topic with practitioners, academics reported discovering new concepts in the papers they read or in the slides that supported their lecture. Informants referred to discovering new dimensions of understanding as an ability to perceive new shades of grey or to see the world in three, rather than in two dimensions. The words of P6 exemplify how the “third dimension” metaphor was used to indicate the discovery of new understandings that overcame professional jurisdictions:

P6: “This was a journey of discovery. There was a philosopher, right now I don’t remember exactly who, Kant perhaps, who spoke in one of his writings of an ant that saw the world in two dimensions: the ant would continuously walk on a plain surface and as soon as it got close to the edge it would turn around and go back. The philosopher was saying that if only the ant could have turned its head up, it would have gone beyond the edge, climbed the wall and discovered a third dimension. I think this is what education is all about. We might fool ourselves that we have all the knowledge we need, trapped in the walls that separate our offices from the world outside. But it’s false [...] I remember in my first day at work our unit director called me in and asked: You are new around here, tell me what you think is wrong with this company. I guess the same goes with academics. No matter how distant their eye is, it’s still more sensitive than ours, so it can project us in a third dimension”.

Interestingly, while actors often admitted that their understandings had undergone transformations, they left to future situations the enactment of these transformations, as exemplified by informants P23 and A1 during unstructured interviews:

P19: “If you think about life situations in general, you realize it’s ok you don’t know the trajectory of a new product or what to do in what she (A1) called today the 3 critical stages. Otherwise they wouldn’t be critical, right? (laughing). I’ve always looked for answers before and after the launch of a new product, and that’s normal. But she (A1) is right you need to ask yourself the right questions, and not just look for answers, I don’t know why I didn’t see this before [...] Like in real life, like, can you know beforehand if your baby will do good in school? [laughing] What I think I learned from these discussions back and forth is you need to do your best, staying active and reactive. But you also need to accept uncertainty [...] I don’t know if this is something new I can bring back to my team [...] but I want to explore a more step-by-step perspective in our next project [...]”

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A1: "This experience has helped me a lot. I have talked to managers, asked for their feedback, helped them solve problems and got to understand them better. Besides, I have been on so many company visits that I have actually seen some of these people at work (...) I guess something changed. Now I teach the same things as before but I talk differently to students, and even to clients and people I do research with, in a more convinced way, as if I were in a new dimension. But you need to take some risks, get out of your comfort zone and create new knowledge that is acceptable for you and for them also. It is like a mirror reflection game. Then we go our separate ways feeling we know more than before and, who knows? Maybe we actually do (laughing)".

In the few episodes where universal role evoking did not cause consensus, actors did not enact further strategies. They simply ended the episode in disagreement and the class moved on. When we asked informants about the knowledge consequences of the episodes ending in disagreement, they explained that no significant knowledge exchange had occurred. For instance, they lamented they did not understand the point the other tried to convey, or that they found it redundant, and did not intend to come back to it. The following excerpt from an unstructured interview with Practitioner 4 emphasizes this aspect:

P4: "I just think that he (A13) used this frame because he likes it but I don't see the usefulness in it, just don't know what is the added value, come to think of it, it was confusing, actually, but it can happen, I mean [...] not everything can make sense to everybody all the time"

DISCUSSION

From boundary building to boundary breaching, via occupational insecurity

The study contributes to theory in multiple ways. First, by looking at the micro dynamics through which academics and practitioners perform boundary work, the study brings a renewed perspective on the theory-practice debate in management. Specifically, adopting a boundary work perspective allowed us to understand how direct interactions shape the knowledge exchanges that academics and practitioners are able to perform. Our grounded model integrates

