Integrating Research and Practice

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*** The Need for Better Integration***

In our practice as internal organizational development (OD) consultants, we are constantly faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, there is a wealth of research, theories and other scholarly products that should apply to the problems we help managers and groups solve. On the other hand, the theories are sometimes contradictory, they are hard to translate to our specific organizational context, and the voluminous amount of material on organizational development and change theory make it difficult to make sense of it all. Even if we do find a theory that might suggest a different action, we have a hard time convincing a decision maker of its value when they hold assumptions that are inconsistent with the theory.

To make matters more difficult, the field of organizational development is rife with popular management gurus who sell the application of one theory as the solution to all organizational problems. This is often confusing to the consumer of these ideas since the gurus have anecdotal evidence that it works. What is often lacking is good scholarship that helps users of the management guru's ideas how to decide when and if the theory will solve their problems. Critics of the popular management theorists such as John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldredge contend that the profession is "constitutionally incapable of self-criticism" (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996, p. 12). This is antithetical to the norms and ideals of scholarship where it is assumed that knowledge is created in part through a dialectic process.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge contend that the major flaws in the field of organization and management theory are mainly a function of immaturity. This immaturity causes the field to be a "mishmash" with huge variability of output. Management theory contains a great deal of intellectual content along side "extraordinary banality". As practitioners, this state of the profession causes us a great deal of consternation. There is no place to find the definitive kernels

of truth that we can rely on to provide a basis for helpful action. Nonetheless, there do seem to be some theories and models which if not universally accepted as true, at least could be useful in certain situations and context.

There is a gap between what the scholarly community is learning and what managers and organizational development professionals are learning. Research is not often used as a basis for action in organizations and the experience of organizations are not used as a basis for generalizable theory. John Willinsky discusses the loss of connection between research and practice (Willinsky, 2000). He contends that research seldom references how the theories have played out in the field of practice. Therefore the process of using scholarship in practice and moving practice to scholarship is of great importance if the field is to ever mature from its teenage years into adulthood. How do we use scholarship to inform our practice? How do we use our experience to inform our use of theory? How do we create new theory? How do managers select, use and create new theories? The essential question becomes how do we close the gap between scholarship and practice?

Kolb Model - Process of Experiential Learning

To better understand the nature of the gap between research findings and practice we will use the Kolb (Kolb, 1984) experiential learning model as a lens. The scholar-practitioner model of Fielding is intended to bridge the gap between experience or practice and new theory or knowledge creation. Kolb states that learning is the process of creating knowledge and defines learning to be the "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). To understand knowledge and how it is created we must understand learning. As adult scholars and adult practitioners we learn from experience. We see that common sense often overrides refined or scholarly knowledge in organizational settings.

Kolb says that common sense is always applicable but imprecise and refined knowledge is precise but limited in application or generalizability.

Kolb integrates the theories of Piaget, Lewin, and Dewey into an experiential learning cycle. Rather than a third alternative to the behavior perspective and the cognitive perspective, Kolb integrates the perspectives of experience, perception, cognition, and behavior.

Converging research from philosophy, psychology, and physiology, Kolb identifies two basic structural dimensions in the experiential learning process. The first is the prehension dimension which is how we grasp experience. Experience can be grasped directly via *concrete experience* known as apprehension or indirectly via *abstract conceptualization* known as comprehension. As I sit here typing this paper I grasp concretely those things around me such as the click of the keys, the background noise of the TV, the movement and air flow of the ceiling fan above me. These are all things I call reality and grasp via apprehension – yet as I describe them I am omitting parts of the experience as it cannot all be translated into words. The other mode of grasping experience, comprehension, introduces order to the chaotic flow of apprehended sensations. Comprehension involves abstracting sets of things into symbols and concepts that transcend the immediate time and space. Comprehension is shaped by mental models, existing knowledge, and psychological type. For example in my prior description of my surroundings I included the concept of air flow from a ceiling fan, I know that I can find a cool spot under a fan without having to come back to this exact same spot. I have comprehended that experience. The two types of knowledge created from apprehension and comprehension has a long history of philosophical inquiry (William James, Bertrand Russell, Herbert Feigl, G.E. Moore, Stephen Pepper, Alfred Whitehead). William James description of knowledge-of-acquaintance is apprehension and his knowledge-about is comprehension. A similar distinction is

made in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) psychological type dichotomy of perception

via sensing or intuition. Where sensing is based on concrete input through the five senses and

intuition imagines possibilities from the concept (Myers, Kirby, & Myers, 1998).

