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A strategy-as-practice approach to strategy research and education

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Abstract

This conclusion to the Dialog proposes a strategy-as-practice based approach to bringing strategy research and education closer to practice. Strategy-as-practice rejects the choice proposed in the previous papers, between theory and practice. We argue for strategy research based rigorously upon sociological theories of practice. Such research complements the parsimony and generalizability of economics-driven theory, extending strategy research to incorporate the messy realities of doing strategy in practice, with a view to developing theory that is high in accuracy. We suggest that practice-based research can also inform strategy teaching by providing students with rich case studies of strategy work as actually practiced, analyzed through such sociological lenses as ethnomethodology, dramaturgy and institutional theory. Strategy-as-practice research does not aim to give students parsimonious models for analysis or expose them to cases of 'best practice', but rather to help them develop practical wisdom through a better understanding of strategy in practice.

A strategy-as-practice approach to strategy research and education

This conclusion to the Dialog proposes a strategy-as-practice based approach to bringing strategy research and education closer to practice. Strategy-as-practice rejects the choice between theory and practice by arguing for research based rigorously upon sociological theories of practice. In the previous papers, both Joseph Bower and Robert Grant recognize deep-seated problems in the relationship between strategy academia and managerial practice, but they have proposed very different ways forward for research and teaching. Bower has argued for a return to the practical concerns of managers based on case study teaching and process research; Grant sees continued potential in economic theory-based research, especially its capacity to challenge students to confront reality with incisive analysis. We see merits in both approaches, but would like to propose our own, one that does not separate practice and research, but which makes practice the direct subject of that research. This 'strategy-as-practice' approach thus aspires both to maintain the affiliation to academic theory championed by Grant, and get that closeness to managerial practice hankered for by Bower.

Strategy-as-practice is a recent field of research which has grown in response to the curious absence of actors and their activities in most academic articles on strategy (Hambrick, 2004). Strategy research is populated by multivariate analyses of firm or industry-level effects upon firm performance; in practice, strategy is something that *people do*. Strategy-as-practice, therefore, is concerned to study strategy through the lenses of strategy praxis, practitioners and practices (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Whittington, 2006). Praxis refers to the work that comprises strategy; the flow of activities such as meeting, talking, calculating, form-filling and presenting in which strategy is constituted. Strategy practitioners are those people who do the work of strategy, which goes beyond senior managers to include managers at multiple levels of the firm as well as influential external actors, such as consultants, analysts and regulators. Strategy practices are the social, symbolic and material tools through which strategy work is done. These practices include those theoretically and practically-derived tools that have become part of the everyday lexicon and activity of strategy, such as Porter's five forces, decision modeling and budget systems, as well as material artifacts and technologies, such as PowerPoint, flipcharts and spreadsheets. The competent strategy practitioner – manager or consultant – has to be able to mobilize these various strategy practices effectively in their strategy praxis.

The strategy-as-practice research agenda addresses some of the concerns raised by Bower and Grant. These authors raised two critical points for the association between strategy research and strategy teaching, which may be largely encapsulated as an opposition between practically-informed teaching, and theoretically-informed teaching. Bower makes the point that the dominance of economic theory underpinning strategy teaching has generated an excessive focus on the strategist as a simple agent for profit maximization. This move away from the practitioner as a sentient being, comprising values and judgments beyond that of rational profit-maximizing agent, has led to economic theory-laden strategy teaching that is less and less based in practice. By contrast, Grant proposes that, without recourse to theoretical models, particularly economic theory, students and even senior strategy practitioners lapse into cognitive recipes based on little more than folk wisdom and anecdote. The assumption is that practice-based teaching is devoid of theory, while theoretically-derived teaching is abstracted and irrelevant to practice. However, the problem here is overly polarized, based on the view that 'proper' theory for teaching strategy is economic theory. As Hirsch, Michaels & Friedman (1987) noted in their provocative article "'Dirty Hands' versus 'Clean Models'", economic theory is prone to unrealistic but parsimonious theoretical abstractions – the 'clean models' – while sociological theory provides the 'dirty hands' research that gives complex insights into the messy realities of practice. We therefore propose that the sociological theories of practice (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki et al, 2001) that underpin strategy-as-practice research might help to bridge this false dichotomy between theory and practice in the classroom. In particular, by drawing on the sociology of practice, strategy-as-practice research can re-orient strategy teaching towards the practitioner as a complex, socially-embedded and reflective being. This should lead to two distinct emphases.