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contributions about the existence of a theory-practice gap at the boundaries of management academia and managerial practice (Beyer & Trice, 1982; Ghosal, 2005; Hambrick, 1994; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Starkey & Madan, 2001), with contributions suggesting that the two communities not only have the potential, but often also succeed in crossing these boundaries to engage in mutually fruitful communication (Aram & Salipante, 2003; Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Cannella & Paetzold, 1994; Weick, 2001). We suggest that when academics and practitioners interact, they may be driven to simultaneously build and breach inter-occupational boundaries. We also propose that relational insecurity plays a pivotal role in explaining oscillations between boundary building and boundary breaching. Relational insecurity manifests as uncertainty about whether one's occupational knowledge and skills will rise to the expectations of members of other occupational communities. We observed four strategies that relied on different types of boundary work. The first two strategies that we called infrastructuring in situ roles and imposing familiar role dyads relied heavily on boundary building: Academics and practitioners tried to exchange knowledge in programmed ways, such that they maintained control and occupied a dominant position with respect to their interaction partners. In contrast, the last two strategies that we called quasi role switching and universal role evoking implied giving up some control over occupational jurisdictions and coming to terms with interaction partners. It is interesting to notice that academics and practitioners manifested a preference towards boundary building strategies, and only when these were not accepted by interaction partners did they enact boundary breaching strategies. To reconcile the gap perspective and the relational perspective, we thus theorize that relational insecurity motivates academics and practitioners to search for creative communication solutions.

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It is also important to notice that while boundary building strategies were programmed a priori to defend occupational jurisdictions, boundary breaching behaviors occurred spontaneously as academics and practitioners were constrained into mutual adjustments to keep the collaboration going. We have shown that academics and practitioners often felt oppressed by boundary building strategies and expressed the need for more personalized and equal interactions. A study of Beech and colleagues (2010) emphasized that egalitarian aspirations have an important role in shaping academic-practitioner interaction. Strategies such as quasi role switching and universal role evoking can help overcome professional narcissism and trigger critical self-reflection in both academics and practitioners (see also Tomkins & Ulus, 2015). A first possible explanation is that the more interaction strategies grow distant from the interests of the single parties, the more boundary breaching becomes possible. As academics and practitioners initially doubted each other, they sought refuge first in classroom roles, and then in those role dyads they were most comfortable with. As classroom instructors, academics were more active than practitioners in triggering roles and, as a consequence, they were often the ones to initiate boundary building, for instance by treating practitioners as students or research subjects or pressuring them with requirements for classroom performance. However, we have shown that practitioners also tried to dominate interaction episodes with academics, pushing them to behave according to expectations. Only when academics and practitioners refused established role structures and went out of their comfort zones did their strategies become more spontaneous, creative, and at the same time, less self-centered.

As a contribution to the boundary work literature, we thus show that drawing on pre-determined roles creates (infra)structure for knowledge exchanges, on the one hand, but may

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also negatively impact boundary work because it feeds boundary building strategies, on the other. Conversely, the ability to play creatively with in situ and ex situ roles can facilitate the gradual transition from planned dominance to emergent egalitarianism. From such a standpoint, intricate role interdependencies allow individuals to go beyond community-specific expertise, and step, at least temporarily, into each other's worlds (see also Ashforth et al., 2000; Bruns, 2013).

Transferring knowledge or building understanding? A reflection on the potential of academic-practitioner direct knowledge exchanges

Our grounded model shows that programmed strategies are less catalytic in terms of knowledge exchange ability than emergent strategies. When academics and practitioners tried to build boundaries, interactions ended more often in disagreement. Even when consensus was reached, it merely implied a limited transfer of knowledge from one side to the other, such as knowledge circumscribed to classroom purposes (e.g., prepare assignments, hold exams, give lectures), or façade knowledge (e.g., exchange jargons and labels out of complacency). By contrast, knowledge exchanges that emerged as a consequence of boundary breaching strategies were much broader and pervasive because they implied developing bridges between and towards new understandings. Our findings are coherent with those contributions to the theory-practice debate that suggest a gap between research and practice should exist and is desirable because it allows for knowledge to transform, and give space to new understanding (Cannella & Paetzold, 1994; Ireland, 2012). From such a standpoint, our approach calls for a more pluralist conceptualization in which actionable knowledge is any kind of knowledge, be it abstract, applied, scholarly, or