The other structural dimension to Kolb's learning cycle is the transformation dimension.

The terms intention and extension represent the transformation processes that occur with both the

apprehension and comprehension modes of grasping experience. The continual interplay of these

two modes creates meaning and learning. Intention involves internal reflection of an experience

termed ***reflective observation*** and extension involves taking action and thereby extending our

experience termed ***active experimentation***. Kolb considers both modes of equal importance. This

integrates the behavioral (action) perspectives and the cognitive (thought) perspectives. It is

consistent with Jung's distinction between introversion and extraversion as two parallel attitudes

that every human possesses. The MBTI subsequently combined these into a single dichotomy

and lost some of the original distinction.

Figure 1 (adapted from page 42 of Kolb) includes both structural dimensions and shows

the cycle of experiential learning. The cycle connects concrete experience to reflective

observation to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation back to concrete experience.

While represented here as a single cycle, it is actually a spiral that builds to more and more

complex and integrated learning. From this model, Kolb developed the concept of individual

learning styles (convergent, divergent, assimilation, and accommodative) and an indicator for

identifying them. Research shows that learning styles are contextual and migrate based on

personality type, undergraduate specialization, professional career, demands of the current job,
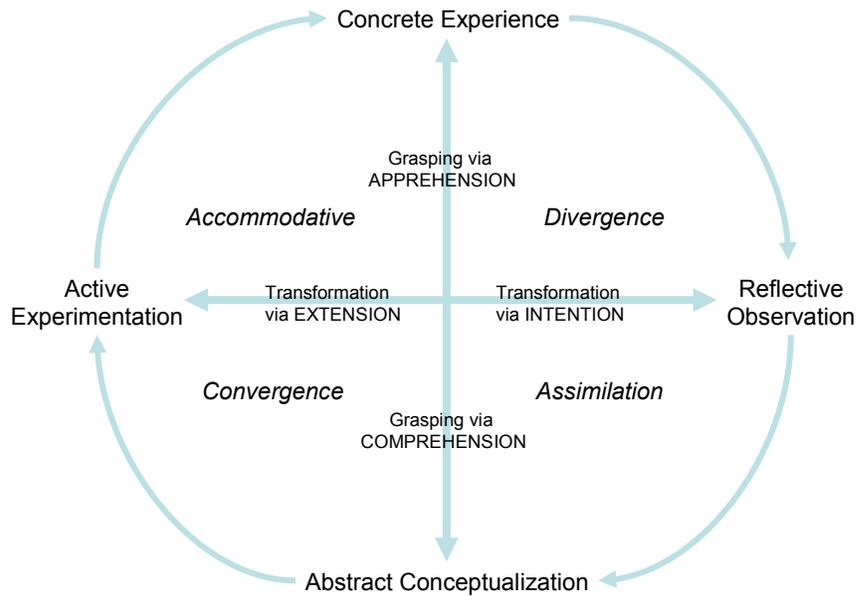
and the current task.

Concrete Experience

Grasping via
APPREHENSION

Accommodative   *Divergence*

Active
Experimentation
Transformation
via EXTENSION
Transformation
via INTENTION
Reflective
Observation

Convergence   *Assimilation*

Grasping via
COMPREHENSION

Abstract Conceptualization

Figure 1 Structural Dimensions Underlying the Process of Experiential Learning

An Example of the Scholar-Practitioner Experiential Learning Process

Within our internal OD consultant group (P3R), we strive to learn new theories and methods to help our clients. We value continually learning and seek to transfer our skills and knowledge as facilitators and consultants over to the groups we support. A typical cycle of development or learning for us looks something like this. Keith, as the "idea" guy, scans books, journals, and the internet for new ideas. In some cases the search may be in response to a specific client request, in other cases it is simply browsing to see what emerges. He brings the ideas to the group and generates curiosity and interest from other team members. Joan may select one of the new ideas based on relevance to a current or planned product and service area. Other team members may select an idea based on their own personal learning goals. Once an idea is selected for implementation, a subset of the team, anywhere from two to five people, will continue to

