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BEYOND BOUNDARIES. A RELATIONAL STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGES BETWEEN MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS AND BUSINESS PRACTITIONERS IN EXECUTIVE CLASSROOMS

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding how organization theory and managerial practice inform each other has been part of management debates for decades. Several studies have highlighted a preoccupying gap between organization science and managerial practice, and respectively between organization scholars and management practitioners, as protagonists of distinct worlds (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Markides, 2011; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Van de Ven, 2007). Accordingly, in producing knowledge, scholars and practitioners are often animated by incompatible interests; they make use of different categories even when they refer to the same phenomenon and organize around distinct systems of expertise -i.e., theoretical and practical- that reflect distinct concerns -i.e., scientific rigor and practical relevance (Huff, 2000; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Such incongruities may hamper cross-community knowledge exchanges (e.g. Susman & Evered, 1978; Starkey & Madan, 2001).

Although the theory-practice debate has been a priority in management studies, contributions have been fragmented, empirical investigations scarce and, most importantly, have displayed contradictory indications (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Rynes et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 2007). Now, we still lack a full comprehension of what supposedly distinguishes academic communities from practitioner communities and we know little about how differences are reflected in the theoretical and practical knowledge each community produces and shares with the other (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Kieser et al., 2015). To this purpose, conducting studies that consider, simultaneously, the theories and practices of academics and practitioners, the exchanges between them, and the cases where these 'succeed' and 'fail' is of theoretical and practical importance (Bartunek, 2007; Daft & Lewin, 2008; MacIntosh et al., 2012).

A useful strategy is 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 in which academics and practitioners perform boundary work to defend, negotiate or break down existing science-practice boundaries (Gieryn, 1983). We suggest that business schools and executive management programs are useful boundary settings for studying how academics and practitioners engage in knowledge exchanges and thus perform boundary work.

With some exceptions (see Tushman et al., 2007), business schools have been said to reflect the problems highlighted in the theory-practice gap debate. Many studies indicate a divide between research and education in business schools, even when those who teach are also those who do research. Accordingly, since business schools strive to meet two different goals - knowledge exploration through rigorous research and knowledge exploitation through instruction,

respectively (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Friga et al., 2003) - they often remain caught between the two (Augier & March, 2007; Moldoveanu & Martin, 2008; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). Alajoutsijarvi and colleagues (2015) have shown that management academics in business schools have historically alternated between the logics of scientific professionalization and the tendency towards corporatization and therefore, towards de-professionalization. Accordingly, academics simultaneously appear as too absorbed by self-centered scientific logics, and, at the same time, too easily willing to give them up for the sake of practitioners' recognition. This paradox, in turn, is said to significantly impact on teaching-learning schemes enacted in business schools (Burke & Rao, 2010; Gioia & Corley, 2002).

However, while most contributions focus on what business schools ought to be, fewer studies investigate knowledge exchanges in business schools and delve into the mechanisms that allow (or obstacle) successful accomplishments. This is surprising because executive management education represents one of the most frequent forms of interaction between organization scholars and practitioners (Augier & March, 2011) and a potentially fertile context to bridge the relevance-rigor gap (Burke & Rau, 2010; Hughes et al., 2011). 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. The present study aims at answering this research question.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

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 (EMTIM). The program involved thirty professionals with five to ten years work experience in technical areas of large companies operating in a variety of industrial sectors (e.g., automotive, ICT, energy industries) and fifteen academics teaching and doing research in different areas of innovation management (e.g., industrial innovation management, new product marketing, entrepreneurship, etc.). By studying a context in which academics and practitioners interrelated, we were able to take a fine-grained look at their interaction strategies and depict how these unfolded over time and with what consequences for their knowledge and practice repertoires.

We collected data through multiple sources such as: classroom observations, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, online platform interactions, company visits, seminars and other program-related activities. More specifically, we observed and fully recorded 225 hours of classroom activities and conducted 45 in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews and 24 unstructured ethnographical interviews. In addition, we had full access to the materials and documents produced during the program.

To analyze our 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 we were interested in understanding how academics and practitioners interacted and exchanged knowledge, we delimited 120 knowledge interaction episodes in relation to a beginning, middle, and ending phase. In a following round of analysis, we further refined codes to understand whether the episodes entailed consensus (actors agreed to a common viewpoint and moved to another topic) or disagreement (moments in which actors raised doubts, objections, or asked for clarifications). We discovered four recurring 'interaction strategies' (two "intended strategies" and two "unintended strategies") through which academics and practitioners tried to move from disagreement to agreement.

