Experienced professionals and doctoral study: a search for performative co-creation

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Abstract

Those doctoral researchers in business-to-business marketing who have substantial prior experience in business practice offer the opportunity for a valuable, constructive dialogue between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. However, for this dialogue to be genuinely constructive there needs to be a mutual understanding of the complementarity of knowledge-creation processes in the worlds of the academic and the practitioner. Employing a reflective approach to engaged scholarship, through which they explore their own experiences as students and supervisors in doctoral research programmes involving highly-experienced candidates, the authors identify sources of tension that can inhibit mutual understanding and effective knowledge co-creation. These reflections also suggest how tensions may be resolved so leading to the greater depth of insight that proponents of engaged scholarship claim can emerge from such participative research approaches. In particular, the notion of performative co-creation of knowledge, through which theory that meets the academic criterion of relevance and the practical criterion of usefulness, is advocated.

Keywords

Performativity; engaged scholarship; research relevance; doctoral research; DBA.

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1.0: Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide a reflectively informed conceptual account of experienced professionals undertaking doctoral study and those supervising them during the process. The article will speak to the need to create an agenda for doctoral supervisors not only to encourage and grow the number of experienced professionals in doctoral study but also to supervise them in such a way that allows for their experiences to be fully inculcated into the research process and findings. The expectation is that this will lead to greater social relevancy in their findings and greater impact stemming from them. The practical value in such an achievement would be to develop the agenda for business engagement, enhancement of business relevancy in academic research, and greater performativity of academic theories. We seek to define a notion of performative co-creation of doctoral research questions that enhance the potential for performative theories to be developed. We are drawn to the comment by Halse and Malfroy (2010, p. 80) when speaking of traditional modes of supervision as:

“…an intellectual and social enterprise, where personal boundaries were sometimes blurred but the roles of supervisors and students were clear: the supervisor provided oversight and guidance; the doctoral student was responsible for producing a seminal thesis that would secure his or her place as an authority in their field. Such representations may reflect the sort of romantic yearning for an imagined golden past.”

The collective reflections of the authors have found difficulties with this model of supervision for experienced professionals, a model that uncritically assumes the ascendancy of the supervisor’s knowledge over the student’s. The very notion of ‘supervisor’ can seem unhelpful in this regard. Malfroy (2005, p. 166) suggests that:

“..doctoral programs that attract professionally based workers, many of whom come from senior positions, are having a profound impact in altering traditional hierarchical models of expert/novice.”
Malfroy (2005) further points out the problems of a supervisor supervising a doctoral student with more years of experience in the disciplinary area, and potentially more practical legitimacy than the supervisor, and calls for new models of supervision to emerge. We will suggest that in this revised model the expert/novice dynamic may become significantly blurred and, indeed, in some cases reversed. A more helpful term would be to consider this exchange as a more democratic co-creation of value which we will work towards defining in this paper. Indeed, Malfroy and Yates (2003) found that new knowledge was collectively produced between experienced professionals and supervisors. Klein and Rowe (2008, p. 676) also suggest that newly designed programmes need to be developed that are attractive to professional candidates, a contention that we will support in this paper. They suggest that:

“If some doctoral programs were specifically designed to build on this intellectual capital, more doctorally qualified faculty would produce practically relevant research in the eyes of "expert” practitioners.”

Therefore the agenda for business-to-business marketers and scholars, in general, is to generate practical and performative findings that demonstrably create social impact. We consequently take on board Klein and Rowe’s link between an effective, as we shall say, ‘engaged’ doctoral programme, and the potential for performative and relevant findings. It is worth reminding ourselves at this juncture of the meaning of engagement.

“The scholarship of engagement, […] consists of (1) research, teaching, integration, and application scholarship that (2) incorporate reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge” (Barker, 2004, p. 124).

In our proposed agenda we will link these debates to the need for performative theory as a result of doctoral study involving experienced doctoral candidates (EDCs). We will develop Marti and Gond’s (2018) processual framework of performativity which offers several stages as to how theory can be used performatively by adding a precursor stage that postulates as to the nature of performative co-creation. In doing so we engage with a discussion by Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017, p. 30) who ask:
“How to generate socially useful knowledge through engaged research that foregrounds making sense of experience ‘from within’ lived collaborative conversations?”

The framework has scope for discussion beyond the context of doctoral study, although that is the focus of our discussion in this paper. Our article is a reflectively informed empirical paper that builds on the experiences of the authors as doctoral students and doctoral supervisors.

Our contribution has several dimensions. First, we present a conceptual framework that positions a new phase of performative co-creation within a well-regarded process theory of performativity. It is suggested that this theory is transferable to many contexts of society-academic interaction. We limit our discussion here however to the context of doctoral study between EDCs and engaged doctoral supervisors (EDSs). We offer guidance on the relational process of supervising and studying for a doctoral programme, to build guidance for performative co-creation from the perspective of an EDC and their academic supervisor. To our knowledge this approach is the first of its kind to link doctoral study to the performativity literature and we build on the calls, mostly in the education literature, for new models of supervision to emerge. As all those contributing reflections within the paper are industrial marketers, the particular context should be of interest to the readers of this journal. However the framework offered and guidance is expected to have much broader interest.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we take a non-formulaic approach (Mats Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013) to the structure of the paper and introduce five reflective vignettes. This non-formulaic approach is consistent with the values we espouse in the paper to problematize, challenge and disrupt existing thinking and produce findings of practical merit. We then draw on these reflections to discuss engaged scholarship in the context of EDCs and EDSs. We then propose how the co-creation of value between EDC and EDS can lead to better performativity of academic theories. We conclude by offering guidance for future EDCs and EDSs.