research the concept, combine it with other concepts, design the implementation, and plan the initial event. We view the initial event or intervention as an experiment, and assume there is much to learn from the experience. Throughout the implementation, we observe the results, often taking time out as a group to discuss what we see happening and how the implementation might be adjusted in the future. We also will make adjustments on the fly based on our experience with similar events and past implementations. After the event we debrief how the process went, decide whether or not to continue to develop the concept, and plan the next steps. We also discuss what patterns we observed and how they relate to past observations, not going as far as developing formal theory, but certainly continuing to build our own theories on how the organization works.

Using the language from the Kolb model and the example above, we illuminate the process of moving from theory to practice and practice to theory and then expand it to view the larger scholar-practitioner cycle.

In his search for new ideas, Keith comprehends concepts from existing literature. At this point he is not converging on any specific implementation, but is imagining possibilities. Kolb describes this in the experiential learning process as abstract conceptualization. The prevalent learning style at this point is assimilation as Keith is also using reflective skills to select which items to pursue and combine. Bringing the new ideas to the team, Keith transitions us to the convergent learning style. Through discussion of practical application for us and our clients, the team makes a selection of an idea or set of ideas to pursue. As we develop the concept into a design and implementation we move towards active experimentation, seeking an opportunity to take the initial action and transform the original idea via extension into our environment. There is always some risk associated with delivery of a new product or service. Action, opportunity

seeking, and risk taking are characteristics of the accommodative learning style. The delivery of the event moves us to the concrete experience portion of the process. We apprehend, through direct observation, the impact and results for the client group. We become aware of the meaning and value of the experiment for the client and for ourselves. Our choice of observations is based on our individual mental models, and as a team we collect and combine those observations, building a bigger picture of the experience. We actively reflect on our observations and experience, using a divergent learning style in Kolb's terms. From here we move back into abstract conceptualization, imagining what could be improved about the delivery or implementation. The cycle is continually executed with increasing levels of understanding and learning.

Where the Learning Process Fails

Pfeffer and Sutton acknowledge the lack of implementation of many of the best researched management practices (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Managers admit knowing about these best practices so lack of awareness or dissemination does not appear to be the major issue. Pfeffer and Sutton identify many reasons for the "knowing-doing gap", some of which can be explained using Kolb's process of experiential learning. One of the reasons is that "memory substitutes for thinking" which implies a lack of mindful reflection (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 88). The cycle of experiential learning fails when managers neglect to reflect on their concrete experience and simply repeat the practices that have developed into habits. They tend to "freeze on past knowledge" under conditions which create a need for cognitive closure which include a) pressure from deadlines, b) fatigue and lack of energy to process new information, c) discomfort and fear which make it difficult to process new information, and d) when closure is valued by significant others. A common theme in these conditions is the lack of ability to process all the

information that is available. Managers, as well as OD practitioners, find attention a scarce resource. This condition leads to another break in the experiential learning cycle; the ability to perform abstract conceptualization is diminished due to the lack of time to assimilate the new information and form new theories.

Another symptom that occurs within organizations that are not able to convert knowledge into action is when "talk substitutes for action" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). In this case it appears that the convergence on a good idea or concept has occurred and it is being presented as a decision. However, active experimentation leading to concrete experience is omitted and therefore no learning or use of knowledge really occurs. Planning may occur however nothing is effectively tried within the organization. At this stage managers or OD consultants may spend a large amount of time explaining or justifying the decision and lack the ability to implement to create a concrete experience so the learning cycle is broken.

Scholars may not often gain insight into the usefulness of the research or theories they create. OD practitioners within organizations may experiment with the theories and not be able to share the results due to the competition and risk associated with attempting a new management program and failing. In this case the concrete experience occurs but the scholar may not be invited into the reflective observation and therefore not gain valuable information about the utilization of the research. This makes it difficult for the scholar to understand what works and does not work, inhibiting the ability to tailor future research to improve practical application. Many organizations, in order to retain shareholder and consumer confidence, may not openly share mistakes in implementation of organizational development initiatives. Other scholar-practitioner communities, such as the successful agricultural extension service, do not have the same competitive conditions.