FINDINGS

We found that knowledge exchanges between academics and practitioners were grounded on the interplay between two types of relationships: in situ relationships – ties that developed in the business school context, and ex-situ relationships – ties with other communities of reference that academics and practitioners drew on to facilitate in situ knowledge exchanges. The findings show the trial and error strategies through which in situ-ex situ interplay occurred.

Relational insecurity

The business school engaged in various courses of action to mobilize different networks of actors (business school staff, program coordinators, tutors, consultants and management gurus) around the EMTIM program to support academic-practitioner interaction. However, despite such attempts, both parties showed relational insecurity in the beginning: uncertainty about how they should have behaved, what others expected of them and what they themselves expected from the others. Although there was a pressing need to take immediate courses of action such as teaching and giving assignments, on academics' side, and learning and carrying out assigned tasks, on practitioners' side, there were almost no indications about how these courses of action would have been received by the other side. Thus, both academics and practitioners confronted with many sources of doubts and uncertainty.

Relational constellations: in situ-ex situ interplay

To face relational insecurity, academics and practitioners connected classroom relations with broader sets of relations that they cultivated elsewhere. Whenever academics and practitioners were either uncertain about the effects that their words had on each other, or wanted to make sure they made themselves understood, they interplayed roles performed in the business schools (educators, students) and roles deriving from other contexts in which they were immersed in their day-to-day lives (colleagues, bosses, researchers, consultants, clients, etc.). To our surprise, the number of times actors mentioned people not present in the classroom was superior to the number of times they addressed each other.

Interaction strategies and knowledge-exchange consequences

Through in situ-ex-situ interplays, academics and practitioners enacted four different classroom interaction strategies, most of which were initiated by academics and promptly answered by practitioners. We also found that the four strategies followed a recurrent trial and error sequence. Initially actors used in situ mediation and only if the strategy failed they switched to strategies that resorted more heavily on ex situ relations, according to the following order: first they turned to professional role assignment based on previous experiences, then to quasi role switching and ultimately to universal role evoking.

Mediating in situ relations: brokers, middle grounds and boundary objects. Actors first attempted to grow close to each other and build a common ground around EMTIM by making use of in situ elements that belonged to the business school 'toolkit'. We identified three types of in situ elements: in situ brokers, middle grounds, and classroom objects. First, academics designated course tutors and consultants to interact frequently with practitioners about

assignments, final projects and in some cases, to serve as education counselors (i.e., in situ brokers). Additionally, an online platform served as a middle ground –a virtual space where to make program announcements, exchange course resources, and clarify issues with assignments. Moreover, classroom objects such as textbooks, assignments, PowerPoints and blackboard drawings created structure inside the classroom: they allowed academics and practitioners to discuss a set of predetermined distinctions, communicate by following well-defined schemes and stick to plans during lectures.

Consequences of in situ mediation: enhancing classroom coordination. This strategy allowed academics and practitioners to reduce the initial relational insecurity. The main consequence our informants referred to was better classroom coordination. By employing boundary objects and brokers, actors clarified task requirements, synchronized classroom interventions and overcame operative misunderstandings. However, our evidence shows that the strategy played only a modest role in rendering classroom knowledge exchanges satisfying because it did not provide academics and practitioners with the broad and, at the same time, detailed information about each other that they sought. In situ mediation was successful in 20% of the episodes. In the 80% of cases in which actors did not find it sufficient for effective knowledge exchanges in classroom, they enacted more sophisticated strategies that were fueled by different types of in situ-ex situ interplays.

Assigning professional roles based on previous ex situ experiences. We found that when the in situ mediation strategy failed, actors drew on previous experiences to assign each other three sets of familiar professional dyadic roles: student-teacher, client-consultant and researcher-informant roles. Academics and practitioners rendered unfamiliar interaction partners familiar by associating them with well-known people such as faculty colleagues, peer reviewers, students, co-workers and bosses, and reduced the uncertainty associated with the classroom setting by evoking well-known places and situations such as research sites, scholarly journals, company offices or R&D laboratories. Just like mediating in situ relations, previous role assignment was used by academics and practitioners as an intended strategy. This means that when we asked them how they intended to interact during the program, informants explicitly mentioned the strategy in their own words.

Consequences of previous roles assignment: façade knowledge framing. The fact that academics and practitioners drew on previous experiences to support classroom interaction animated their relationship and kept different bits and pieces of information from falling apart. We found that in 35% of the observed interaction episodes, actors accepted the assignment of pre-existent roles. In these cases, academics imposed knowledge frames that were uncritically accepted by practitioners out of courtesy, or the other way around, without further negotiation. We labeled this outcome as façade knowledge framing. The strategy failed in 65% of the interaction sequences analyzed because actors refused to reduce the classroom exchanges to previously experienced roles and demanded more personalized interactions.