2.0: Reflective vignettes

Our approach to the empirical date in our paper is informed by a desire for methodological plurality (Midgley, Nicholson, & Brennan, 2017). Similar to the approach taken by Whitehurst and Richter (2018) and much like the approach adopted by Strumińska-Kutra (2016), drawing on the experiences of the authorial team, we use a reflective approach to study engaged scholarship. In this section we present five vignettes, in which the authors provide critical
reflections on their personal experiences as EDCs and EDSs, drawing in particular on the
notion of the engaged scholarship, a participative form of research where greater insight is
sought by combining the perspectives of different stakeholders (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016; Van
de Ven, 2007).

Vignette 1: Doctoral student with 30 years of professional experience

I am a ‘pracademic’, a term I use to identify myself colloquially as someone who has ‘blended’
experience as a practitioner and academic. My practical experience amounts to over 30 years
in industry, almost wholly in business-to-business contexts. During my 12 years as an
‘academic’ I have continued to practice through my own B2B marketing consultancy.

The motivation for my doctorate was a desire to understand more about how sales and
marketing interact to develop value propositions. This desire was driven by a history of
working as a senior marketing practitioner in large organizations, which had attempted to move
towards a more customer-centric approach to developing value propositions with varying
degrees of success. Having the opportunity to try and understand more deeply, unpack, and
explain the phenomenon of sales-marketing interworking for value proposition production to
try and help move practitioner understanding forward was an exciting prospect for me as a
novice academic researcher.

During the early phases of the doctorate I felt my practitioner experience was seen by the
programme and supervisory team as a barrier to research objectivity that drove me towards a
neo-empiricist research approach. However, I felt that adopting this ‘objective’ approach led
to the production of anodyne work that left my considerable commercial experience out of the
analysis during the write up of essays, which were deemed to be ‘non-doctoral’. This left me
feeling frustrated and caused me to question the worth of continuing on the doctoral journey.
The overemphasis on research philosophy also dampened my enthusiasm as it took my focus
away from doing pragmatic research to help practitioners.

I was rescued by a new Director of Studies (DOS), who emphasised the centrality of my
‘pracademic’ commercial experience and encouraged me to put ‘myself’ back into the thesis. A
watershed conversation with the DOS led to the deployment of a novel research methodology
in which an engaged scholarship approach was combined with a critical realist philosophy.
Adopting an engaged scholarship approach allowed me to put my commercial experience back
into the interpretation of respondent data and helped bridge the schism between practitioner relevance and academic rigour in my thesis. Thematic analysis was used for the interpretation and analysis of data, and this felt like a formalised natural progression of what I did intuitively as a practitioner and consultant, looking for themes from qualitative data.

In practical terms the novel research approach unfettered me in a number of ways. The ‘commercial’ literature and research that I had been led to believe could not be used in the thesis was now permissible, and enormously enriched my work. I was able to include experiences from my commercial life as commentary to enhance data analysis which made the process much more enjoyable and rewarding. Writing in the first person, whilst strange at first, was an additional liberating factor which gave me my own voice in the thesis. Finally, my DOS encouraged me to ‘get angry’ in my analysis of existing theories to bring out the passion I showed in discussion about my field of study, which had been absent in my essays. The new approach renewed my motivation which made it easy to jump out of bed and press on with the thesis write-up.

Overall my new DOS provided fresh insight and helped me understand that the problem at hand was the focus of scientific and practical contribution, not academic literature gap-spotting. My self-perception of what I could contribute to the research process from the perspective of a former senior practitioner was enhanced, not least by the fact that both the DOS and my supervisor valued my greater experience of the matter at hand and saw the supervisory relationship as being a set of conversations, not uni-directional instruction.

I also have my DOS to thank for facilitating attendance at an IMP conference. Presenting a paper I co-authored and meeting the kind of academics who are part of the IMP gave me confidence that I can make a contribution to a practitioner-connected body of academics.

Seeking out contributions from academic literature and appreciating the power there is in synthesising academic and commercial literature for both academic and practitioner audiences will be of immense lasting value to me. I cannot overstate the effect that critical realism (CR) has had on me. In one respect CR is like a formalisation of what I naturally did as a senior practitioner in my commercial roles. On the other hand, the combination of CR and engaged scholarship was a liberating force for me, using new literature outwith marketing management in the process of abduction and applying my experience to analysis and retroduction was a paradigm shift from the anodyne, pseudo-empiricist doctoral essays I was turning out.
I look forward with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. The enthusiasm is driven by a feeling I can contribute to academic conferences, like IMP, and their associated academic journals. I have already written for practitioner magazines and journals, presented at practitioner events, co-authored a practitioner focused book, and presented more papers at IMP conferences, and am excited to write more in both these genres. Ironically, my trepidation is centred around the perception of contribution made to the world of practice. Often academic research can lead to outputs that seem trivial and obvious to the practitioner. Having been the ‘so what’ muttering practitioner sat across the table from academics during my time in industry I don’t want that to happen to me.

Finally, the biggest challenge of my thesis was adjusting to a formulaic doctoral writing style that appeared to require more narrative than anything I had written previously. I feel that writing in a ‘doctoral’ style can create unnecessary distance which causes practitioners to accuse academics of ‘talking funny’!

Looking forward to my debut as a doctoral supervisor I would resolve, through conversation, to encourage ‘pracademics’ to put themselves and their previous experience into their work. Helping them appreciate the need for producing contributions that develop both theory whilst informing practice would be the over-arching goal.

**Vignette 2: Doctoral student with 20 years of professional experience and 20 years academic experience**

By my mid-30’s I had worked for several blue-chip companies in operations roles reaching middle management level, and was also involved in business process consultancy. A key role that I enjoyed was the education of clients and it was this that sparked an increasing engagement with both learning and teaching, but also an increased appetite for a deeper understanding of my discipline. I subsequently gave up the day jobs (although kept the consultancy work) and decided to take an MBA followed by an educational qualification, with a view to embarking on an academic career. I worked for a while in tertiary vocational education and whilst this helped me improve my teaching craft, it did not satiate my thirst for further understanding and discourse.