Nonaka and Takeuchi state that a "cognitive common ground" is required between knowledge workers for knowledge creation in companies (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 14). This could explain the gap created when researchers select topics of limited practical use for OD practitioners. Likewise, researchers may not view the practical problems of the manager or practitioner as relevant for research. The world view or mental models of what constitutes valid knowledge may differ between the two communities, so rather than meeting on the cognitive common ground we simply wave at each other from our cognitive islands. In western culture, we tend to view overlap or duplication of roles as redundancy that needs to be eliminated. Establishment of the separate academic and practitioner communities created a distinction between knowledge creation and knowledge application. This distinction prohibits natural creation of cognitive common ground that enables shared knowledge creation. In the learning cycle this is a lack of common concrete experience between scholar and practitioner.

Likewise the separation may limit the tacit knowledge transfer process (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). Micheal Polayni (Polanyi, 1966) originally wrote of the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, saying that which can be made explicit in words and numbers is only the tip of the iceberg of the entire body of knowledge for a person (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Yet for scholarly work, we seem to rely most heavily on the published word in scholarly journals, using academic peers as the judges for what is valid and worth publishing. Polanyi argues that humans acquire knowledge by actively creating and organizing their own experiences; congruent with Kolb's model of experiential learning. Nonaka and Takeuchi define knowledge conversion processes for accelerating knowledge transfer between tacit and explicit dimensions and note that transfer of tacit to tacit knowledge requires social interaction. If we extend the stages in Kolb's experiential learning cycle from an individual to a set of individuals

we can loosely correlate to the Nonaka and Takeuchi knowledge conversion processes (Nonaka

& Takeuchi, 1995, p. 62) as shown in Table 1. The story of our own OD consulting team is an

example of using Kolb's model at a social interaction or team level. Rynes and colleagues

provide suggestions of how the gaps between research and practice could be closed using

mindful application of the knowledge conversion processes, providing an accelerated spiral of

knowledge creation between the two communities (Rynes et al., 2001).

Table 1

Correlation of Experiential Learning to Knowledge Conversion

Experiential Learning Process	Knowledge Conversion Process	Examples from P3R Story
Abstract conceptualization	Combination Explicit-to-explicit knowledge	Keith's search for new ideas
Active experimentation	Internalization Explicit-to-tacit knowledge	Team selecting idea and developing intervention
Concrete experience	Socialization Tacit-to-tacit knowledge	Joint team delivery of the intervention
Reflective observation	Externalization Tacit-to-explicit knowledge	Joint team debrief of the delivery

Kolb - Experiential Learning Theory of Development

Inherent to Kolb's theory of learning is a component of growth and development.

According to Kolb, individuals can move through three stages of development; acquisition,

specialization and integration. The *acquisition stage* is from birth to adolescence and "marks the

acquisition of basic learning abilities and cognitive structures" (Kolb, 1984, p. 142). This stage is

where the child develops a sense of self and uses assimilative learning via the transformation of

comprehension by intention. This is equivalent to Piaget's stage of concrete operations and is the

beginning symbolic development.

The *specialization* stage "extends through formal education and/or career training and the early experiences of adulthood in work and personal life" (Kolb, 1984, p. 142). In this stage, individuals are socialized into their career and are rewarded for their increased competence in dealing with the demands of that career. Increased specialization is reinforced by a self-fulfilling process as their personal characteristics are enhanced to match the external demands. This positive feedback occurs in two ways; first the individual self-selects into a field that uses their natural personal learning styles and second the environment tends to change personal characteristics to match it.

The transition to the *integration stage* is caused by an awareness of the conflict between the restrictive effects of the social system on the individual's personal fulfillment needs. The individual realizes either gradually or from a transformational event that they want more from life and he or she begins a process of awakening. Some people never transform to this final stage as they are too tightly coupled to a social system that rewards their specialization behaviors. If an individual does reach this stage, he or she begins to use their non-specialized modes. For example, for the person who specialized in the active mode the new emergence of the reflective side allows for a deeper understanding of the range of choices and its implications.

