City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

The use of theory in research relating to open access: Practitioner perspectives

Simon Wakeling, Stephen Pinfield, David Bawden, and Lyn Robinson

Abstract
The relationship between theory and practice has long been considered problematic for many applied academic disciplines. In this short paper we report preliminary findings from a two-year research project investigating the ways and the extent that theory and practice have interacted in the development of open-access (OA) approaches to the publishing and dissemination of research outputs. Based on interviews with practitioners and researchers working on OA related issues, we explore the ways in which theory is (and isn't) of value to practice. We find that while practitioners acknowledge that theory has the potential to improve understanding, bestow credibility on work, and codify existing knowledge about OA, they also perceive it as "mood music" to the practical work of OA, lacking explicit links to action.

Introduction
"There is nothing so practical as a good theory." So goes the famous maxim by Kurt Lewin (1944, p. 27), who repeatedly called for action to address what he considered a problematic gap between theory and practice, and theorists and practitioners. While much has been written on the subject in the intervening years, it seems clear that the theory-practice gap is still a recognizable and troublesome issue in applied fields as diverse as management (Scapens, 1994), nursing (Corlett, 2000), education (Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001), and library and information science (Haddow & Klobas, 2004).

The broad brush arguments common to these debates will be familiar to many. Researchers using theory are often characterized by practitioners as remote and unhelpfully abstract. Practitioners, meanwhile, are perceived by researchers as too narrowly focused on their immediate working context, and unwilling or unable to engage with the broad picture. In this paper we present some preliminary results from a two-year project investigating the ways and the extent that theory and practice have interacted in the development of open-access (OA) approaches to the publishing and dissemination of research outputs. Based on a systematic review and analysis of the theoretically informed literature relating to OA, and in-depth interviews with 36 researchers and practitioners working on OA problems, we have attempted to better understand what the use (or non-use) of theory has meant for the development of OA, and what this tells us about the theory-practice gap in general. In this paper we focus on data generated from our interviews with OA researchers and practitioners, and in particular material relating to the value (or lack of value) of theory to the practical business of OA. These are among the most significant of our findings, which go to the heart of the theory-practice question.

Method

Detailed interviews were conducted with 36 participants (11 female, 25 male), selected through maximum variation sampling to ensure a broad range of perspectives and backgrounds. Of these, 12 were academic researchers working on OA related issues, and 24 were practitioners. This latter group was comprised of librarians (L) (9), publishers (P) (7), OA providers (Pr) (3), policy makers (Po) (3), and consultants (C) (2). Of these practitioners, seven had also published theoretically informed work on OA. The interview schedule covered three main areas: the participant's background and experience with OA; what they understood theory to mean, and how it had informed their understanding of OA; and their view of the theory-practice relationship, and how theory had informed their practical work. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis used as a framework for organizing and interpreting the data, with a coding process following Braun and Clarke (**2006**).

Results

Value of Theory to Practice

A number of participants acknowledged a link between theory and practice in OA, but in general they found the relationship vague and difficult to articulate. As one publisher put it: *"I do believe there is a golden thread, if you like, between theoretical work and practice … Does theory influence and, ultimately, shape in some form practice? Yes. I just couldn't tell you how"*(Pu5). Theory was seen by some as a way to extend thinking *"beyond the day to day"* (L5), and by others as a means of avoiding trial and error. Theory was seen by some as a *"shortcut to understanding"* (C2), and a means of linking work to an established and robust intellectual base. Interviewees also spoke of theory bestowing *"academic credibility"* on research outputs, which in turn strengthened advocacy and policy positions. However the most commonly cited benefit of theory to practice was as a tool for understanding. As one librarian put it, *"I do love it when I get some theory that makes sense of things for me"* (L3). Several participants gave examples of specific theories that had helped them understand certain aspects of OA, particularly theories relating to innovation diffusion, and the concept of knowledge as a commons. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, interviewees spoke of the capacity for theory to formalize and codify existing knowledge. As one librarian explained: *"I'm thinking of the, 'what was often thought but never so well expressed' thing. Where it's sort of there in my mind, but in a, kind of, random inchoate way. And I suppose one of the purposes of theory is to round up these sort of stray ideas and say, actually that is what you think is this"* (L3).