I intuitively knew that I needed to be in higher education but entry barriers seemed quite forbidding. However, I came across an initiative run by a UK research funding council that
specifically aimed to get practitioners into higher education, applied and was accepted as one of the 12 scholarships. We were assigned to one of the 12 institutions on the scheme (a mixture of older, traditional universities and younger former polytechnics). I had what at the time I considered to be the great fortune to be allocated to a ‘Russell Group’ institution (the Russell Group comprises 24 research-intensive British universities). This initial optimism gradually dissipated as I realised that research output was the priority. My colleagues were all highly esteemed in their discipline, but few of them had significant practical experience. I was still involved in consultancy work and used my contacts to develop collaborative work such as student placements, consulting projects and other lucrative collaborative activities. Also, teaching practitioners on various postgraduate programs was highly enjoyable, and generated further consultancy work. I started a PhD but because of the ethos toward theoretical output, and my preference for doing practical research that would be of some direct use, I gave it up. This was at about the same time that I was informed that my contract would not be extended. I was on the verge of going back into industry but chanced upon an advert for a lecturer in a ‘post-92’ university (a former polytechnic). The environment was quite different, most notably there was less pressure to do research and more emphasis on teaching and collaborative activities, especially through the very strong links with the local business community. I essentially picked up where I had left off at my first institution and had one foot still firmly planted in practice. Although I had little intention of doing a doctorate, that changed when I was given the role as first year tutor on a large course. My operations management practitioner instincts kicked in and I applied that knowledge to managing the first year cohort. I identified two key measures of performance, student academic attainment and systemic retention, but at the same time discovered the complete absence of any management information system that could help me in the task. Through an internal grant, however, I developed the management information system I needed and started to accumulate longitudinal data. A couple of years into the job I recommended changing the teaching delivery structure and replaced the classic lecture-tutorial system with 2 hour seminars in all the modules for the course. My data showed significant improvements in student class attendance, attainment and a fall in student drop-outs. My engagement with the year tutor role had piqued my interest in the retention problem and I started looking at retention literature. The volume of research was huge, dating back to the early 20th Century in the US, but there was little empirical evidence of any improvements in retention. As a practitioner I found this puzzling and started attending retention conferences, and also presenting my experience. My objective was to convince the
community that I had solved the retention problem. I was bemoaning this lack of achievement and that research was too theoretical and asserted that we needed more practitioner research, and was told by a senior researcher to “go and do it then”.

This is when the penny dropped, it was clear that I had to produce some research myself. At first I considered writing papers but realised that the size of the issue needed a doctoral approach. I had data for a five year period, but I immediately began to struggle with how I would approach writing this up. A more immediate issue was finding a supervisor who could help through the early stages of shaping the thesis but this was a challenge because of the lack of experience and interest in what I was doing. I ended up following the EdD (Doctor of Education) route, so it was deemed a pedagogical topic because some elements had a pedagogical slant. This left me in a difficult position because I felt it wasn’t strictly a pedagogical topic. I viewed the issue as very much a business-management problem because it was related to aspects of institutional performance and fed into the general concept of the management of higher education.

I could write the literature review but I had a problem visualising what the methodology would look like. My experience had generated the assumption that methodology should conform to clear parameters. I happened to be discussing my work with a senior research academic and was conveying the difficulties I was having trying to fit my methodology into what I saw as academically acceptable methodological theory. After a while my patient audience stopped me and asked me to explain what I was actually doing, how I was doing it, and what data I was collecting. After explaining they said “There you go, that’s your methodology-write what you did, not what you think academia wants”. This was a cathartic incident and helped me shape my work into a more practical form that suited what I was doing. I felt unfettered, and the thesis simply unfolded. The shackles of what I saw as academic correctness were permanently removed. The restrictions I felt in terms of the need for academic rigour, were in retrospect self-imposed in the conditioning facilitated by 15 years in HE. It took a few chance meetings with well-meaning academics to shake me out of that conditioning.

I could now visualise how my thesis would look using a combination of what I realised was technical action research (non-participatory action research) by a practitioner all neatly encased in a case study strategy. I was now using my own terminology to explain the process and felt comfortable doing so and at times felt I was on a consultancy assignment. The first two years,
or “episode 1” as I called it covered the data collection, observation and intervention plan. Episode 2 covered the subsequent five years of collecting data after initiating the intervention.

I have struggled to find what I consider to be suitable doctoral candidates mainly because I concentrate on addressing the still multiple complexities of student retention. Professionals interested in this area are few and far between, mainly because they come from within the institution and there is little appetite for internal scrutiny. My search continues however.

I consider myself a ‘pracademic’, with one foot in academia and one foot in the world of practice. That world of practice is geographically located in the same place as me the academic. It has made me aware that we, as responsible business schools, should look to our own internal practices, especially in a climate of commercialisation and competition. If ever I am asked what is my finest achievement is in HE, it will not be the doctorate itself. It will be what the doctorate achieved in terms of improving the lot of students. My next step is to write a practitioner guide to managing retention.

**Vignette 3: Doctoral supervisor with 8 years of doctoral supervision experience**

I began to supervise an EDC, James, about seven years into my academic career and it was one of the first doctoral supervisions I undertook. I largely drew on master’s student supervision as a model of supervision at that time, which involved me ‘explaining’ how to do research including how to draw research questions from literature. There was an early conversation where I passionately advocated drawing on subject matter from outside the candidate’s embedded community of practice (COP) since to do otherwise, I argued, would lead to bias in the data collection. Today I regret offering that advice and now see the value of an EDCs grounding in practice, which includes their ability to gain candid access to the problem area. In contrast, six years later I intervened in the supervision of another EDC, Andrew, and was struck immediately by the passion he had for his COP. It also struck me that the candidate was more passionate in speaking about his findings, rather than when writing about them. Previously, he had been advised to develop a value neutral approach, bracketing out his experience and drawing inference only from academic literature and findings. Drawing on experience from supervising James, I resolved therefore to encourage Andrew to write a first person critique. Subsequently the narrative moved from being rather dry and neutral to become, as I saw it, deeply critical and interesting. I was also taken with his utter frustration with some of the conclusions in the academic literature relating to his COP and I remember suggesting he
should take a strongly critical perspective when writing the literature review. Our co-created solution was to write a biographical section at the start of the thesis so that a reader could identify epistemic reflexivity in relation to critiques on the literature and in analysis of the findings. What emerged was a critique of academic literature from a practitioner perspective.

