

Academia and development

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A recent topic debated on the KM4Dev discussion forum, introduced by Hem Thore of Norad, was ‘Academia and development’. Thore’s central point was one of work load and communication:

In our agency there is an increased focus on how we could strengthen our relationship with researchers and research institutions...Preliminary observations [from research on this topic] indicate that many of the staff would like to build more on research in their advisory work. However, many find themselves in a work situation where there is no time to immerse themselves in the academic reports and literature.

Thore then asks if anybody has any ideas how to ‘solve the time-trap dilemma’ and there is an implicit assumption that by solving this dilemma there will be some sort of positive outcome (i.e. – more cross-fertilization ideas will lead towards improved results by development workers/advisors). The responses from contributors to the forum seem to have revolved around a couple of key issues: namely the relationship between the human being and the use of learning material – as well as the technology required to deliver the material to be learnt. Culture appears to play a role in this debate. In this brief note, I will try and review the central points of the conversation and develop a few tangential themes.

Contributors to this discussion comprised (‘in order of appearance’) Hem Thore, Vardhani, Erik Caldwell Johnson, Dr Jyotsna Bapat, Chris Burman, Sebastiao Ferreira, François Stepman, Haresh Dalvi, George Obanyi, Steve Denning, Malaika Wright, George de Gooijer, Neils Keijzer, Tom Abeles, Nancy White, Frank Ryan, Stephanie Colton and Mark Winslow. The discussion, under the headings ‘Academia and development’ and ‘Revisiting academia and development’ featured more than 40 contributions during 9-23 March 2006. It also led to other contributions on related subjects, including ‘Routines versus creativity and new knowledge’ and ‘Devil’s advocates.’

The time-trap dilemma and learning

Dr Jyotsna Bapat opened by explaining how he found that by taking consultancy work he found himself better able to produce more meaningful papers. He also mentioned the way in which he was criticized for selling out to his sponsors – ‘but it worked’. This was

a useful opening gambit because it emphasizes how contested the expression ‘development’ is and implicitly points towards the way in which areas of research are determined (and who determines these arenas) as being far from neutral (apolitical) concerns. This comment emphasizes that the politics surrounding what researchers *should* be working on is always going to be an area of debate.

Haresh Dalvi – as did Vardhani, Eric Johnson from the World Bank and Francois Stepman – explained how it is possible to tackle the ‘time-trap’ dilemma by literally forcing a space for reflective thinking between professionals. All these contributors gave useful examples of how spaces for knowledge sharing can be invented if the issue is approached creatively. This facilitative environment – so it seems to me – represents the institutionalization (suggesting that leadership plays an implicit role in the process) of identifying and protecting moments during hectic weeks where motivated people can come together and learn – with the process enhanced by pragmatic technological innovation.

Sebastiao Ferreira moved the focus slightly by arguing that people have a theoretical glass ceiling with respect to learning about their field of interest which can then lead towards ‘professional stagnation’. However, he qualifies this claim by suggesting that it is not just people’s ability to learn that contributes to this stagnation but rather it is the agenda within which people can learn that is a key factor that constrains such learning processes. Sebastiao acknowledges that the agenda is partially set by the seemingly individually held ‘theory in use, plenty of assumptions and unconscious beliefs’ which become the ‘decisive factors in the level of [personal] achievement’ but emphasizes a more social context of agenda setting as being influential. This comment – like Dr. Jyotsna Bapat’s note - implicitly points towards the politics of knowledge being an invisible mediator of our learning terrain. Sebastiao’s comment reminds me of intellectual / practitioner Paulo Freire’s emphasis on exploding the existing bourgeois conceptual context within which people live as a form of radical empowerment because this process – *conscientization* – broadens the intellectual parameters of existence, in turn offering more choices for the future.

Sebastiao goes on to briefly explore the nuts and bolts of (Western) empiricism before arguing that the ‘gateway for practice renewal is promoting an agenda ... defining concrete points people need to dig into for pushing their work forward.’ He then suggests that once the area of interest is defined and captured then the space will open for learning to occur. In my view, this slightly contradicts his pertinent comments about the context because he assumes that an area of interest, once individually defined, will become accessible to the learner. I concur that motivation to learn is a very significant fulcrum around which learning hinges but I think we should question whether or not the individual – set amongst complex social relations – is necessarily able to access, absorb and articulate that which they identify as being the area they wish to dig into.

Thore responded enthusiastically to Sebastiao’s call for a critical look at the agenda constraints contained within contemporary ‘Dev-speak’:

In Norway, it is my understanding that the culture of development aid - though rooted in the solidarity/internationalism of the labour movement and the Christian charity - has consciously created a distance to those asking critical questions. Because of the false understanding that criticism/academic discussion could easily turn out as ammunition for the enemies of the development co-operation.