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managerial, provided that it has been negotiated and transformed to suit academics' and practitioners' purposes at hand (see also Aguinis et al., 2014; Aldag, 2012; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Ireland, 2012; Jarratt & Stiles, 2010; Pettigrew, 2011; Rasche & Behnam, 2009). In boundary work studies, scholars have discussed cases in which knowledge is either transferred, translated or transformed at boundaries. When common jargon is used, members of two occupational communities are able to access and read each other's knowledge (transfer); when bridges of meaning are developed, knowledge from another occupational community can be appropriated internally, reinterpreted and partially revised (translation); when interests within a network of occupations are aligned, knowledge can flow between communities and take multiple forms (transformation) (Bechky 2003b; Carlile 2004; Hayes & Walsham, 2001). Our study contributes to this debate, as well as to the theory-practice debate (see also Carton & Ungureanu, 2017), by showing that interaction strategies that are programmed beforehand and grounded in preferred roles lead to circumscribed or superficial knowledge transfer. Conversely, strategies that emerge spontaneously and imply boundary breaching are more likely to lead to translation or to transformation. Future studies might investigate the extent to which different settings of interaction such as executive training, consulting projects or joint communication platforms favor or constrain academics and practitioners' transitions between knowledge transfer, translation and transformation, depending on whether interactions are planned or emergent.

Business schools as boundary work settings.

Our findings also enhance understanding of business schools as contexts of academic-practitioner boundary work (Burke & Rao, 2010; Tushman et al., 2007). Studies on boundary

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work suggest that the more knowledge exchanges are situated in the home base of an occupation such as companies, for practitioners, and research departments, for academics, the higher the risk of conflict and thus the costs of the exchange with those in other occupations (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Carlile, 2002). More successful knowledge exchanges are thus likely to occur in boundary conditions (Carlile, 2002; Bechky, 2003a; Yanow, 2004) or trading zones (Kellogg et al., 2006) where individuals can partially free themselves from the roles, norms and constraints of their occupations and build bridges toward other occupations.

Our study shows that business schools can serve as trading zones for academic and managerial knowledge. As previously outlined, executive education has been often criticized for being situated in between research, instruction and managerial relevance, without satisfying the logics of either party (see Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Additionally, academics in business schools have been criticized for oscillating between professionalization which they secure through rigorous knowledge, and corporatization which they achieve thanks to an increasing focus on managerial relevance. Such oscillation has been associated with the predominance of short-term objectives, and the lack of a clear and stable long-term vision (see Alajoutsijarvi et al., 2015). However, we suggest it may be precisely the ‘in-betweenness’ of executive programs that allows academics and practitioners to renounce their pre-existing comfort zones for the sake of cross-fertilization. Interestingly, our findings go against common understandings of business schools as infrastructures of people and resources that must cultivate intermediate knowledge exchanges. To give an example, Burke and Rau (2010) and Hughes and colleagues (2011) have emphasized the importance of finding the right people and tools to mediate theory-practice exchanges in business schools, and of motivating academics to transfer

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knowledge from theory to practice and back. We have shown that the first thing academics and practitioners do when called to interact is to rely on the in-situ infrastructure provided by the business school, such as course materials, tutors or learning platforms, but this was also the less successful strategy. While the availability of specific programs, curricula and teaching/learning tools undoubtedly plays an important role in structuring academic-practitioner exchanges, and thus in lowering relational insecurity in the beginning of a program, the main advantage of classroom settings may actually come from the ability to offer an open and egalitarian space where academics and practitioners feel free to exit their comfort zones (Berkovich, 2014).

In terms of practical implications, two aspects are worth discussing. First, our study shows that the most successful strategies are the ones that develop spontaneously, as academics and practitioners work together around a common topic of interest. This way, it points towards the need to de-infrastructure business schools as to give more space to spontaneous interaction. To this regard, equipping academics with skills and techniques for critical classroom conversations not only can lead to more effective classroom exchanges but also create more opportunities for boundary spanning outside the classroom context, such as consulting or joint research projects (Carton & Ungureanu, 2017).

Second, given the importance of boundary breaching processes in classroom, it is important to reflect if some specific conditions could enable them. We argue that there are many ways to stimulate quasi-role switching and/or universal role evoking. One straightforward method is the use of critical texts. Including in the course syllabi articles about the theory-practice debate such as, for instance, the provoking work of Baldrige and colleagues' (2004) "Are Managers from Mars and academicians from Venus?", can stimulate dialectic reflection on inter-professional

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differences. Similarly, debates about beliefs, perspectives, and worldviews across the two communities can be stimulated by asking academics and practitioners to read side-by-side texts written by academics and by practitioners and to comment on them in the classroom.