A further EDC I supervised was Alex. I started from Day 1 of Alex’s supervision, and I look back on his problem development as something substantially grounded in his COP and the problems he was wrestling with professionally. This process started with me constantly pointing out that a doctoral thesis must be grounded in a theoretical contribution and that a practical contribution was a fortunate by-product. Again, I regret having held that stance but feel this is probably a common approach to supervising EDCs; this is a view that today has emerged from this experience into my notion of co-created research. The question was grounded in a practical business problem from the start, but in due course theoretical implications arose from the research. What I took away from this process was not to force research questions into a body of literature too early in the process of supervising an EDC.

A further point I reflect on to this day from these supervisions was the efforts I made in all three cases to move them away from a tendency to report findings rather than to build a persuasive argument upon them as academic polemic. I realize now that this tension between practice and academic skills was a negotiated process of co-creating a thesis that was both rigorous and relevant. Two of the EDCs now hold academic posts so adding the rigour element as a supervisor in the co-creation process did keep open the option for those EDCs to move into academic posts. In one of the cases, the candidate remains in a professional post but maintains the interest in contributing to both academic and professional literature. With Andrew and Alex, I was struck by their engagement with professional literature that was largely unknown to me during their thesis journeys. While there are many comments by marketing academics that professionals don’t engage with academic literature, I became aware of how little I engaged with professional literature. One important aspect from the supervisor’s perspective is that an academic output from the thesis of a certain standard that inspires professional dissemination warrants merit as and is evidence of social impact. Through these three supervisions I developed a stance on supervising EDCs that altered my view of the expert/novice relationship and drew me to reflect on the very notion of being a ‘hierarchical supervisor’. Instead I now emphasize the process of co-creating problems and producing rigorous but practically relevant findings.
**Vignette 4: Doctoral student with 20 years of business experience and 5 years of doctoral supervision experience**

After 20 years in business including participation in a management buyout and holding several senior and board level positions in marketing I changed career and joined a business school lecturing in strategic management and marketing. This move satisfied my interest in reaching deeper understandings of business practice, and helping undergraduate, postgraduate and organisational practitioners in both the private and public sectors make sense of their worlds, and cast a more critical eye on marketing work. My educational activities involved a mix of passing on normative understanding of classic marketing analysis and decision making techniques that emphasised linear rational objectivity, and introducing what I later came to understand as a more resource-based perspective emphasising subjectivity, complexity and interpretation.

My undergraduate education was in international relations and history (which I now see were highly interpretive subjects) but my business education pathway ensured that I was weaned off my early leanings to subjectivity and interpretation. My Diploma of Management Studies and MBA saw me become a neophyte of the objective managerialist paradigm and a fan of normative tools and techniques. I had discovered what was claimed to be the expert superiority and generality of the management method. I had apparently discovered the theoretical answer to management’s everything.

I did my MBA part time. However, during that period I eventually changed my zealous, managerialist attitude, becoming disenchanted with the claims of objective, value free analysis, predictability and causation that never seemed to occur in my management practice. Where were concepts like managerial power and value judgments in all of this? Indeed, the plethora of management models and formal market-customer-competitor analyses I prepared for formal planning documents only seemed to be used as part of ritual planning cycles, whereas ‘real’ business was done face-to-face without the need for this theoretical bureaucracy. It was my interest in organisational learning that reconnected me with subjectivity and interpretation in management practice.

My management education experience brought into sharp focus the tension between my theory of management and my experience of work. I now see this as more a tension between my attitude and expectations of the role and purpose of management theory and its connection to my practice. The philosophical credentials of my formative marketing analysis and decision
education were never openly declared or contrasted with alternatives. This meant I originally expected (uncritically bought into the belief) that management theory was able to provide crisp, clear insight and definite, success assured, courses of action. Do detailed and structured analysis and the answer will pop out! I experienced dissonance because my managerial experience suggested otherwise. Unlike colleagues who saw this issue as ‘you are either theoretical or you are practical’ I started to come round to see theories as ‘helpful explanations and approaches’ to be used where appropriate rather than fixed normative prescriptions.

My doctoral study and then supervisory journey followed. The school strongly emphasised a grasp of alternative philosophical and methodological perspectives and so my world became highly abstracted from the everyday. Indeed it became a rite of passage for all Doctor of Business Administration students to grapple with ‘what is truth’ as a key assignment, a topic seemingly far removed from questions such as how to achieve a competitive advantage, develop the brand, or increase sales. At the end of the process however I believed I had developed a more profound insight into the nature of managerial reality and how people knew that reality and so the doctorate did improve my understanding of my practice and sensitised me to the assumptions others would make. This particularly helped me when tutoring MBA students, enabling me to unsettle their over-confidence in analysis and description and formulaic plan creation. In the end the theory I studied during my DBA helped me reconnect with my interpretive younger self.

**Doctoral Supervision**

My first doctoral supervision was with a DBA student. This involved supervising a long term colleague and friend who had extensive senior management experience with a large public company. The supervision presented me with some interesting personal challenges, such as how to give frank and candid feedback to a strong character (especially when I had only recently completed my doctorate), how to resist stepping in and resolving their dilemmas, puzzles and ponderings, and how to avoid being too directive in terms of methodological approaches. The student was emphatically practitioner-minded and initially positioned themselves as sceptical of the worth of abstract philosophical and methodological ideas and approaches for a DBA, a supposedly practically-orientated research degree. My fear in the early stages was that the student might be criticised for lack of ‘doctoralness’ (a term frequently used and yet ill-defined) in their work because of this attitude. The antipathy to theory weighed heavily on me and I often wondered if it was my job to actively persuade the student of its
worth and necessity or to simply support them reaching that conclusion for themselves. I wanted the student to succeed and felt incapable of convincing them of the merit of abstract scholarly ideas for practice.