Once again broader political concerns permeated into the discussion. Thore said he would be exploring the suggestion of looking into ‘reflective practice writings’ – which is something that perhaps we should all be considering in more detail. Sebastiao responded by recalling a comment by Steve Denning that the ‘best learning occurs in the areas where the successes or the failures were not complete’ and went on to emphasize how appraisal processes were often overly biased towards documenting successes which means that often some very interesting sources of learning are ignored. Sebastiao points the conversation towards a pertinent dialectic between demonstrating to funders that our work is worth funding again and the reality that sometimes we can actually improve our work by exploring the mistakes made along the way – but by doing so we may simultaneously risk jeopardizing our position with our donors.

The researcher-practitioner divide

George Obanyi brought the conversation back to Thore’s central point by indicating that joint publication between practitioners and academics had ‘narrowed the gap between’ the professions. George also makes the important point that with a paradigm shift towards human rights and development, the role of communication in development has the potential to facilitate the voices of all becoming more audible.

Steve Denning then entered the conversation to tell us where he feels the problem lies:

There seem to be two different problems being discussed here.

One is the problem of finding out what has been discovered in academia and elsewhere of relevance to development and the organizations involved in it.

The other is the problem of putting into practice, and getting our organizations to put into practice, what one learns there.

Much of the discussion so far seems to be about the former problem. In practice, however, it’s the latter problem that is the more serious one.

Steve then explains what must be done – ‘rather implementing what we already know needs to change’ and hints that story telling may be a useful tool to affect such change.

My own contribution was intended to emphasize that we all bring biases to the development/academia forum and that these biases form a necessary part of being human. In my opinion, it is this maelstrom of emotive thinking that enables human beings to be

the creative creature that I think we are. My feeling is that any development related 'interface' is far from a neutral playing field: it is a jumble of beliefs, politics and thoughts but above all it is a playing field of unequal social relations. So, when a technology or knowledge is introduced into the warp and weft of this playing field, it is picked up and used by the players in ways that are difficult to determine. Thus, synergy between academics and practitioners is possible but not guaranteed. And it may well be that synergy between the two groups is not necessarily a good thing for the future of development related activities.

Scientific method versus story telling

Tom Abeles responded by asking that we critically re-visit the belief system that underpins the academic community: 'the scientific method'.

Unfortunately there are many, particularly amongst academics, who have not given up on the hope that even if there are not such "articulatable" laws, there is the scientific method that can be pursued to uncover or to organize possibilities. These are truly wonderful stories that are alive and well, even in the field of KM. There are even some academics who still believe that because they have proclaimed that they have such an armamentarium at their command that they still command the "bully pulpit".

My view around this issue of giving up on the scientific method is that while we can all see the damage being done through the scientific method (global warming; global inequalities of wealth distribution etc.), it is uncertain – in my mind – whether we can be certain that the scientific method is solely responsible for these issues and simultaneously we must note that the scientific method (of which I am personally very critical) has produced incredible opportunities across the globe. My suggestion is that the scientific method is so closely interdependent with rampant neo-liberalism (politics and coercion) that it is impossible to implicate the method as the harbinger of all that is bad in the world today. I also feel that to reduce the future to one without the scientific method seems impossible to imagine unless we are to change the hearts and minds of millions of people. My fantasy for the future is a simple imaginary that re-invents the scientific method to one tool that can be used to achieve a global condition where human beings are considered more important than profit.

Steve Denning responded to my contribution (which, after Antonio Gramsci, included a mention that we are all intellectuals) and claimed that a central delusion of many people is that human beings are solely rational beings:

This neatly sums up a central set of delusions of much of academia – and development, for that matter. Humans are rational beings. The intellect is the one and only basis for acting. Life is a mental phenomenon. If we keep working on reasons, we will eventually be able to solve our problems. And so on.

Steve argues that there are two modes of operating that human beings employ to make decisions:

Human beings are a species that has two modes of operating. One is quick and intuitive and effortless and partly unconscious and tightly linked to passion. The other is deliberative and slow and deliberative and effortful - the process that Chris refers to. Our lives are a combination of both processes, and scientific research shows that most of our decisions are based on the former mode, not the latter. Read Gary Klein's book, Sources of Power (1998) for instance. In fact, if we tried to run our entire lives entirely in the latter, deliberative mode, we would die of indecision. Both modes of operating have their value.

He goes on to explain that if you want to influence people and hence make change then you need to get under the skin of their 'story' as a mechanism for influencing change.

Similarly, if you want to influence people in the development field, you need to comprehend the story that is guiding the lives of those people and then find ways to induce them to imagine a different kind of story.

Steve's point that human beings are more than *homo economicus* is well made and is especially relevant to the question of how to close the gap between academics and practitioners. Inducing academics to 'imagine a different kind of story' in terms of how they deliver their findings could be a useful strategy in dealing with the Hem Thore's original question about how to close the 'time-trap dilemma'. Likewise, practitioners might also be induced to imagine a different kind of story in their search for useful research material.

