Bridging Research to Practice via Action Learning

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Abstract

There is concern that management and business research favours rigour and theory over relevance and practice. There are pressures from funding councils for researchers to show more impact. The paper shows how the bridge between the academic world and the world of practice can be served by action learning. Recent ideas on theories of knowledge translation are presented and using the example of a article published for an academic journal relating to futures and foresight in organisations, the paper shows how action learning provides a vehicle to complete the process of application. Two examples of the introduction of Futures and Foresight Learning are presented, including how impact was made during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Key Words: Research, Impact, Action Learning, HRD, Futures and Foresight Learning.

Introduction

There is continuing concern that management research and theory development favours rigour over relevance and therefore does not become 'practical' in the sense of influencing what practitioners do, think or say (Kieser et al. 2015). While many papers might cite relevance as a concern or purpose, the term lacks definition and can have different meanings in different contexts which are occasionally contradictory (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). That prominence is given to rigour is often seen in the priority given to research as an output that can meet the requirements of largely US-based journals.

More recently, Ross et al. (2020) have argued and shown that through learning and development a vehicle can be provided to create impact in a range of contexts. Further, this 'bridging of the gap between research and practice' (p.121) can also cover impact from different disciplinary disciplines, attesting to the mulit-disciplinary nature of HRD (Chalofsky, 2004). In this paper, we seek to show how the bridge between the academic world and the world of practice can be served by action learning, a crucial HRD activity. In doing so, we show how academic work, written up mainly for the purpose of providing a research output and proving value via rigour, can link with practice in a process that provides relevance though action and learning in an action learning set. A second purpose arises from the action learning process itself. Once participants begin working with action and learning, asking questions and seeking ways forward, knowledge is likely to be created. Thus, in a potentially reverse movement on the bridge, knowledge generated by learners in their practice can cross into an the academic world.

To demonstrate, we will first consider recent criticisms of management and business research concerning its disconnection from practice, and consider a response to this problem in the form of a Knowledge Translation (KT) value-chain (Thorpe et al. 2011). We then employ this idea in reporting on work with a financial services organization. In the case, we began with a published academic paper by Hines and Gold (2015) that contained the key concepts that provided the impetus for action and learning. We conclude by suggesting that there is significant potential for working with action learning both as a vehicle for tackling intractable problems and knowledge translations.

The Problem of Management and Business Research

In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)[1] defines research impact as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy', stating there can be an academic impact or a economic and societal impact or both. The ESRC provides scope for impact that is instrumental, conceptual and/or capacity building. In Higher Education in UK, these indicators for what counts as impact influence the funding for research through a Research Excellence Framework (REF). The consideration of impact in REF as part of the criteria for assessment has in turn created strategies, strictures and behaviours that affect how staff consider their research (McKenna, 2021). In particular, academic staff become concerned how the impact of their publications can be measured through such indicators as the impact of the journals they publish in (the Journal Impact Factor) and the individual citation of their publications or H-index. In addition, there is growing interest in how impact might occur via online processes, including downloads and article views but also mentions in social media and beyond. This has led to the development of alternative metrics or 'Altmetrics' based on an algorithm to measure research impact (Bong and Ebrahim, 2017). Such measurements might only provide a limited consideration of research impact. In the UK, the REF (previously called the Research Assessment Exercise or RAE), requires the submission of impact cases along with publications. However, it is suggested that so far, the cases contain little hard information and are limited with respect to time and space (Khazrgui and Hudson, 2015). Another problem is that the consequences of research can be undesirable and have unintended consequences but these can escape measurement (Butler 2010).

The problem of research and impact has a long pedigree. Writing in 1929, the philosopher A.N. Whitehead argued that the rigour of scientific enquiry should include use value as part of the process so that it could contribute to a 'three-fold urge: (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better.' The fundamental point here is that the production of knowledge should not