As time went by our supervisory conversations resolved this. This was very much a process of dialogue rather than supervision. We were in fact simultaneously trying to reach an understanding of the student’s doctoral project. This was something very different from me advising the student how to undertake steps in the research process. The student gradually became more interested and amenable to how research theory could play a part in their thesis during these conversations. I would share the experiences and choices I made for my doctorate and also declared where I felt unsure about the way forward. It was during our conversations that we got onto the topics of critical realism, thematic analysis, interpretation and subjectivity. During this time the student realised that abstract notions such as layered reality, retroduction, abduction, pattern spotting, and the voice of the subject, referred to what the DBA student intuitively did in their commercial practice. This was a ‘light bulb moment’ for both the student and me. Subsequently, the student’s antipathy to theory dissolved and a powerful sense of insight and understanding emerged. In some senses it proved almost cathartic in that these theoretical constructs enabled the student to understand and resolve work situations that had historically been conflictive, troublesome, and difficult to articulate.

Once the theoretical genie was out of the bottle this led to the student exploring very broad areas of literature to sensitise their data interpretation, often far removed from the normative practitioner focussed literature of their core research topic. These so called ‘outwith’ literatures provided a new way of seeing dynamics and interactions between sales and marketing professionals and led to challenges to conventional thinking about the tensions between sales and marketing. This in turn provided a way for practitioners to change their conversation about their sales and marketing work, which in turn held the possibility of revitalisation and improved prospects of commercial success. The scholarly notions of retroduction and abduction, thematic analysis, and layered reality engaged directly with the everyday sales and marketing practice of generating plausible explanations of causes, re-contextualising experiences from one market/customer to another, spotting patterns in customer conversations and appreciating the idea of managerial actions predisposing the chance of commercial success rather than definitely causing it.
Vignette 5: Doctoral supervisor with 10 years of business experience and 20 years of doctoral supervision experience

I am the middle generation in a three-generation series of doctoral supervisor/student relationships all involving experienced practitioners. My principal doctoral supervisor was a practitioner-turned-academic, I am a practitioner-turned-academic, and several of my doctoral students (some current and some graduated) are current or former practitioners. One of the joys of doctoral supervision is how much you learn, as a supervisor, during the process. A key difference between supervising experienced practitioners and those without substantial business experience is what you learn. While one should not stereotype, nevertheless, those with limited business experience tend to be ‘theory-hounds’ who keep one on one’s toes with respect to the literature, and quite possibly introduce their supervisor to new and emerging theoretical approaches. On the other hand, the experienced practitioner (who will, necessarily, become familiar with a body of theory) generally keeps a keen eye focused on the practical relevance of both their own research and the literature they review. In particular, once the academic stardust has cleared and the practitioner-student realizes that the literature is not a fount of practical wisdom at which they are blessed to have been invited to drink, I have found that puzzlement, disillusionment and even cynicism can set in. Puzzlement that complex and arcane methodologies and terminologies have been deployed by evidently clever people and yet yield no obvious practical benefit. Disillusionment that the section of the academic article that is manifestly meant to deliver the practical relevance, the ‘implications for practice’, is often merely a brief and uninteresting statement of such generality as to be of no use to anyone. Eventually this may lead to a certain cynicism, since realization dawns that academic publishing is arguably a business like any other, academics respond to incentives like anyone else, the incentives to publish are high, and so the over-riding academic priority is to deliver research of which editors and reviewers approve. Often, research of which editors and reviewers approve is of a theoretically arcane nature, uses highly sophisticated methodologies with great panache, and says nothing of obvious practical value.

Those practitioner-students who survive this process may (in my experience I would say usually do) return to the fray wiser but stronger. It begins to dawn on them that a great deal of business knowledge is highly contingent. Generalisations have to be at a relatively high level of abstraction to have any hope of carrying legitimacy, but business-people have to make decisions in specific circumstances. Indeed, arguably, it is the ability of the experienced practitioner to take account of the specific circumstances when applying general business
knowledge that constitutes the essence of their experiential knowledge. They begin to appreciate that it is more or less asking the impossible to expect to find concrete answers to concrete business problems in general-purpose academic articles. At this point, the wisest among them begin to realize that they should not seek the solution to their business problems in academic literature; rather, they are themselves the conduit through which seemingly esoteric academic findings can be converted into something of greater practical value.

Of course this is an idealized view of the process and leaves out what may be (and indeed I can state with confidence often is) a fairly tempestuous process as the supervisor and the practitioner-student initially lock horns over the relative merits of ‘book learning’ compared to experience. The wise supervisor also understands the limitations of academic knowledge, but emphasizes to the student that for most doctoral programmes a contribution to theoretical knowledge in the field is essential. It is unwise to assert or suggest, to a practitioner-student, that academic knowledge is a higher or superior form of knowledge compared to experiential knowledge. It is also, I would argue, incorrect. Academic knowledge and experiential knowledge are complementary, not competitive. When supervising a practitioner-student the goal, at least as far as I am concerned, is to speak both to academics in their language of theory and methodology, and to practitioners in their language of business problems and solutions. The exact balance between the two will depend on the nature of the doctoral qualification and attendant assessment criteria; for a conventional PhD the balance is more academic, while for a professional doctorate it is more practical. When working with a practitioner-student, the first aim is often to disabuse them of the notion that academic knowledge is meant to provide a direct solution to practical problems, the second aim is to persuade them that nevertheless academic knowledge has some value, and the third aim is to convince them that they are ideally placed to act as the intermediary between academic and practical knowledge.