Evidence suggests that role playing techniques can be useful to encourage quasi role switches. To give an example, "A look through different lenses" (Moore et al., 2005) is a role play exercise commonly used to mitigate interracial prejudices by inducing in participants strong opinions and emotions regarding controversial or publicized events about their own groups, which they are asked to debate with members of other groups. The educator or a classroom mediator chooses a 'hot topic' such as the statement that academics live in "Ivory towers" and practitioners just want to "get things done" and then each party must produce as many supporting and critical arguments as possible, using both their group's standpoint and the standpoint of the other group.

Other strategies that relate to the concept of role play are based on dramatic and performative activities. As we have shown in this study, the classroom can easily become the stage for performances if academics and practitioners are open and flexible enough to improvise together, negotiate and solve emerging conflicts. Academics and practitioners may be asked to create a monologue about a certain topic first from a practitioner standpoint, and then from an academic's standpoint. To give an example, the concept of disruptive innovation can be tackled by asking academics and practitioners to deliver a monologue from the perspective of Apple's former CEO Steve Jobs, and then from the perspective of the author of the disruptive innovation theory, Clayton Christensen. Students may be encouraged to find out everything they can about their characters' beliefs, thoughts, actions, and social contexts. The performance of the written

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monologues may begin with a description to the class of what they think they know about the character, and then give space to deeper and more unexpected narrations (e.g., "You think you know me, but you don't!"); Finally, classroom discussions can be triggered by comparing the two characters (Thein et al., 2007).

To emphasize the knowledge transformation of role switch, academics and practitioners may be encouraged to develop 'mind maps' before coming to class (Budd, 2004). Each map consists of a semantic tree around a concept and can be united to other mind maps to create constellations of meanings that actors explore together in the classroom. These exercises can be applied not only to develop the academic-practitioner relationship in class but also more in general to encourage practitioners' critical approach to academic texts, and academics' engagement with practitioners' systems of beliefs and their written texts. It is important to highlight that for any quasi-role switching exercise to work, both academics and practitioners must be willing to play the game. We have shown that the refusal to leave behind one's position triggers the same reaction in the other party, leading only to superficial (i.e., "façade") knowledge exchanges.

Management education studies have shown that service-learning opportunities in which actors temporarily become members of other groups can develop character strengths such as compassion, understanding and tolerance (Crossan et al., 2013; Pless et al., 2011), which we have shown to be central to universal role evoking. Hypothetical dilemmas can be introduced in these exercises to smooth the transition from quasi-role switches to universal role evoking. Through "What if" questions, academics are encouraged to understand the motivations and perspectives that might lie behind the actions and choices of a practitioner, and *vice versa*. This

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can help the two parties acknowledge, respect and understand each other, even when they are in disagreement (Thein et al., 2007). Finally, another way to activate the universal role frame is highlighting a common purpose or common good concern that animates members of different professions, such as discussion forums about social and environmental issues, for example (Carton & Mouricou, 2017; Hartman, 2006; Roca, 2008). According to Mele (2009), focusing on over-arching goals allows the building of a delicate equilibrium between personalism (i.e., being oneself), putting oneself into others' shoes, and universalism (i.e. seeing all people equal and alike, despite differences).

All in all, we propose that business schools staff, facilities, activities and tools might have a more limited importance in academic-practitioner communication than commonly argued (see Burke & Rao, 2010), as opposed to classroom dynamics which require more attention from business schools that take their boundary spanning role seriously (see also Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Starkey & Tempest, 2005). However, by proposing the classroom exercises above we do not want to imply that a successful classroom interaction must be merely “implemented”. As a matter of fact, executive programs are full of interactive exercises, but when these are unidirectional they can easily turn into obstacles for joint reflection (Crossan et al., 2013). The authenticity of the interaction process, then, is guaranteed by the extent to which *both academics and practitioners engage in it*, avoiding hypocrisies by which they encourage others to do what they for first are not willing to do. Some business schools will probably be concerned about their clients' reactions to less structured products, and might fear a consequent commercial loss (Roca, 2009). Educators may also fear that their status will be undermined by these exercises of symmetry, or feel uneasy about exposing their lives and personal opinions to the