[1] The ESRC is one of the UK's research councils that since April 2018 is covered by UK Research and Innovation, a non-departmental public body that is accountable through Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). This definition is found at https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/#:~:text=Academic%20impact%20is%20the%20demonstrable,application%20across%20and%20within%20disciplines, accessed 10 May, 2021

be disconnected from its use. However, for much of the 20th century, and in many areas of research, concerns of disconnection or worse have persisted, as we will show below. Disconnection problems can exist at local and even individual levels, at the levels of organizations, policy-makers and government or even at wider social or inter-national levels. This ought to be the position of research and, in some fields, this connection can be discerned. Commentators such as Nicholas Maxwell (2011) suggest that because academic inquiry has been driven by the primary purpose of knowledge-acquisition and technological know-how, that it mostly stays on this path, creating more and more specialized disciplines and sub-disciplines, which celebrate their achievements in the form of publications and conferences only involving their specialized memberships. Maxwell refers to this as knowledge-inquiry and shows how the means become the ends as knowledge is produced but seldom put into practice, producing over time what we now call the research-practice gap. This gap stretches across many areas of research and is particularly evident in the social sciences such as management and business - the very areas of research that night be expected to deal with problems of significance to our lives. Maxwell points the finger at academic research caught in this knowledge-inquiry trap that succeeds in developing knowledge and even technological know-how but only in ways that disconnect it from problems of living and from what is needed to 'resolve' these challenges.

Other commentators argue further that the focus on the production of the theory can lead not to good practice but to ideologies that can have damaging effects. For example Ghoshal (2005) argued that the theories presented to students in business schools were 'amoral' but had the potential to promote 'bad' practices through the shaping of the 'normative order'. In recent times, academics have been blamed for their part in the Global Financial Crisis, where Krugman (2012) observed that 'economists have been part of the problem, not part of the solution'.

A key part of the problem pertinent to those working in the social sciences, have been the efforts to copy the natural sciences so as to demonstrate rigour, privileging scientific theorising and model building, which Bennis and O'Toole (2005) have dubbed 'physics envy'. In Economics, for example, the discipline has been largely concerned with models, mathematical proofs, market solutions and claims of value-freedom (Pfeffer 2005). Many other social sciences have also prioritised rigour at the expense of relevance in this way, socializing their doctoral students through teaching them to make their contributions through published outputs (Lariviere, 2012).

Research can be basic in order to improve understanding but without consideration of use (Stokes, 1997). The danger here is that this understanding goes no further, and generates specialisation which distorts the means to become ends. Where research is applied, as in, consulting organisations this can be highly relevant but lacking in rigour in the continuous and largely unquestioning pursuit of the next improvement. A third possibility is where the research is rigorous but was also simultaneously applied, thus reconciling rigour with relevance and provoking new possibilities. Interestingly, business schools could claim to work this way , but perhaps this is a reflection of original intent that is now part of an illusion or delusion (Alvesson 2013)

The disconnection of business and management research in the UK is reinforced by the publication of a journal ranking list by the Association of Business Schools, which some have described as a 'fetishism' leading to a 'perversion' (Wilmott, 2011). Earlier Hambrick (1994) had referred to a 'closed' incestuous loop' among the writers of management research who were simultaneously both the producers and consumers of research outputs, with judgments of success based on the consumption by other writers who could cite a work in their next production rather than showing how it served the needs of managers and practitioners. Perhaps this dynamic was also working to counter the good intentions of the UK's Advanced Institute of Management (AIM), set up in 2002 to improve the quality of research in business schools so that it played a part on contributing to the country's economic competitiveness; in other words, management research needed to become more relevant and practical. However, as argued by Macdonald et al. (2015), it seems that those who were selected to participate in AIM were more oriented towards the requirements of publishing in highly ranked journals so as to fulfil requirements for the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Concern about the status of management research has a long history (Pearce and Huang 2012) with some journals such as the Academy of Management Journal seeking to encourage research that was more relevant to practice (Rynes, 2007). There have also been various efforts to frame research in relation to problems and issues in a context of application so that it is relevant to practice (Gibbons et al, 1994; Van de Ven 2007; Panza and Thorpe 2010)), although progress still needs to be made (Hodgkinson and Starkey 2011).

In what Maxwell (2011) terms wisdom-inquiry, the 'problems of living rationally' should form the basis of research so that actions to tackle the problems are considered and imagined before the acquisition of knowledge. The starting point for research in universities should be to articulate the 'problems of living' at individual, social and global levels so that possible solutions and actions can be proposed and critically assessed. Knowledge would not be pursued or acquired for its own sake, nor become trapped in the academic *cul de sac* of papers and conferences that do not go further. Crucially, there is a cyclical aspect of pursuing knowledge that tackles problems that then provides feedback to begin the process again. The cyclical features of wisdom-inquiry opens the door to methodologies that allow a critical analysis of relevant issues to our lives and an orientation to taking action and learning from that action, such as action learning. In the next section, we consider how a theory of knowledge translation and propose that action learning can become the vehicle for a reverse translation by producing academic work that seeks to influence practice concerning issues of importance to our lives.

Theories of Knowledge Translation

One solution to the problem of the prioritizing of rigour over relevance in the academy is the idea of the Knowledge Translation Value-Chain (KTV-C) (Thorpe et al. 2011) which considers the different kinds of impact that could widen the scope of research, depicted as a series of stages as shown in Figure 1.

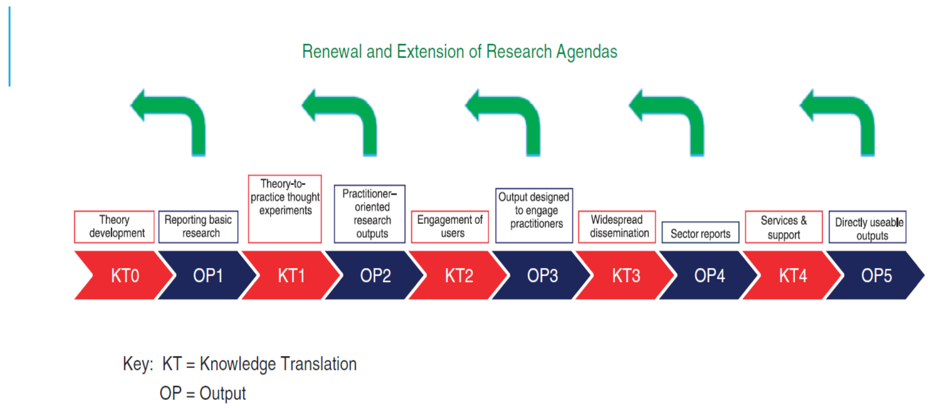

Figure 1. The knowledge translation value-chain

Figure 1: A Knowledge-Translation Value-Chain
Source: Thorpe et al. (2011)

This value-chain can be seen as a bridge, at one end of which is knowledge created for academic purposes (OP1 & OP2),and at the other, is the application of the knowledge within a practice environment. How does this knowledge move from one end of the bridge to other? In the model as proposed by Thorpe et al, the value chain moves basically from Left to Right; from academic research to practice. The green arrows are outputs from the former to the latter, in order to renew or extend the research, to 'contribute to the re-development of theory' p.429). However there have been criticisms of the linear flow between research activities to those of practice (Anderson et al., 2017)

In addition, there is no indication in Fig 2 of any opportunity for Maxwellian "knowledge inquiry" (2011) where the "problems of living rationally" should form the basis for academic research. We propose a transformation of the linear KTV-C either by a second chain moving in the reverse direction, or by bending the chain, creating loop or circle, whereby findings from practice can influence the direction and purpose of academic research. Others such as Ross et al., (2020), drawing on data from impact cases presented for the REF, suggest that knowledge translation can be consider as a 'network of interrelated cases' (p.13). Thus any single case or even an academic paper can be worked with and extended to others such as interactions, other disciplines and practitioners of different worlds.

Ross et al., also suggest HRD as a way of brokering translations and delivering impact. We therefore propose that action learning is a proper vehicle for reverse crossings, completing the circle, or extending interactions, along with action research and the other "action modalities (Raelin 1999), where' knowledge is produced in the service of, an in the midst of, action' (Raelin 1999, p.117). As traditionally formulated, based on the work and practice of Revans (1983), the primary concern of action learning, its 'first principle', is the relationship between learning and problems where the problem is 'real'. That is, the problem is not just an exercise in thinking or learning a theory; if the problem has salience for the learner, it can provide for action. Central to the consideration is that through questioning insight or Q new possibilities for action can be formulated. Revans gave particular emphasis to this process and contrasted it with a reliance on P, or programmed knowledge, arguing that in situations where learners are faced with a problem 'they do not know how to address', it is through Q that opens new possibilities. He and others even denounced the tendency to give prominence to P (cf. Mumford 1995) and this might include the efforts and outputs of academics and business schools.

Revans' seminal works date mainly from the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and largely before the advent of the digital age. Castells (1996) highlighted the explosion of available information, or P, and new areas of expertise or generations of 'knowledge workers', resulting from the accumulative and generative power of ICT. Leaving aside the important debates concerning the movement from data to information to knowledge, it should be evident that we live in a world in which digital technologies fuse with physical and biological advances to produce a P-rich world (Schwab 2016). Academic work in business and management is part of this accumulation although, as we argue above, too much of it remains as data to information which does not then become accessed by individuals as knowledge for their use. Crucially, if we take Polanyi's (1975) views on the personal character of knowledge based on 'participation through indwelling' (p.44), we argue that action learning can provide a path to correction.

Enacting Knowledge Translation with Action Learning

A paper by Hines and Gold (2015) concerns a long-running issue of how Futures and Foresight can be integrated into organizations and highlights some of the reasons for the rare use of futures and foresight methods and ideas. These include a lack of clarity of the meanings of terms such as futures and foresight, the episodic use and confusion with strategic planning and a non-receptive climate in organizations which meant that managers were too busy and focussed on short term and everyday matter. In addition, futurists and foresighters, seeking recognition for their expertise were failing to be recognised as professionals and could not make the case that Futures and Foresight was worth the attention. Hines and Gold proposed the need to show the worth of futures and foresight through internal champions who could broker and facilitate an integration process. They argued for a social constructionist approach and an inter-subjective problematic (Cunliffe 2011). This required inside connections and meaning-making in an organization by participating in a dialogue that leads to the construction of a reality that is recognised as futures and foresight. In this paper, we report findings from two cases, including recent examples that occurred during and in response to the Covid 19 pandemic from 2020.

The first concerns a medium-sized financial services organization (FSO) in Yorkshire, UK. This work was approached via the creation of an action learning set where Hines and Gold (2015) was used as the starting point to cross the bridge from KT1 moving to OP2 in Figure 2. That is, the paper was not a purely abstract theoretical contribution but drew on a variety of sources to make a case for Futures and Foresight, albeit in a decontextualized manner. The intended destination was firstly KT2 to OP3 and then potentially a jump to KT4 and OP5.
In addition, there was also the possibility of reverse flows as data from the sets might allow translations from practice towards further consideration as models and conceptual work.

From the start in FSO, we presented Futures and Foresight as a learning process which we term Futures and Foresight Learning or FFL. In an attempt to engage with the users in FSO, FFL was suggested to one manager in 2017 who had just completed a leadership programme. As a manager concerned with the strategic development of the organisation, he was aware of the limitations on thinking that had occurred in the last 10 years, during which the organisation and the sector as a whole had come close to disaster. FFL seemed an attractive and new direction to explore. Working on the basis that if an insider could become interested, others could be attracted through conversation. This was achieved by providing enough meaning of what was still rather an unknown discipline for the process of persuasion to work. As a result of his efforts, five other managers were able to attend the first meeting of what was not yet an action learning set. However, in order to quickly provide interest, and in accordance with a key feature of action learning, the first move was to consider questions. The following were set for a group response:

1. What is the time horizon?
2. What is the focus for this group?
3. What is the outcome envisaged?

The group used the questions to quickly agree a time horizon first, 2027 but needed more time to find the focus. As newcomers to FFL, the group found future talk more difficult than their reliance of past talk feeding present talk, so prompts were needed. As Aaltonen and Barth (2015) argue, FFL is concerned with our ability to imagine, create and use futures knowledge but looking back or hindsight also plays a part in this. Further prompting to push the talk towards the future produced the focus of:

The Future of FSO Services in 2027

and an outcome of:

Sustain why the FSO community is here: Understand how we deliver to ensure we do.

The process provided an entry point for FFL and a step into the action learning vehicle. FFL is concerned with a time that has not yet happened where predictability falls and uncertainty rises. We suggested that this started once we considered time periods beyond 3 to 4 years. This meant that talk about the future could work with what was probable in terms of the continuation of events and activities, but increasingly had to be concerned with what was possible, plausible, preferable and undesirable or surprising (Micic 2010). Because FSO had endured a very threatening and difficult period until 2010, and had been recovering since then, it was possible to give more prominence to the way FFL could work and the group were happy to move to the next phase of ‘doing the work’ within a project (Hines and Gold 2015). This begins by posing questions, which prompt action, and so action learning could now begin.

A future which concern events that are increasingly uncertain falls closely into what Revans (1983) might have considered as an intractable problem that resists easy solution. In response to such uncertainty, questions can be posed against which there answers are not yet formulated. In F+F work, questions are used to set a direction for possible and probably developments around the focus and outcome. They can direct attention towards finding knowledge that reveal the key factors in terms of trends, issues and technologies about future development of the environment that will inform decision-making. For FSO, such knowledge could concern market conditions, the behaviour of consumers and customers, technology, regulation and the law and general socio-economic-political conditions. Each person in the group was able to set their own question under the focus and outcome that was set earlier but which also reflected their particular interest. These were:

1. Where will the emphasis be on regulation and what do we need to put in place ?
2. How will people's attitudes and emotions towards financial needs change across generations? What is the changing landscape of different generations' expectations?
3. Will people be able to afford to save and want to save for tomorrow?
4. How will we innovate for success? Are we fit for purpose?

The questions were then used to provide a path of action in terms of seeking knowledge. This took the form of company and sector reports, access to experts but also, with our support, academic and other papers from data bases. We developed a cloud based support infrastructure for storage of materials which allowed access to all group members. We met the usual restrictions of company access to external sites (Farah 2015) but all group members had sufficient expertise and 'smart' technology to avoid the restriction.

The group then proceeded to gather data and this formed the basis of the first review of action taken 8 weeks later. During that time, group members were able accumulate significant bundles of information ranging from freely available futures-oriented documents such PWC (2014) and more academic papers such as Nienaber et al. (2014), which are usually only available through subscription-based databases. In order help sense-making and articulate learning, each person prepared a presentation using a template with two sub-headings – Overview and Actions for the Present. The intention was to allow the value of considering the future to be related to possibilities in the present. Figure 2 provides a sample from one of the presentations.

How will people's attitudes and emotions financial needs change across generations?
What is the changing landscape of different generations' expectations?

• **Overview**

-Logistics; physical and virtual.
-Time; rich or poor
- Usability; Advanced or simplicity
-Customer experience; 'look and feel'
- Financial situation; scale of affluence
- Ease of transaction
-Connectivity – 'peer to peer'

•**Actions for the present**

• Current customer segment and feeder group. Establish these further to overlay attitudes and emotions of both groups .
• Personas
•Insight
•Review of channels and usability to accommodate segments across generations

Figure 2

Although not clearly stated, this presentation along with the others was based on multiple sources of information which had been synthesised by two of the group working together. As a first effort to work with FFL, there was a need to guide and direct to some extent. Further by allowing the group to make the presentations in their own words and articulate actions in their own words, they were using language that would be more acceptable to others in FSO. Elsewhere, Hines (2000) referred this as form of stealth positioning of FFL.

The group agreed to take the project further recognising that there was a possibility of connecting their work to others. A review of learning so far had revealed that F+F had:

'Allowed the time and space to start the development of an internal capability that is aligned to supporting our long term growth aspirations'

'Established a group of key leaders within FSO to influence decision making, using well-grounded insight to make projections.'

As insiders, they could see how F+F was 'now starting to ground our work in actionable outcomes' furthering the progress of FFL towards acceptance by others, which Hines and Gold (2015) saw as a key stage in the recognition of the value of the discipline. One way of doing this was to develop mini-scenarios. Scenarios are probably the most well-known FFL method that are applied in organisations, with Wack's (1985) article in Harvard Business Review reporting the development of the Shell Scenarios since the early 1970's. There is strong likelihood that scenarios, as possible futures, become confused with forecasting and impression of controlling uncertainty and lack of predictability. Our approach was to use a simple method to develop mini-scenarios that could be created from the work already completed. The idea was not to provide predictions but to consider projections, with an emphasis on possible futures that were suggested by the work. To encourage joint work and creative talk, we combined two projections to form single mini-scenarios. For example, the following projections were used in the mini-scenario in Figure 3:

1. FSO uses it influence with the sector to collaborate and inform our regulators
2. FSO supports development and research innovative solutions which provide choice, security and trust

Friday 30 January, 2027

FSO LAUNCHES NEW CUSTOMER PORTFOLIO SITE

FSO together with Partners in the Financial Services Industry has today launched a new service which will give customers the opportunity to see their own personal investment portfolio.

Having the ability to view all their savings and investment, mortgage and pension information from any Financial Services providers in the same place will give customers choice and opportunity.

Once a customer has built their own portfolio of accounts, they will see up to date information on balances, interest rates, risk factors and a forecast of a return on those investments

Working with the regulators, FSO and its Partners, including banks and pension companies, have designed a safe and secure system which puts the customer in control.

Gone are the days of inertia and apathy, the customer will have the opportunity to set goals and pathways to help them obtain the right outcome – be that saving for the holiday of a life-time, or planning for retirement.

Once signed up, all their accounts are linked together and they will be able to move their money between providers.

Figure 3: A mini -scenario for FSO in 2027

The making of mini-scenarios completed the first phase of learning for the group, which had also stimulated a growing interest and appreciation of the value of FFL. They could now use the end result, the mini-scenarios, as a means to persuade others. Hines and Gold's (2015) key purpose was to set out the path for the integration of F+F into organisation life. As internal advocates for F+F, the group could work with the mini-scenarios to make them available to others.

Stimulated by the interest shown in the mini-scenarios and the experience of using tools of FFL, including questions to consider at work, a case was being made that added to the discourse that FFL ought to become more widely used in FSO and provided the basis for continue FFL through action, consideration of the outcomes of FFL in FSO's strategy and inclusion of FFL in the organisation's leadership development programmes.

When the Covid 19 pandemic began, FSO was faced with two key issues for the futures. Firstly, how would the pandemic affect work location? Secondly, given the extensive branch network, how would FSO's reputation among customer be affected by an increasing move towards a digital/online relationship? A Virtual Action Learning (VAL) group was formed to consider the year 2025 and over three months, these questions were addressed to produce mini-scenarios from which key ideas were developed for its location and digital plans.

During the Covid 19 Pandemic, the time horizon for FFL was set to five years, reflecting increased uncertainty and reduced predictability. In a UK business school, a FFL group was formed to operate using VAL. Collaboration was selected as a key issue for 2025 focusing on general practice in HE but business schools in particular in addressing covid-19, between organisations and universities. After a review of trends and patterns, two projections were developed, each allowing the formation of a contrast possibility.

- Collaboration is a fundamental, integrated, accepted approach to teaching and learning in HE, rather than resistance to collaboration leading to duplication of effort and ineffective use of resources and knowledge.

- Collaboration between business schools and organisations to enhance teaching and learning is usual, accepted practice, rather than collaboration between business schools and organisations being dependent on the goodwill of individual clusters of staff.

This allowed the development of four mini-scenarios, the most positive of which is shown in Figure 4.

Collaboration is a fundamental, integrated and accepted approach to teaching and learning in HE, and that collaboration between business schools and organisations to enhance teaching and learning is usual, accepted practice.

Strong working relationships exist between business schools and employers, who value the collaboration to the extent that they factor liaison with business schools into a range of their organisational job descriptions. Students in business schools work on real and current case studies developed in collaboration with employers, rather than relying on text book examples. Employers consistently offer a range of quality internships and placements for business schools students. Employer visits, work shadowing and guest lecture opportunities are commonplace and students value the opportunities. Business schools students have a reputation as being highly employable and desirable employees.

Student led enterprise is common and successful within business schools, and there is mentoring given to students by local businesses in both the start-up and in the running of these ventures.

Figure 4: A mini-scenario for business schools in 2025

As the group developed four mini-scenarios, they were able to extrapolate backwards to consider implications for the current strategy which were then presented to their leadership team for consideration. For example, the following were included in their presentation:

- Embed employability knowledge and competences and confidence in modules at all levels in the business school
- Encourage PG studies, especially where employment opportunities reduced
- Audit course/module content, ensure currency and employability focus; audit staff competences and ensure best fit to delivery when profiling

- Encourage collaboration, communities of practice, team work and communication developing a permanent culture shift
- Encourage internships, placements, work experience, consultancy projects and real case studies developed with employers

The response from the leadership team was enthusiastic and positive. A meeting was held online to allow further discussion and was opened to staff throughout the business school. This created an extension of FFL to others beyond the group. One consequence that soon emerged was the creation of a core module in the business and management degree at Level 5 (year 2), which introduce students to FFL.

Discussion

Against a widely-held view that too much business and management research does not move beyond academic publication, if it gets there, this paper has sought to provide a different view. The paper by Hines and Gold (2015) was refereed and published in a journal that takes impact seriously: for example, the journal metrics show an Impact Factor of 2.058 and a Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP) of 2.658. However, such metrics have little meaning beyond the academic world; suffice to say that the paper in question had, according to a recent Google Scholar search, 41 citations[2]. Nevertheless, the paper seeks to present a way by which Futures and Foresight as a particular field of understanding could be integrated into an organisation and valued for the contribution it makes to organizational life. Importantly, the paper advocates the role of internal champions to broker a process based on conversations the seek to persuade others to join the work and the progressive construction of the text of FFL throughout organisations. The members of the action learning groups became the internal champions and as has been shown elsewhere (e.g. Dovey and Rembach 2015), this provides an important way for the use of action learning. If we reconsider the critique of Maxwell (2011), who has argued that the knowledge-inquiry trap is disconnected from the problems of living. Such problems would include global warming, pollution, poverty, obesity, housing and so on. If anything, the Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted such issues and made them more urgent. In response, Maxwell advocates a shift to what he calls wisdom-inquiry which is concerned with problems of living, realizing what is of value in life and justice. Action learning, for example, can provide the connection between the many reports and inquiries that relate to such issues, but with the impetus to bring about change and learning. For example, Watt et al. (2016) show how action learning sets in different organisations sought to tackle poverty in the Leeds City Region.

A further issue concerns the direction of travel on the bridge as considered in Thorpe et al's (2011) KTV-C. Starting from KT1 with OP2, the process initially gave prominence to the published paper, or what Revans would have seen as P or programme instruction. Indeed, despite the reverse arrows, the main thrust of KTV-C is from left to right, theory to practice, in a linear direction. We might suggest that, given the P-rich world that we now inhabit, it is important to recognize that value of creating the translations based on outputs. However, we also need to recognize more cyclical and iterative pathways on the bridge (to mix the

[2] Search completed on 19 May, 2021

metaphors). Ross et al., (2020a) to see knowledge translation as a net or network which extends the impact of one case, as presented here maybe, to others through interaction and this can include a variety of different disciplines.

As should be evident from the various texts that were produced in the cases, not only did they provide the impetus to bring about new practices and to help provide some clarity for strategy, they also represent a codification of the meanings generated by the members of the action learning groups. Revans (1982) might have recognized such 'symbiosis' as 'System Gamma' (p. 347) and the data gathered in response to questions posed and the learning that surfaces provide a rich source for further research to be translated and formulated into outcomes.

Considering some implication for HRD research and practice, it should be evident that academic papers in many disciplines, as well as impact cases prepared for REF (Ross et al., 2020), provide significant opportunities for more widespread translations. Further, as argued by Ross et al., (2020a) the translations can be facilitated by HRD academics and practitioners who play a role as intermediary or broker. Indeed, it becomes possible for our universities to support such initiatives as part of the collaboration mini scenario presented in this paper.

In particular, action learning as an HRD activity, can give prominence of connecting research – as P – through the posing of questions – as Q – which is relevant to the problems of practice. As a part of the future consideration of the KTV-C or the net, we recommend how action learning, can accommodate the cycles and iterations that lie at the crux of knowledge generation and creation. Collaborations between HRD professionals and academe can also employ action learning for the benefit of participants and a contribution to further research through action learning research (Raelin, 1999).

A further implication for HRD, both in theory and practice, is the incorporation of Futures and Foresight as FFL. That is, as we have demonstrated, the tools and techniques of an emerging sub discipline can be easily accommodated under the heading of HRD to the benefit of organisations and beyond. As we begin to consider life beyond the Covid 19 pandemic, FFL which is enacted by action learning provides a transforming opportunity for HRD.

Conclusion

We began this paper by suggesting that in management and business research, including HRD, there has been a long held concern that too much prominence is given to the rigour of research at the expense of its application. What should be the means to a change or illumination of the world as an end becomes an end in itself when publication is achieved. Journal editors and publishers reinforce this distortion through an ongoing obsession with rankings and citations. However, even before Covid 19 pandemic but reinforced by it, the time seems right to restore or remake the balance. Academic papers in management and business can be made meaningful in practice beyond publication and HRD, especially through action learning, can play a key part of bridging theory to practice and vice versa.

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