First, strategy-as-practice research can provide insight into what comprises a competent strategy practitioner. Bower raises the point that, before it was hi-jacked by economic theories of profit maximization, strategy teaching at Harvard Business School focused on developing a competent practitioner, who brought values to the strategy process beyond simple profit-seeking. He appeals for a return to practice, reinstating the strategy practitioner in teaching as an individual with whom students can identify. This appeal is at the heart of the strategy-as-practice agenda, but we can extend Bower's vision through the sensitivities engendered by sociological theories of practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki et

al, 2001). Thus strategy-as-practice scholars emphasize the importance of research that closely examines the actual doing of strategy; the material artifacts to hand, the language that is used, the physical positioning in strategy episodes, the laughter, frustration, anger, excitement, anticipation, boredom, repetition and political maneuvering that are brought together in strategy work. Such deep studies will illuminate what is involved in being a competent strategist and how some practitioners are more influential than others. In particular, we may understand those values that constitute a strategist and why the enactment of those values is perceived as skilled practice that attracts the respect or acceptance of their peers. An intimate understanding of the practice that identifies a practitioner as a competent strategist is important before we can go beyond value judgments or prescriptions about how practitioners should behave.

Second, strategy-as-practice studies, while not prescriptive, may help to improve practice by providing explanations of activity and its consequences that provoke recognition and reflection (Raelin, 2007; Schon, 1983). Strategy-as-practice is concerned with explanatory theory, endeavoring to reflect actual practice with some accuracy. Explanatory theory has the benefit of familiarity and veracity for practitioners (Weick, 1989). That is, practitioners will recognize the situations and activity described and explained. While these studies do not have statistical generalizability, they indicate the underlying situational mechanisms involved in human action, which are familiar to human actors (Hedstrom and Swedberg, 1998; Tsoukas, 1989). As Bower notes from his extensive classroom experience, students can identify with the problems of the practitioner. Furthermore, as students now enter the classroom with more industry experience, they are cynical or bored with simplistic models and heroic stories of the charismatic CEO. We thus need more complex and realistic teaching material on which to reflect, including drawing on that stock of practice that students bring to the learning experience. Strategy-as-practice research may, therefore, be influential in enabling practitioners to better understand their own actions, to reflect on its strategic implications and, potentially, to reconstruct activity in light of these reflections.

Illumination of and reflection about strategy practice addresses one of the key problems that Grant noted in teaching; the cognitive boundaries of the typical business school student and strategy practitioner, who resort to folk wisdom or already tested recipes and solutions. His solution is to provide better theoretical models to supersede folk wisdom. However, better theoretical models will not necessarily reshape cognitive boundaries, as a theoretical model

may as easily be a heuristic device as an aid to rational analysis (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992). While we can teach decision tools and choice-making models, we need also to expose the practice of using (or not) those tools and models in making decisions; including the socio-political dimensions of tool use (e.g. Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). With better insights into how strategy frameworks and tools are used, we might thus inspire students to move beyond cognitive boundaries that look for tools to provide answers, to reflecting on the use of tools and understanding their implications, limitations and aids to judgment. In this way, such tools might supplement the intuition that Grant also notes is a key feature of doing strategy, albeit one that has not been well supported by economic theory.

Current forms of strategy teaching reflect the strategy-as-practice approach quite poorly. As evidenced by the typical content of strategy textbooks, conventional strategy teaching adopts a normative view of strategy as a process of formulation followed by implementation (Hendry, 2000; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2002). The dominant focus is on those economics-based models and frameworks through which the formulation part of this process may be understood, such as environmental analyses, resource, competence and capability assessments, and the ubiquitous SWOT to analyse the fit between firm and environment with a view to making strategic recommendations (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). The case method remains a dominant mode of teaching, but it has become increasingly detached from practice as cases focus more on the retrospective analysis of stylized problem designed to help students learn standard strategy models and frameworks (Liang and Wang, 2004; Raelin, 2007). While Pascale (1984) exposed the false assumptions of intent, rationality and foresight in much case material with his explanation of Honda's unintentional and emergent penetration of the US motorcycle market, which was in marked contrast to the Boston Consulting Group's rationalistic analysis (Rumelt, 1996; Harvard Honda Case A and B), cases continue to prefer the simplified version of reality consistent with the text books. Thus, in a comparison of 66 popular North American and Chinese case studies, Liang and Wang (2004) found only one case that reflects strategy as a messy, real-time practice.

[Table 1 about here]

The practice of strategy can be taught, however. Of course, effectiveness in strategy practice can be advanced by the use of strategy projects, in the form of MBA consulting assignments

for example, with space carefully built-in for reflection on practice (Schön, 1983). However, most education is still done in the classroom and this too can be an effective vehicle for bringing research and reality together. We therefore propose an extension of Grant's earlier table, to include a column on the potential contribution of strategy-as-practice research to classroom teaching (see Table 1). Here the focus is neither a capstone course nor a foundational one, as proposed respectively by Bower and Grant. Rather the archetypal strategy-as-practice course is likely to be an elective, taken by those who have already grasped the basic analytical tools and who are now keen to understand how to use them in their practical work, whether as managers, entrepreneurs or consultants.