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judgment of executive students. However, we have shown that relational insecurity is the steep passage that gets us to the other side. As much as we have tried shrinking this passage, it keeps on widening each time we enter the classroom. This may be the time to invert our perceptions about classroom insecurity.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

While we believe our research contributes to theory and practice, some limitations should also be considered. A first concern, common in interpretative research, refers to the trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To deal with these issues we used ad hoc strategies for qualitative research (Gioia et al., 2013). For instance, we reported excerpts from field notes to make emerging categories comprehensible to readers. We also conducted two follow-up interviews with key informants to comment on our final grounded model. In addition, we provided rich contextual descriptions to favor the evaluation of the transferability of our findings. Of course, additional studies in different contexts involving academic-practitioner interactions could foster an understanding of how the mechanisms observed in this study would figure in other contexts.

While we witnessed many events where both academics and practitioners exchanged knowledge or admitted having reached new understandings, we did not have the opportunity to capture if, and to what extent, such knowledge was subsequently used by informants in their working lives. Future research would benefit from longitudinal investigations aimed at exploring how work situations might trigger (or inhibit) the enactment of transformations that occur in executive classrooms.

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Finally, our study raises a legitimate question: is any encounter between academics and practitioners a potential success story? Our study suggests that *in boundary settings* a traditional scholar might be pushed by practitioners to act more critically and to be more practice engaged, just as practitioners tend to be more reflexive and concerned with theorization. We thus suggest that connecting our scholarship with the worlds of management practitioners is not an unreachable desideratum, but an inherent potentiality of our most mundane interactions.