At this point the conversation dipped in and out of the 'Routine versus creativity' debate but was re-focused by Steve Denning when he responded to Frank Ryan's snippet about giving reasons 'why' it is important to do something by claiming that:

[G]iving people reasons is certainly better than giving instructions, but the problem is that reasons are aimed at the wrong organ of the body. Reasons aim at the brain, whereas basic change comes from the heart. So if you want basic change, you have to reach people in the heart, something reasons can't do. Failure to grasp this leads to many of the problems we see in families and communities.

This statement seems overly biased towards a corporeal locus of control but there seems to be little doubt about the power of the story as a vehicle with which to express the feelings of the body. My concern with the notion of the story as a tool for change is the issue of 'context'. Steve Denning was involved with an extraordinary moment of change at the World Bank and this change is closely associated with the story as a key player in the game. My uncertainty lies around whether it really was the story that facilitated this change or whether the desire for change (the context) was already lurking in the hearts and minds of the Bank employees. Is it possible that the context was clearly set and the

momentum for change flowed through the story (and could have flowed through other change management strategies) rather than being kick started by the story?

The final points that were made regarding the ‘Academia and development’ thread then began to focus on the type of institution which could facilitate a more effective form of work. Steve Denning reminds us how management theory has changed from top-down to horizontal management strategies but warns:

*[H]ow long will it take before all organizations get into the collaborative mode?
The answer may well depend on how alert we all are to the issues.*

Steve also mentioned that organizations need to be radically restructured so that they can organically become more efficient delivery tools and Tom Abeles reminded us that the power relations within organizations are rarely conducive to this sort of reform.

So this discussion spread across a broad spectrum of inter-related areas of concerns which I will now try to summarize in order to reach some final conclusions.

Conclusions

Thore asked about how to close the time-trap dilemma in ways that would put researchers and practitioners closer to each others’ knowledge. The first few responses gave very practical suggestions about how to do precisely that. The ideas put forth indicated that, with some creative thinking, it is possible to facilitate motivated people to come to a forum to enter into dialogue concerning research and implementation.

The conversation – prompted by Sebastiao – then moved towards the politics of agenda setting. Agenda setting is a highly political issue which many radical academics have commented on. Sebastiao’s point is well made and a welcome reminder that politics and development are interdependent activities.

However, for Tom it is not so much politics that seems to be the thorny problem to be dealt with but the embedded cultural bias of the modern, Western, established ‘scientific method’ which is the routine that constrains us as we seek to forge a future from a complex world.

Steve moved in and balanced the story by indicating that both thinking and intuitive decision making processes guide people as they decide to act. Steve emphasized the importance of narrative and story as a vehicle through which it is possible to persuade people to affect change. It is difficult to be precise about the link to the story and Thore’s original question but it seems fair to suggest that the story could help both academics and practitioners come together. However, the story – as a change catalyst – seems dependent upon a clearly articulated and shared context. I am not convinced that academics and researchers necessarily have a shared context and so story-telling may not be – in some instances - the useful tool that Steve suggests it is. To offer a brief example

of what I am trying to get at about contexts and story-telling, I would like to propose the example of the situation in South Africa.

I work in South Africa where the context is uncertain. For many people the transition to democracy has produced a confusing context and many people seem to prefer to articulate their story under Apartheid rather than their story of today. I wonder if the context of today in South Africa is so contradictory that it is almost impossible for people to negotiate a story that is easily shared. It certainly seems to me that it is easier for people to articulate their story when the context is a familiar one and perhaps we should ask whether or not academics and practitioners necessarily share the same context within which they can come together and improve the collaborative efforts that this conversation has implicitly been hinged around.

While there are many examples of academics and practitioners working together it may just be that the tension between some academics and practitioners is a significant part of the mix that helps keep critical development theorizing alive and well.

Abstract

This contribution to *Community Notes* reviews the discussion on ‘Academia and development’ discussion which took place on KM4Dev in March 2006. The discussion was initiated by Hem Thore. Thore asked about how to close the time-trap dilemma in ways that would put researchers and practitioners closer to each others’ knowledge. The first few responses gave very practical suggestions about how to do precisely that. The ideas put forth indicated that, with some creative thinking, it is possible to facilitate motivated people to come to a forum to enter into dialogue concerning research and implementation. The conversation then moved towards the politics of agenda setting. However, for some it is not so much politics that seems to be the thorny problem to be dealt with but the embedded cultural bias of the modern, Western, established ‘scientific method’ which is the routine that constrains us as we seek to forge a future from a complex world. Both thinking and intuitive decision making processes guide people as they decide to act. The discussion emphasized the importance of narrative and story as a vehicle through which it is possible to persuade people to affect change. It is difficult to be precise about the link to the story and Thore’s original question but it seems fair to suggest that the story could help both academics and practitioners come together. However, the story – as a change catalyst – seems dependent upon a clearly articulated and shared context.

About the author



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