Lack of Value of Theory to Practice

A number of interviewees recognized the aversion of practitioners to theory, although, intriguingly, this tended to be reported of others rather than stated as their own view: e.g. *"there's a lot of practitioners that, I suspect, will say theory is nonsense, we don't need any of it"*(Pu5). Academics who had used theory echoed this point: *"I haven't found much acceptance of theoretical discussion in the area of practice that I'm familiar with"* (R9).

Several reasons were given for this. Some participants questioned the timeliness of theoretically informed work, in terms of both publication lag, and its ability to keep pace with a fast moving field. Many practitioners also saw the work of OA as unsuited to theory: *"I think of it more as more of a practical thing"* (L4), and there were numerous examples of participants positioning theory in opposition to practice. Theory was considered *"mood music"* (Po1) for the practical work of OA, creating an atmosphere but lacking value because it did not translate well into action. In this sense it was compared unfavorably to outputs such as toolkits, checklists, or case studies, which practitioners felt could be of immediate and direct use.

Is the Theory-Practice Relationship Harmonious?

Unsurprisingly, most interviewees believed that the relationship between theory and practice was not harmonious. Indeed, the language and imagery of conflict was often used to address the question, with participants describing *"a locking of horns"* (R2) or a *"struggle"*. It was also striking that the discussion often turned to individuals – *theorists* and *practitioners* – with academics engaged in theoretical work perceived as *"a bit sort of ivory-towerish. People that are actually trying to put this into practice are down in the trenches … They're just trying to fill the repository"* (Pr2). In general most practitioners felt that academics were most to blame for the lack of a harmonious relationship, although a researcher noted that *"if one side were good at breaching the gap or divide, then it wouldn't be there"* (R9). One final point is relevant here, and that is the unconscious influence of theory on the practitioner community. As one librarian noted, echoing Keynes, *"every man who thinks he's just practical actually has a theory … Every librarian who thinks he understands libraries practically is really the slave of some defunct library theoretician"* (L3)

Discussion and conclusions

In many ways, the views expressed by our participants reflect general perceptions of the relationship between theory and practice. While they somewhat reluctantly acknowledged the value of theory to OA work in certain circumstances and for certain purposes, practitioners tended to view theory as mostly distinct from and only obliquely relevant to their practical work. There is, however, evidence that the issue may be more complex than this. Two points in particular stand out. First, the role of theory as a means of codifying existing knowledge represents a clear and fundamental way for theory to add value to practitioners. Second, the notion that theory serves as a silent and essential foundation to practical work undercuts the popular view of theory and practice as separate, and potentially reframes the theory-practice gap as an issue of perception rather than reality. Further work as part of this project will attempt to model the theory-practice relationship in the field of OA, and highlight the ways in which this gap might be bridged.

Acknowledgements

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**(2), 77– 101.

Corlett, J. (2000). The perceptions of nurse teachers, student nurses and preceptors of the theory-practice gap in nurse education. *Nurse Education Today*, **20**(6), 499– 505.

Haddow, G., & Klobas, J. E. (2004). Communication of research to practice in library and information science: Closing the gap. *Library & Information Science Research*, **26**(1), 29– 43.

Korthagen, F. A., Kessels, J., Koster, B., Lagerwerf, B., & Wubbels, T. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education.* London, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lewin, K. (1944). Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology. *University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare*, **20**, 23– 27.

Scapens, R. W. (1994). Never mind the gap: Towards an institutional perspective on management accounting practice. *Management Accounting Research*, **5**(3-4), 301– 321.