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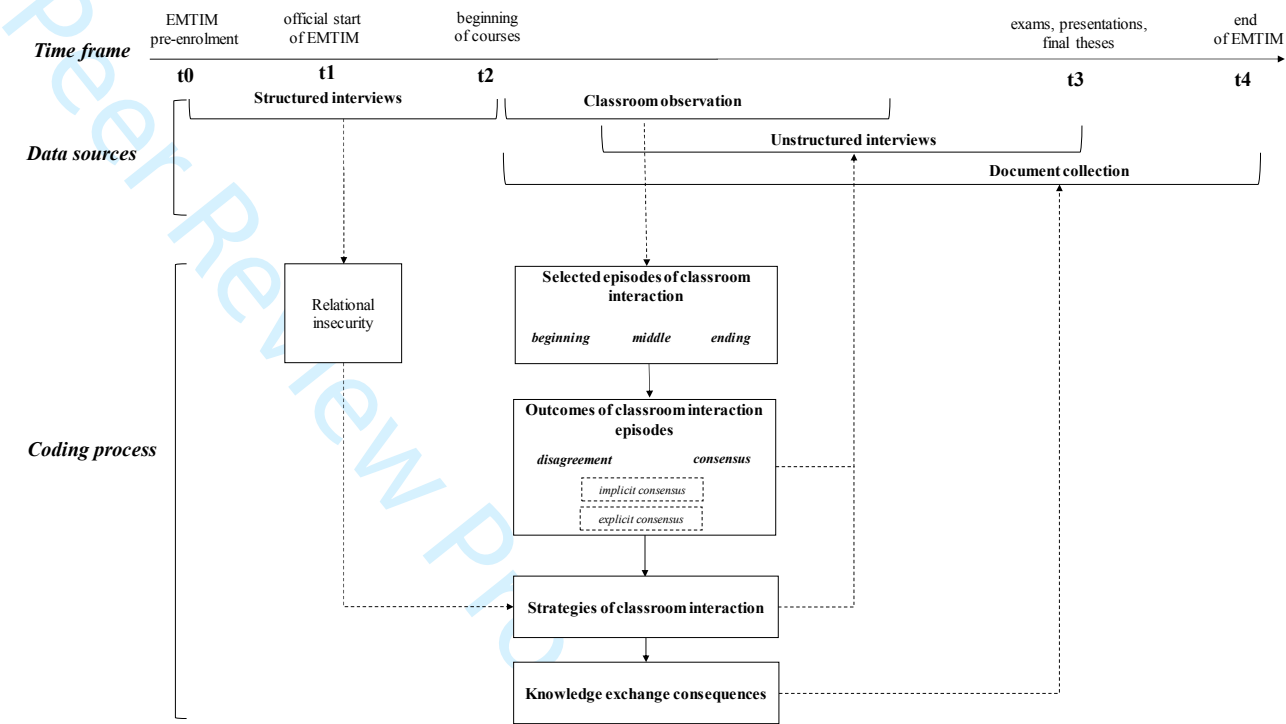
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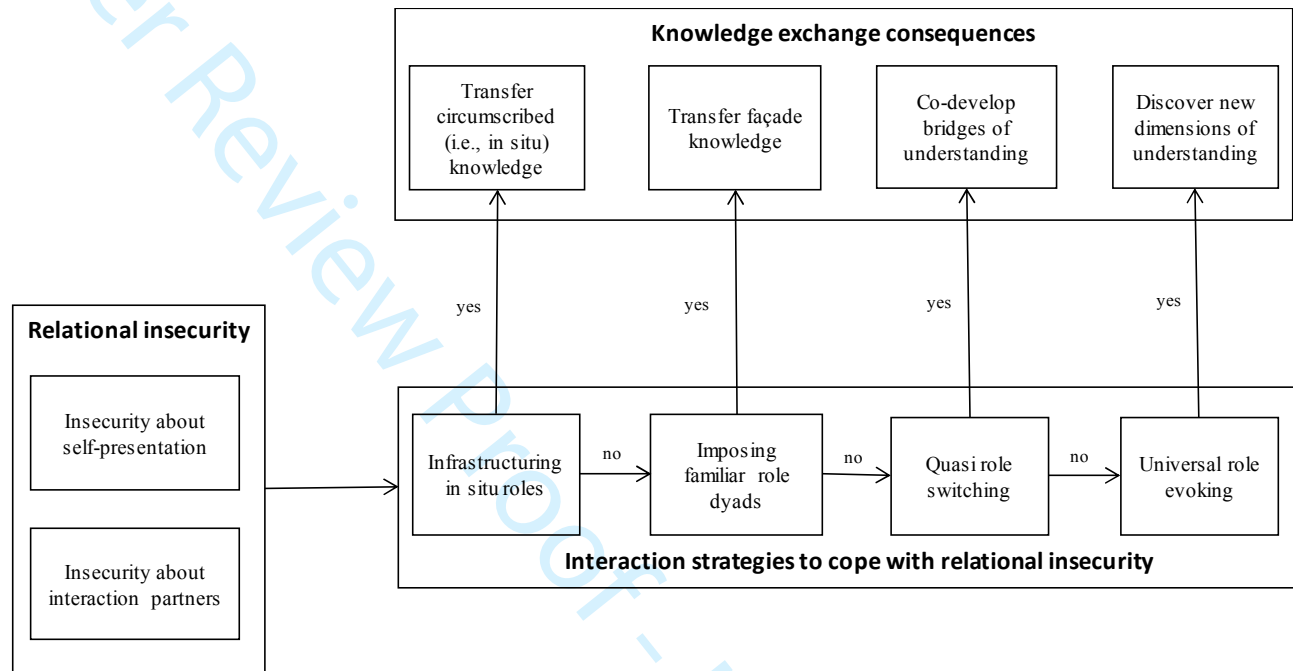
Figure 1. Process of analysis for the grounded model. Data sources and coding stages