3.0: Conceptual background and reflectively informed findings

3.1 Emergent Themes

A number of themes emerge from the reflective vignettes, which are placed in a theoretical context in the following sections. Before doing this, the key recurring ideas that emerge from the reflections are briefly summarised.
Initial enthusiasm followed by a period of disillusionment experienced by the EDC recurs. The initial enthusiasm is associated with the notion that engagement with academic knowledge and in academic research will provide a new and deeper understanding of marketing and management theory that will illuminate and enhance marketing practice. Disillusionment arises because the prior business experience of the EDC is seen not as something valuable to be built upon during the doctoral research, but as a problem to be overcome. That is to say, the experiential knowledge of the EDC is regarded as lacking validity, and at best an irrelevant distraction from the development of properly ‘scientific’ marketing knowledge. This is because of the perceived primacy of theory in a university context (particularly in research-intensive universities), and the perceived illegitimacy of knowledge grounded purely in experience. In the vignettes, we see an example of an EDC who is actively discouraged from using his practitioner knowledge as a basis for doctoral research but then, serendipitously, encounters a scholar who advocates a new and different approach that embraces his experience.

Tensions are described over the role of research philosophy in doctoral research. In vignette 4 we see an EDC who is initially sceptical of the value of learning about relatively abstract aspects of ontology, epistemology and methodology, eventually becoming the supervisor of an EDC and finding great mutual satisfaction as both come to appreciate the useful role that such ideas can play. Here we see a self-aware process of mutual learning going on, and a supervisor/student relationship that is not predicated on the assumption that the supervisor is always the better-informed member of the relationship. Indeed, in vignette 3 the very idea of a ‘hierarchical supervisor’ is questioned in situations where the doctoral candidate has lengthy business experience. The suggestion emerges that, where EDC supervision is concerned, rather than a supervisory process and a supervisor/student relationship, it might be better to think of a dialogue process leading to knowledge co-creation.

Our vignettes suggest that EDCs are somewhat alienated in conventional doctoral programmes because practitioner experience appears not to be valued, knowledge creation has to be justified primarily in terms of formal epistemological ideas, and there is a preference for abstract theorising over concrete problem-solving. Not surprisingly, therefore, a further theme that emerges is that the use of the practitioner literature in the field (such as practitioner-orientated journals, magazines and ‘white papers’) is largely discouraged, with EDCs encouraged to ignore source literature that they may have used as practitioners and concentrate exclusively on academic literature. A corollary of this, observed in vignette 5, for example, is that when aiming to publish their work for a wider audience, the EDC is steered in the direction of
academic journals and away from publications read primarily by practitioners. So, the EDC who set out enthusiastically to learn about theory in order to contribute to practice, having encountered a number of hurdles on the journey, is finally told that the best place to publish their research in journals that practitioners do not read.

3.2 Practical Utility and engaged scholarship

Some authors recognise that practitioner engagement is not just a knowledge transfer problem, nor is it that practitioner and academic enquiry represent distinct and irreconcilable worlds (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Buckley, Ferris, Bernardin, and Harvey (1998) propose five “areas of tension” in academic-practitioner interaction: First, there is a theoretical versus pragmatic focus. Academics often have a purposeful intent to contribute predominantly to theory, or indeed theory alone rather than practice. In the process of scholarship it has been noted that the practical implications of research are often subordinated to the theoretical or scientific contribution imperative. Many leading marketing scholars have become proponents of marketing as a scientific endeavour (Bartels, 1951; Buzzell, 1963; Converse, 1945; Demirdjian, 1976; Shelby D. Hunt, 1983; Shelby D Hunt, 1993; Hutchinson, 1952) while others have spoken passionately against this (Brown, Bell, & Carson, 1996; Egan, 2009). Implicit in this dichotomy seems to be an assumption that a finding cannot be both scientifically and practically useful. This is a point addressed in vignette 5, where the doctoral supervisor asserts that scientific knowledge in marketing is necessarily at a fairly high level of abstraction, whereas marketing practitioners seek solutions to business problems in a particular set of contingent circumstances. This tension has been explored as the rigour-relevance gap both in marketing (Baines, Brennan, Gill, & Mortimore, 2009; Baraldi, La Rocca, & Perna, 2014; Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2014; Cederlund, 2014; Gummesson, 2014) and in the broader management literature (Fincham & Clark, 2009; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2013, p. 285) warn that

“More often than not […]practical contribution] is dealt with in a token paragraph, written in the conclusion section as an afterthought once the research and article have been all but completed, with scant concern for praxis that results in dubious practicality.”

… and speaking in the Academy of Management Learning and Education, Doh (2010, p. 98) similarly comments:
“For many of us, the short passage on managerial implications that typically comes at the end of the Discussion section of our research papers is an afterthought—a box to check as we are finishing up our draft papers for submission to a journal”.

This observation can be compared to the assertion in vignette 5 that the managerial implications sections of academic articles tend to be brief and uninteresting.

Engaged scholarship can be seen as a reaction to an ongoing discussion relating to academic utility for the ‘real world’ (Boy, 1996). The quest for both rigour and relevance has recently taken sharper focus due to the ‘impact’ debate driven by research funding bodies (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017). Traditionally ‘impact’ has been taken to mean translating academic theory into practice and providing social utility (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Willmott, 2012) for both practice and science. In setting out to achieve this social usefulness, engaged scholarship also keys into the zeitgeist of promoting science-informed management practice (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009).

Buckley et al.’s (1998) second tension is between data-supported versus a focus on logic. Scientific methods generally favour a deductive approach designed for maximum generalization, discouraging subjective interventions by the researcher based on their experience. In this sense, an experienced professional should reject their instinctive and experientially informed sense that a finding is impractical, instead favouring reliance on rigorous generalization. Instead, pracademics may be inclined to deploy an abductive and experimental approach favouring the elimination of unpromising findings in the development of a relevant theory (Klein & Rowe, 2008). Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) speak of the need to try multiple theories and techniques to each problem which fits very well with the principle of abduction. Their caution as to the efficacy of cross-sectional studies also feeds into a call for more longitudinal research, and given the duration of part-time doctoral study (the likely route for most management professionals), then the potential for relevance is enhanced. Indeed, it has been argued that impact is a process and not just an outcome (MacIntosh et al., 2017).