Table 1 refuses the opposition between theory and practice: sociological theories of practice are at the head of the strategy-as-practice column. Recalling criticisms of the practice-based approach of the early case method, which led to the rise in 'theory-driven' (economic theory) research and teaching, it is important to resist theory-free teaching. Rather, examples of practice in the classroom need to be supported by more sociologically-informed approaches, such as anthropology (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Geertz, 1973), ethnomethodology (e.g Garfinkel, 1979), dramaturgy (e.g. Goffman, 1959) or institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). For example, just as Whyte's (1943) evocative *Street Corner Society* gives us deep insights into the way that individuals' emotions, bodily actions and speech – indeed the full gamut of their everyday lived experiences – are implicated in the way they make sense of their world and interact with others, so might strategy-as-practice research inform us about the subtle processes of interaction and influence amongst practicing strategists. These theoretical perspectives drive thick descriptions in support of theorizing that is close to the field, explaining the actions and interactions of actors in ways that are faithful to their experiences and situations. Such studies would not aim for parsimony but practical wisdom. While we do not aim to replace economics-driven theory, we do seek to complement theory that has parsimony and generalizability with theory that brings accuracy and that spark of recognition, to which a practitioner can respond.

Strategy-as-practice research should also provide, or inspire, new kinds of case study for use in the classroom. A strategy-as-practice approach would entail cases based on the real-time unfolding of strategy, in order to illustrate how and why the actions and interactions of multiple actors shape strategy (see, for example, Regnér 2007). Rather than simplified situations for the application of textbook analytics, such cases would aim to provide deep

understanding of how strategic practitioners actually work and the implications this holds for shaping strategy. Indeed, such cases might involve a return to the practical foundations of the Harvard Business School noted by Bower. However, we should go beyond the early premises of the Harvard Business School, which brought practitioners into the classroom to explain their practice, towards examples of actual practice and critical reflections on that practice. Some recent textbooks have included chapters on strategy-as-practice with illustrative cases of practice, for example boardroom strategy talk, strategy retreats or strategy consulting interventions (see Balogun et al, 2007; Johnson et al, 2007). However, these are limited beginnings. Technology can provide us with actual examples of practice, via DVD or even via live streaming from the workplace. Additionally, we can make more of students as practitioners, engaging with real-world situations and reflecting on that engagement[i] (Raelin, 2007). If we integrate practice more fully into teaching in this way, we have better opportunities to associate teaching with practice.

In short, strategy-as-practice offers a different solution to the tangled problem of the relationship between strategy research and practice. In place of the gap *between* strategy research and practice, it proposes research *on* practice. The work, workers and tools of strategy are centre stage. Understanding these better can feed from business school classrooms directly into practice, as strategy-as-practice teaching helps shape more effective practitioners, whether as managers, consultants or entrepreneurs. Bower is right about the importance of practice and Grant is right to assert the role of theory. Strategy-as-practice research, building on sociological theory, can bridge the two. There are truly exciting opportunities for strategy-as-practice research and teaching in evoking the lived experience of doing strategy from the perspective of the practitioner and in generating theoretical explanations of how and why these experiences vary in different situations.

	Business Policy	*Strategic Analysis*	*Strategy-as-Practice*
Knowledge base	Management practice	Theory of profit—drawing mainly upon industrial economics and Ricardian rent theory	Sociological theories of practice, which provide deep insights into management practice
Experience base of teachers	Teachers predominantly former executives and consultants; case writing the primary academic training	Doctoral degrees in strategy, economics, organization theory, or systems theory followed by theoretical and empirical research into strategic issues.	Doctoral degrees in strategy, organization theory, sociology or anthropology, followed by empirical research into strategy practice.
Major emphasis	The art of strategic leadership by the general manager	The identification, creation, and appropriation of value	The work of strategy practitioners, broadly defined beyond the general manager (e.g. consultants, lower managers)
Position of course in MBA curriculum	Capstone: integrating functional and discipline based courses to provide an overall general management perspective	Foundation: analysis of the fundamentals of business—in particular, the determinants of profit	Elective: integrating functional and discipline based courses to provide an understanding of what constitutes a competent strategy practitioner
Textbooks that exemplify the approach	Andrews (1980) Christensen (1991)	Grant (2008) Barney (2007) Saloner et al (2006)	More needed! Chapters in Ambrosini & Jenkins (2007) Johnson, Scholes & Whittington (2007)

Table 1: Contributions of different approaches to bridging the research, teaching and practice divide

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[i] See a recent stream of discussion on strategy teaching on the strategy-as-practice website: www.strategy-as-practice.org for ideas on how better to incorporate practice in strategy teaching.