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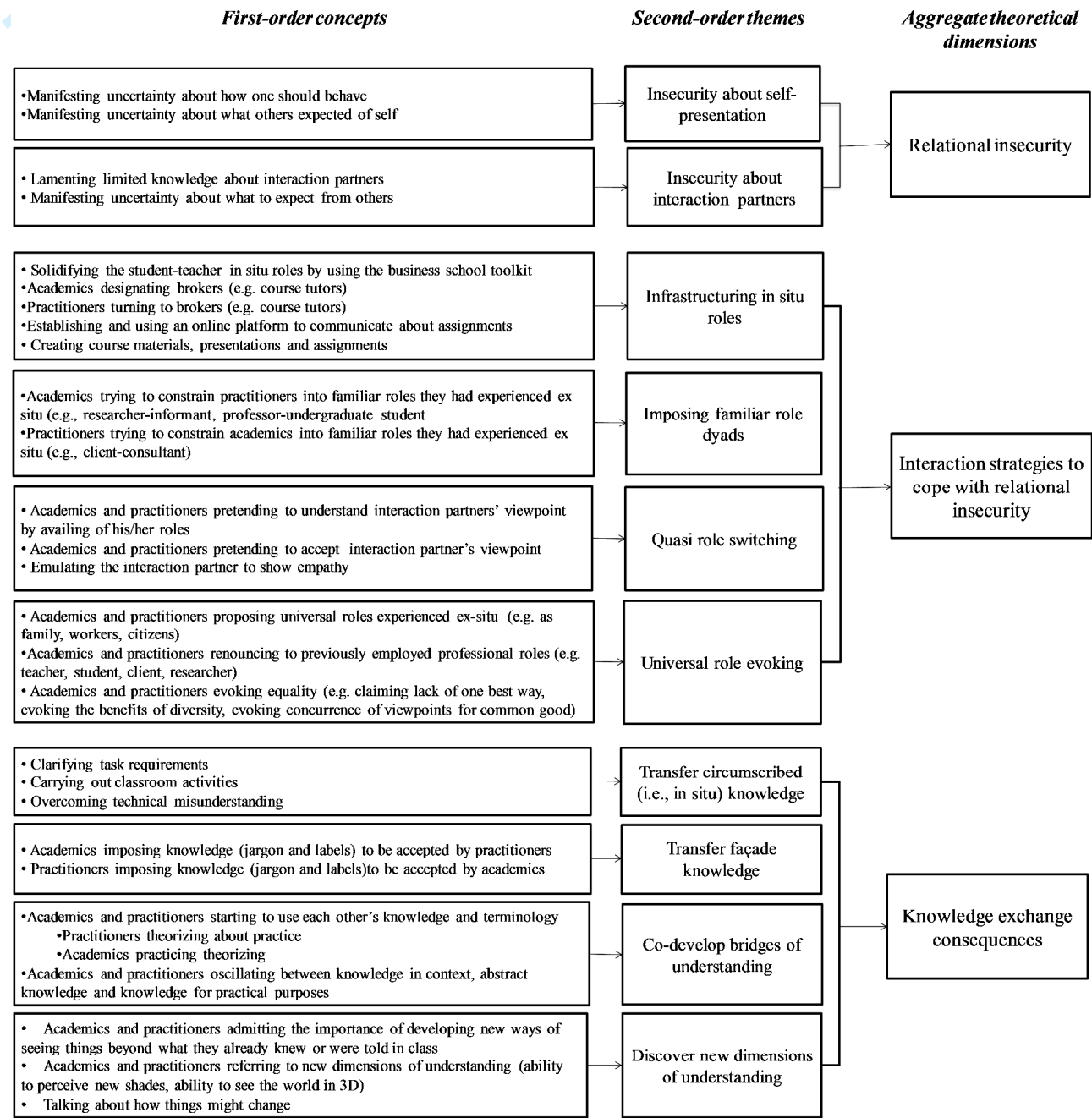
Figure 2. Grounded model of a trial and error process in academic-practitioner boundary

work



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Appendix 1. Data Structure



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Appendix 2. Outcomes of interaction strategies. Number of episodes and percentages in which each strategy succeeded and number of episodes and percentages in which it failed and led to the enactment of the next strategy.

Interaction Strategy	Outcomes/Total number of episodes in which a strategy was enacted (%)		
	Success (accepted by the other party)	Failure (refused by other party)	Total number of episodes
1 Infrastructuring in situ roles	24 (20%)	96 (80%)	120 (100%)
2 Imposing familiar role dyads	34 (35%)	62 (65%)	96 (80%)
3 Quasi role switching	48 (78%)	14 (22%)	62 (65%)
4 Universal role evoking	12 (82%)	2 (18%)	14 (22%)