Buckley et al.’s (1998) third observed tension is a reliance on scientific method versus case examples and common sense. Some scholars feel that the rigour-relevance gap has arisen due to the predominance of positivist epistemologies (Barker, 2004; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Klein and Rowe (2008, p. 683) confidently state the need for the involvement of
pracademics in doctoral study: “we need their unique capacity to serve as future boundary spanners between academia and practice and the contributions to knowledge that they can make if properly trained in qualitative research methods.” However, the issue may be more than just a reliance on the dominant functionalist paradigm. Midgley et al. (2017) discuss a paradigm barrier in industrial marketing research, and suggest that this can be overcome by taking a methodologically pluralist approach, allowing theoretical, methodological and methodical choices to be led by the practical business problem and the solutions sought, and the methodological traditions and methods be decoupled from paradigmatic traditions.

Buckley et al.’s (1998) fourth tension is a focus on academic-oriented versus practitioner-oriented journals. Supervisors must therefore respect the ambition of experienced doctoral candidates to publish in practitioner journals. Klein and Rowe (2008, p. 682) speak of:

“…finding a form of representation and communication of their research results that can speak to the professional [community of practice] that was studied, so that their former peers can see the practical implications of the research results. This goes far beyond the usual confirmation of the internal validity of the research results with the study participants”.

However, as our vignettes showed, academic supervisors face a dilemma when advising experienced practitioners about their publication plans. Academic staff obtain prestige and career advancement by publishing in journals that rank highly in academic journal ranking lists (such as the Australian Business Deans Council List, and the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide). Practitioners generally do not read these journals (Baines et al., 2009). If the EDC has ambitions to develop an academic career, something that was seen in vignette 3, then they need to publish their doctoral findings in those highly-ranked journals. Publishing in journals read primarily by practitioners may achieve the EDC’s goal of contributing to practice, but leave him/her without publications that will impress an academic short-listing panel.

of US academics had declined because it had come to mean holding a faculty appointment and writing in a certain style understood only by one’s peers.

3.3 Performative co-creation

Performativity is an onto-epistemological stance that denotes ongoing journeys, and in this sense, performativity can be thought of as a continuously unfolding journey (Garud & Gehman, 2016). Critical performativity, by contrast, has been interpreted as an “active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices” (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2016, p. 226) and has been linked to the contribution strategy of problematization (Pattinson, Ciesielska, Preece, Nicholson, & Alexandersson, 2018), the approach in academic contributions that sets out to challenge the underlying assumptions in a body of work. It has been argued that progressive performativity introduces an ethical dimension, allowing “critical researchers to focus on specific issues of concern within an organization and on engaging with specific managers” (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015, p. 116).

Marti and Gond (2018) investigate when theories become self-fulfilling. The engaged scholarship literature forms a critique regarding the gap between academic and practitioner thought worlds that challenges the underlying assumption that a choice must be made between rigorous or relevant findings. Felin and Foss (2009) also suggest that scientists no longer have to choose between understanding the world and changing it. Thus, performativity offers a challenge to the notion underpinning much research, that researchers are there to observe and report rather than intervene and change. Indeed, Gehman, Trevino, and Garud (2013) discuss performativity as a means of bringing theory into practice and as a result of which, theories do indeed become self-fulfilling.

Marti and Gond (2018) propose a helpful performative process theory that flows through three stages. First, generic performativity asks how practitioners use new theories; second, effective performativity asks how using theories create effects; and, third, Barnesian performativity asks how theories reshape practices. Such an approach offers a challenge to research being in contrast “a temporal sequence where ‘upstream’ research impacts on ‘downstream’ practice” as a result of which “the academic community is two or three cycles behind practice” (MacIntosh et al., 2017, p. 4).
What has emerged from our reflections highlights the importance of an earlier phase of performativity, which asks questions about the role of the experienced agent in the development of theory. We will refer to this processual phase as ‘performative co-creation’ and this builds on the advice offered by Mason, Kjellberg, and Hagberg (2015, p. 2), who suggest that “studying the performativity of marketing offers a response to calls for marketing researchers to reflect on their roles during and after research encounters.” We propose in Figure 1 that all three of the forms of performativity identified by Marti and Gond (2018) will be enhanced by performative co-creation. In a similar vein, impactful research has been thought to reside at the nexus of changing practices, influencing practitioners, reflexive change and changing ideas (MacIntosh et al., 2017).

![Diagram of performativity types](image)

**Fig. 1: Authors’ conceptualization of the position of performative co-creation in relation to the forms of performativity proposed by Marti and Gond (2018)).**

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) discuss the importance of developing problems from real world business situations, rather than basing them purely on gap-spotting in published literature. We suggest that a doctoral study between an experienced professional and an academic supervisor that links the proposal to a real-world problem has a greater chance of generic, effective and Barnesian performativity. The situated knowledge of the practitioner allows for a greater potential for the development of real world research problems, given the EDCs continued immersion in their communities of practice.

“Situated knowledge can be broadly defined as knowledge embedded within a social, historical, cultural and political time and place that
reflects contextual features and lived experiences” (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017, p. 30).

A misunderstanding in much management research is that rigorous research methods produce the most generalizable findings, but a flawed premise in this contention is that researchers gain candid access to the real situation in the context under investigation. Due to the EDCs continuing embeddedness in communities of practice, the EDS can gain a richer picture of the research subject, thus the co-creation of business problems between EDS and EDC can lead to more robust and insightful findings that are also relevant.

4.0: A performative agenda.

We are drawn to the comment by Wickert and Schaefer (2015, p. 125), who suggest that “anti-performative research misses out opportunities to support managers and help them to trigger social change within their organizations”. In what follows, therefore, we aim to lay out an agenda for both partners, the EDC and the EDS, in the doctoral performative co-creation process. The performance unfolds as a series of Acts.

4.1 Act 1: What’s my motivation?

The selection of supervisors is clearly important. For an EDC, a supervisor should ideally have some practical credibility for there to be a chance of performative co-creation. Selecting supervisors who can be pragmatic and empathic towards a practice orientation seems to be an essential pre-requisite. The ideal supervisor is likely to be someone who will appreciate and value the practical experience of the doctoral candidate. Casting the right actors in the performance would seem an essential first task, and programme directors looking to recruit EDCs should carefully consider the process of auditioning and casting supervisors, who for this purpose are best termed ‘advisors’, for the support of EDCs.

A second product of our reflection is that performative co-creation is a boundary spanning activity of which the business competency and relevance-focus of the EDC and the rigour-focus of the EDS are essential components. We suggest that EDS should focus on this rigour-relevance dynamic throughout the relationship (or ‘performance’). At the outset, the EDS should appreciate that the candidate is likely to begin with a preference to contribute to practice, and that a practical business issue may be central to the research problem. Whilst practitioners
are probably keen to learn how to solve managerial and organizational problems instrumentally, the idea of ‘studying’ abstract philosophical ideas may, initially at least, be perceived as pointless and demotivating. The role of the EDS is to encourage the EDC to appreciate that those abstract ideas will, later in the process, very likely assist the EDC to illuminate new understandings about the practical focus of investigation. The EDS should also appreciate that while some EDCs have academic ambitions, others have no interest in such a career path and so have quite different motivations from their academic peers. There are well-meaning academics who understand the importance of relevance who can change the path of the sceptical EDC, but these are rare. Tension exists because the supervisor is quite possibly operating under the standard academic imperative (‘publish or perish’) and conventional PhD candidates are often considered a means of achieving this goal. In addition, there is the risk that the EDS saw their own doctoral research as a process that transformed them from a practitioner into an academic, and (perhaps without much thought) believes that the EDC is on the same pathway. This perception may conflict with the desire of an EDC to achieve a doctorate in order to become a better practitioner.

4.2 Act 2: Getting into character

In the vignettes, there is a sense that EDCs had been guided to take a neutral stance when examining academic literature, rather than ‘to get angry’ with the perceived lack of relevance of much academic literature to practice. We suggest that where the EDC is referring to practitioner literature to identify the source of this irritation, it is important that the EDS engage with this literature and not see it as an irritating irrelevance. If both parties perceive their roles to be complementary, then this will enhance the potential for claims of delivering real-world impact from research and publication arising from the performative co-creation process. A further key role for an EDS is to help the EDC to understand that a doctoral programme is not simply a step up from a taught post-graduate program such as an MBA, and that the purpose of a body of literature is more than simply to update professional knowledge. Here we feel one role of the EDS is to differentiate ‘learning through research’ from studying, since learning through research implies grappling with difficult ideas without striving for a quick and neat resolution, rather than just ‘topping up’ what you know.

4.3: Act 3: Agreeing on the script

The first stage of this performance would be the perusal of an initial research proposal, which is likely to be ‘relevance’ dominant where an EDC is concerned. In our vignettes, there is a
sense of EDCs being ‘dominated for rigour’ by supervisors early in the process and also proposals being rejected for lacking recourse to academic literature. It is highly likely that the case made by the EDC when submitting a proposal for entry on to a doctoral programme will be heavily influenced by experience of practice supported by commercial research evidence and practitioner literature. To then leave the practitioner feeling that this has to be ‘dumped’ in order to be accepted onto a program risks alienating the EDC from the whole process before it even begins. We suggest that the EDS encourages the EDC to continue to engage critically with practitioner literature. Indeed, critically investigating and interrogating the distinguishing characteristics of ‘academic literature’ and ‘practitioner literature’ is potentially a very interesting conversation for the EDS and the EDC to have.

The EDS should also appreciate and emphasize that a contribution is more than a simple act of spotting a gap in the academic literature and setting off rigorously in pursuit of filling it. Authors such as Corley and Gioia (2011) have emphasized that contributions can be both to science and to practice, and others (Matas Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Nicholson, LaPlaca, Al-Abdin, Breese, & Khan, 2018; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) show how there are other strategies for making scientific contributions such as problematization and replication. It is a great facilitator to enable broadening of the EDC vision for both scientific and practical contribution, rather than traditional gap spotting.

4.4 Act 4: Avoiding method acting

The vignettes also expose a tendency for supervisors to force a paradigmatic tradition on EDCs early in the supervision process. The overt focus on research philosophy, ontology, and epistemology while essential in the long run, risks diverting attention from the thing that may have created the EDC’s interest in the first place – a real life problem perceived by practitioners. We advocate a critical pluralist approach whereby methods, methodology and philosophy are treated as dimensions of the study approach that can be used pragmatically, rather than being hierarchical levels of study, which are dominated by the paradigmatic assumptions at a theoretical level to which all other levels are then subordinate (Midgley et al., 2017). Through this approach there is some scope for spontaneity and divergence from the norm. In order to bridge the perceived gap between practice and academia a useful further step is to ensure that practitioners and pracademics undertaking doctoral study feel that they can engage their whole-self in the research process. That is, EDCs should not feel that they have to bracket out their experience (part of their professional pride and self-identity as senior practitioners) during the process of doctoral study as something that is a hindrance to
objectivity. Engaging their previous commercial experience, we suggest, is a necessary precondition of whole-self engagement.

4.5 Act 5: Encore!

This will however require structural change and the development by academia of an enabling context that goes beyond current efforts such as outreach and consultancy, which often entail the academic engaging relatively superficially with practice and retaining the veneer of a disinterested external expert. It may require the establishment of mechanisms whereby the normal pressures on academics are alleviated or, perhaps more likely, are replaced by a different set of pressures where the need to contribute to academic knowledge through publication in prestigious journals is more closely matched by the need to demonstrate some contribution to practice. While this may seem implausible and idealistic, if business schools are to co-operate with business organizations to help with the major challenges of our time, such as maintaining or improving living standards while avoiding catastrophic climate change, there is little point in thinking small.
References