Quasi role switching. When the previously described strategies failed, actors drew more heavily on ex situ relations, enacting quasi role switches. This strategy consisted in academics and practitioners temporarily taking up each other's roles. For instance, academics temporarily performed the roles of business practitioners during conversations with practitioners to get closer to them and make them feel understood. Similarly, practitioners put themselves in the shoes of academics, suggesting they understood the complexities of the educators' and researchers' roles. In doing so, academics and practitioners drew on what they knew or imagined about each other, to win each other's trust. Unlike the previous strategies, the quasi role switch was not an

intended, programmed strategy (i.e., it was a spontaneous reaction to the flow of classroom interaction that actors were not able to describe beyond what we had witnessed).

Consequences of quasi role switching: temporary knowledge switches. Quasi-role switch contributed more significantly to the creation of new knowledge than the previous strategies. In particular, the more actors struggled to find a place for ex situ relations in the classroom, the more their knowledge base underwent transformations. For instance, while academics became more involved in the dialogue with practitioners, their theorizing acquired a performative dimension: it became almost tangible, like a practice in its own right. Similarly, to get through to academics, practitioners often passed from an operative mode of knowing to a reflexive, almost theoretical one that resembled to a great extent to the theoretical mode used by academics. Quasi role switching led to consensus in 78% of the cases in which mediating in situ relations and assigning pre-existing professional roles failed. In the remaining 22% of the cases, actors employed an alternative unintentional strategy called “universal role evoking”.

Universal role evoking. In those interaction sequences in which previous interrelation strategies failed, academics and practitioners evoked universal roles that they commonly played in day-to-day lives –e.g., knowers and doers, parents, colleagues, friends and citizens. Because of their universality, such roles served as ‘consensus tools’ that helped academics and practitioners evoke what they had in common and renounce to all the previously employed professional role distinctions. The strategy was successful in the majority of cases in which all the others failed (82%) precisely because it implied adopting universal principles, such as, 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.

Consequences of universal role evoking: new knowledge creation. When actors invoked universal principles, they co-designed new knowledge they frequently referred to as ‘the third dimension’. Accordingly, actors acknowledged that the time spent in the classroom contributed to the creation of something new that helped them learn from each other’s viewpoints. For instance, each time actors negotiated what managing innovation meant for them and their reference groups, they simultaneously drew new paths concerning what innovation management might become in the future. Interestingly, while actors often admitted that their knowledge repertoires had undergone transformations, they left to future situations the enactment of these transformations.

DISCUSSION

Our findings document the resourcefulness of academics and practitioners when they exchange knowledge in conditions of relational insecurity, i.e. limited knowledge about each other and pervasive uncertainty about exchange outcomes. This resourcefulness is rooted in the ability to fuel current exchanges in the classroom (in situ) by drawing on myriads of ties in which they are embedded in their day-to-day personal and professional lives (ex situ). We labeled in situ-ex situ interplays as ‘relational constellations’. In this regard, our study documents a trial and error process by which academics and practitioners try first a set of intended strategies aimed at maintaining pre-established academic-practitioner role distinctions but, as soon as the intentional strategies fail, they gradually progress towards more complex and emergent strategies.

These insights offer several implications for how we understand the relation between management theory and managerial practice. We portray academics and practitioners as flexible knowledge professionals that by means of relational insecurity can engage in sophisticated cross-

boundary exchanges. The concept of relational constellations underlines the importance of seeing theoretical and managerial expertise as socially entangled rather than community-specific, and the exchanges between theoretical and managerial expertise as fast-paced and in becoming instead of mainly conditioned by in-group-out group differences.

We also contribute to the literature on boundary work (Bechky, 2003; Gieryn, 1999) by showing that boundary work strategies can influence the form and content of knowledge exchanges. Specifically, intentional classroom strategies might have a lower impact in terms of knowledge transformation than unintentional, emergent strategies. A possible explanation in our context is that the former were too anchored in the interests of one party and resonated too little with the other party, leaving little space for negotiation.

Finally, we address the role of business schools as boundary work settings. We document the ways in which the 'in-betweenness' of executive programs may push academics and practitioners into renouncing to pre-existing repertoires for the sake of cross-fertilization. While intentional facilitation strategies can undoubtedly play an important role in mobilizing academic-practitioner exchanges, particularly in the beginning stages, classroom sites are important especially because they create the opportunity for spontaneous dialogue and transformation. We suggest 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 has received less attention so far (see also Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Starkey & Tempest, 2005). From such perspective, classrooms provide dialogic functions: on the one hand, they trigger people's uncertainty and insecurities, but on the other, they also prompt the activation of reparatory courses of action.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS