

Researchers and Practitioners: Colleagues or Strangers?

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Abstract

This is the report of a small, pilot research project, funded by an internal BMRI grant, and carried out from January to July 2014. The aim of the project was to facilitate better access by practitioners to current research. Researchers and practitioners often have very different priorities and operate within very different environments. Despite good intentions much academic writing is presented in language and concepts that seem very far removed from managers' concerns and day-to-day realities. But the relationship between the two is profoundly symbiotic. Researchers are concerned with investigating real problems and concerns and are generally desirous of having an impact on practice. Practitioners generally want to do their jobs well and are keen to benefit from new ideas and knowledge. And yet attempts to facilitate dialogue between the two groups are often unsuccessful. This paper reports on a small research project aimed at piloting three approaches to making research accessible. The researchers worked collaboratively with the National Coalition of Independent Action's network of practitioner managers. Three research articles were chosen and summaries of each produced. Different models were developed for these summaries and subsequently evaluated. Each article concerned current research into aspects of voluntary sector management and managers surveyed for feedback into the effectiveness of the different formats chosen.

Introduction

Our starting assumption was that although researchers and practitioners share overlapping interests and concerns there are also significant difficulties to be overcome in creating effective dialogue between them. Researchers and practitioners tend to inhabit different organisational and sectorial cultures. Each tends to develop quite specialised languages, which may be confusing and off-putting to the other. Researchers and managers often operate within very different time constraints, with researchers typically working to longer term, or even open-ended time scales while the need to respond very quickly to changes in the external environment is a necessity for managers. Although it is to glib to say that managers want answers and researchers are interested in better questions, nonetheless this cliché does capture some sense of the differences in perspectives born out of different circumstances and day to day realities. We suspect that these different circumstances create quite formidable barriers while acknowledging that many of us working in either research or management are motivated by a powerful desire to make a difference; to address significant social problems and make a real difference on the ground. And yet very little of what researchers produce is seen by practitioners and when it is, practitioners often find it dense and inaccessible. So our project aimed to make research more accessible, without losing too much of the depth and richness of the work.

Project Design

This project was carried out by two researchers (Daniel King and Christina Schwabenland) and one practitioner (Andy Benson from the National Coalition for Independent Action). NCIA was chosen as the partner organisation because the original impetus for the project came from discussions in a panel on critical approaches to voluntary sector management at the International Critical Management Studies Conference in Manchester in July 2013. Thus, from the very beginning, the project allied itself with a particular ideological position in regard to the motivation of the researchers and also the choice of articles chosen.

The first stage of the project involved identifying three recently published papers (in academic journals or as conference papers) of widespread interest to voluntary sector managers. We used a number of networks to circulate the call for contributions and posted a call on the NCIA website. These calls did not elicit any response, so we approached a number of individuals, whose work we were familiar with, to ask them to participate. From this we identified three articles: *'Protecting the most vulnerable' in an economic crisis: a participatory study of civil society organisations in Ireland*, by Gemma M. Carney, Tony Dundon and Áine Ní Léime, *Managing conflicting logics: Organizational and individual responses to inherent contradictions in nonprofit organizations* by Sarah Langer and *A state of unlearning? Government as experiment*, by Karel Williams and John Law. We asked each researcher to produce a summary of their article, suggesting formats such as 1) a short executive summary in written form, 2) a 'TED talk' podcast and 3) a more interactive format such as a locally organised seminar with an invited audience. We also asked each researcher to keep notes about their reflections as they produced their summaries and in particular, about the choices they had to make when deciding what to leave in or out.

Things do not always go according to plan. Gemma Carney had to withdraw from the project, and as the time scale was very tight, Daniel King stepped into the breach and recorded a video of an article he had written on *Professionalization of the voluntary sector practitioner*. Sarah Langer and Karel Williams each produced written summaries, but their approach was quite different.

The three summaries were uploaded on to the NCIA website in June. Their presence was highlighted through twitter, the NCIA website itself and through individual networking and twenty practitioners approached for feedback. Feedback from ten of these was received through emails and from postings on the website.

Findings

The project attracted a lot of very positive interest. Two indicative comments¹:

'What a great project.... This is a great idea and it would be good to use with other networks that mix practitioners and researchers... to reach a wider audience.'

(P7)

Several respondents also identified immediate uses to which they could put the summaries.

'I enjoyed this and am minded to show it at one of our network meetings if it is public. The background is too dark? I liked the presentation as both a piece of research, and a personal story, which is of course the reality of all research worthy of the name. This video will be useful in introducing voluntary groups to the concept of professionalisation and its hazards, as people often see this as simply the way of the world. I thought the video was a more human way of presenting this, different from both an academic paper and a lecture.'

(P3)

'The article on Government as an Experiment really engaged me, and I immediately shared it for two different audiences on twitter - it got all sorts of connections firing in my mind. I think the title drew me in, I liked it, and in addition (importantly) the paper was really clear and well explained.'

'All pieces offered me phrases which I pounced on and I know I can make use of: "contradictory workplaces " YES! "think disruptively" YES!' (P5)

There were also many useful suggestions for ways in which each of the formats could be improved. Interestingly, no one format was preferred above the others. Each attracted a variety of comments, with the video generally being seen as the most accessible, but also overly long. Also, the more didactic delivery of the video was not universally popular. The two written formats were generally liked, and the use of boxes to add visual contrast and to quickly summarise key points was particularly noted.

A number of comments concerned the content of the summaries rather than the format. In one sense this feedback is less directly useful in terms of the aims of the project but it does demonstrate that the summaries were effective, in that the respondents read them and engaged with the ideas.

¹ Quotations taken from feedback from practitioners are identified as P1, P2 etc., and from researchers (the authors of the three articles) as R1, R2 etc.

More unexpectedly, some of the feedback was not only highly critical but also was also expressed with varying degrees of anger. Some of this was focussed on the content of the papers as in the following examples:

'Are they [the authors] offering advice and leadership in a world going mad? Nope - an apology, a mind-game and... well no comment on [example] paper, it doesn't deserve one.'

'I got frustrated by the apparent inability of all pieces to call a spade a spade, and to take a side or position. There was a political dishonesty or naivety which is part of the gap between academia and the messy world of activists/practitioners. All pieces in different ways were talking about the impact of neoliberalism and the ideologies that underpin this. I would like to see research become more explicitly political, or at least transparent about the dominant hegemonies, naming what is really going on.' (P5)

These comments raise interesting questions about how researchers and practitioners understand each other's' roles. However, it is important to note that the researchers' whose papers were under discussion all consider themselves as having an affinity with critical approaches to management, and as such, did regard themselves as taking a more political stance than many researchers might wish to do.

However, there was also a considerable amount of anger expressed about form and presentation.

'The voice I heard predominantly was that of a lecturer, talking to "them" and not to "us" as fellow activists/practitioners. I found this distancing and at times felt a lesser mortal.' (P5)

'He generally used language most of the population understands, though he soon slipped into 'I'm smart so you take note of what I say' mode by using the word 'beignet'...thereby establishing himself as a being superior to the audience. How to lose friends and fail to influence people. Didn't he read and take note of Paulo Freire?' (P6)

'The video caused irritation, because I didn't know where it was leading and what point I was supposed to take, let alone what I might do about it, and I'm not someone who can easily be lectured.' (P5)

The following example is particularly interesting because this respondent found the content important and stimulating:

'[Example] made me angry, despite the content being intriguing and very interesting... I wanted to feel less like a laboratory rat and more

like an effective person The writers seemed so aloof from the job at hand, with their finger pointing at me to do the hard work.' (P5)

For the authors producing the summaries also proved to be unexpectedly difficult, and even painful at times:

'I guess I cannot [con]dense it down to two pages or it will be very painful for me, I just can't leave central results out, it would be negligent, it is just not possible.' (R1)

'I have realised after doing the first hour is that my original ambition of writing only 1000 words has been completely blown because I am mirroring instances of the structure of the academic article. My assumption now is that this might reach 3 to 4000 words.' (R3)

These findings raise a number of issues which will be briefly addressed in the following section.

Discussion

In reflecting on these findings we realized that although we had identified a number of barriers to effective dialogue between researchers and practitioners, we had primarily approached the projects as a technological exercise, assuming (naively that they could be overcome through the development of *techniques* of presentation. This assumption was clearly wrong. The strength of feeling that the project aroused alongside the nature of those feelings ('pain', 'anger' and 'frustration) suggests that the barriers to understanding reside at a deeper level.

One issue seems to be a perception, on the part of the practitioners, that the researchers were 'talking down' to them, being condescending. This was not the intention of the researchers, as demonstrated by the difficulties of choosing the right 'voice' with which to present the material.

'I still wonder if I should change the language[to]n a rather "non-academic" manner, but I didn't change the language so far because I am not willing to "reformulate" the language in an "easier" shape as this opens up a hierarchical view on the relation between practitioners and scientist. My premise then is to write in a transparent and clear manner for the readers to comprehend my argumentation.' (R1)

'I believe this paper, [of] the ones that have currently available, speaks more directly to the interests of voluntary sector practitioners, where as others I have been working on are more focused on the relationship between critical management studies and practice.' (R3)

Although the two researchers cited above present slightly different responses, with one choosing to retain a level of complexity in her approach in order *not*

to be condescending, and the second choosing to pick an article that was less theoretical in its orientation in order to be more relevant, each is struggling to 'get it right'. We speculated that some of the anger might stem from a perception that academics are more protected from the harsher environment in which practitioners are working. This was to some extent acknowledged by one of the researchers:

'I am in the luxurious position to research and reflect [on] the concrete constraints of daily practice, instead of having to deal with them as practitioner. My task then is to reflect them in a critical manner and opening a way for perceiving the circumstances as changeable, as possibly containing alternatives.' (R1)

Many of us are in more luxurious positions – our contracts are a little more secure, our administrative demands a little (just a little) less burdensome than those of practitioners; it is probably important to acknowledge that degree of privilege. However, the pressure to be framing research in the language and concepts that are seen as desirable in highly rated journals is a competing pressure that practitioners may not be aware of, nor that *'institutional mechanisms do not reward such endeavours'* (R3).

Another issue that requires further thought is the difficulty -perhaps impossibility – of separating form from content, as demonstrated in R1's reflection:

'As the topic of my research was the professionalization process of an NPO [non-profit organisation] , It comes to my mind that reading this executive summary by practitioners might well be interpreted as a sign of professionalization: integrating scientific knowledge into daily practice.' (R1)

The anger demonstrated by some of the practitioners and framed as a desire for academics to 'get off the fence' and take a position may reflect another side of this dilemma, an understanding that knowledge is not value neutral and a distrust of a presentation that does not acknowledge that. Critical researchers are aware of the possibilities that attempt to critique certain phenomena can result in their reification, as R1 recognises.

Further Development

The pilot project has raised a number of questions that were unexpected, and deserve more consideration. our original intent was to produce a series of protocols, 'how-to-to-it' sheets in effect, that would encourage more researchers to produce, relatively quickly and cheaply, summaries of their current work that could be rapidly disseminated to practitioners . Although our study is extremely small, and focussed on a particular group of researchers and practitioners who each bring a critical orientation their work, on the basis of our findings we are now much less sure that this technocratic approach would be helpful. One possibility for further research would be to produce a

wider range of summaries and gather feedback from a more diverse range of practitioners. However, with the understanding we now have about the possible consequences of this task, we intend to delve more deeply into the material we have and carry out some follow-up interviews with both researchers and practitioners to explore these findings in more depth. We also intend to interview people working in 'bridging' organisations who have more experience of making research accessible to draw on their expertise. We have already presented initial findings at three academic conferences (Discourse Power and Resistance, European Group on Organisation Studies and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations / Voluntary Sector Studies Network) and we plan to write these further reflections up for publication in an academic journal and are considering a small series of discussion sheets developed around these issues as a means of dissemination and debate with practitioners.