It is safe to say that most people in their productive adult years are firmly in the specialization phase. They strive for increased specialization and are often rewarded for it. They are surprised when the skill they know best fails to work in achieving their goals. Their specialization has created filters to inhibit seeing what another specialist with a different learning mode understands as immediately obvious. Since different professions and occupations have their own specializations of learning modes, barriers are created between types of social

institutions. As we will argue, specialization can explain much of the gap between scholars and practitioners.

Barriers Due to Specialization

Taking a wider view with the Kolb theory of development model, we provide a more general picture of the gap between scholar and practitioner. First, we make some distinctions that are relevant in the field of organizational development. We define *scholars* as professional specialists who attempt to make valid claims about the world through research and who work primarily in universities and research institutes. Scholars make their work known primarily to a community of scholars working in their particular field. We define practitioners by dividing them into *managers* who are those that direct or control a business or other enterprise and *organizational development (OD) consultants* who are those that work with organizations to increase individual and organizational effectiveness. We admit that there are many individuals that will work in more than one of these roles however; we assert that these distinctions will illuminate some fundamental differences in the problem-solving approach of these roles even if it is the same person changing roles. We also assert that each of these professional roles can be associated with different modes of learning. It is the overuse or accentuation of a mode of learning, with its associated world view, that creates a culture. Members from one culture tend to distrust the methods of other cultures.

Scholars are interested in understanding and describing the world. They are often interested in developing theories that are as valid as possible. There is an attempt by the classic scholar to show consistency and correlation of causal relationships. We call this the natural science scholar. The social science scholar by contrast is interested in coherence between people and their relationships to the world. They may also develop causal models but their motivation is

often from an idealistic value system that emphasizes inclusiveness and harmony. For the natural science scholar the strategy of inquiry is integrative analysis and for the social science scholar inquiry is through an integrative synthesis (Kolb, 1984, p. 120). Relating to the Kolb model in Figure 1, the natural science scholar uses the learning mode of assimilation or grasping via comprehension and transforming through intention. The social science scholar uses the learning mode of divergence or grasping via apprehension and transforming via intention. Notice that what these types of scholars share in common in their learning styles is transformation via intention. This is an introverted process in the Jungian sense. We call attention to this relationship between the two scholarly learning styles because it is our hypothesis that scholars may develop secondary learning styles that are in the introverted reflective observation domain. In other words, the natural science scholar may increase their use of divergence modes and the social science scholar may increase their use of assimilation modes. This would result in a transformation to the Kolbian specialization stage of development which in this case, creates increased complexity along the reflective observation axis. A person with increased perceptual complexity would include the ability to give observations personal meaning and creating alternative meaning and observation schemes (Kolb, 1984, p. 152). These are abilities that align with scholarly values.

We must point out that our description of these types of scholars is a bit crude and simplistic. It would be easy to find scholars in many fields that use different learning modes than described above, for example a phenomenographer probably is using an accommodative mode. However, studies have shown that the above generalizations hold true for individuals in academic fields (Kolb, 1984, p. 85). This use of a specific learning style in a scholarly field occurs because either there is a process of socialization in a community of scholars or people

self-select into fields that support their natural learning style. In fact, it is probably a combination of both. We assert that this difference in learning styles is the basis for much distrust between the scholarly community and other communities especially the management field. Furthermore, this distrust causes a barrier between the learning from one field to cross into the other.

Managers are action oriented. They are interested in actualizing concepts or accommodating a changing environment. Managers are concerned with workability, verification, and qualitative confirmation of their concepts. They are also realistic and pragmatic and deal with the realities of the larger system while accommodating the people that comprise the system. Relating to the Kolb model, managers use the convergent style, grasping via comprehension and transforming through extension, or they use the accommodative style, grasping via apprehension and transforming through extension. These two styles share the extension or active experimentation mode. We hypothesize that increased development in the manager to the specialization stage would result in complexity along the active experimentation axis. This increases the ability to achieve clear long range goals to take risks by making strategy and goal tradeoffs. Both of these abilities are often stated as management and leadership competencies.

The manager is concerned with the field of action which is an extroverted focus in the Jungian sense. As they develop into the interpretive stage they will have an increased ability to solve management problems and will be positively reinforced for these actions. Just as the scholar will develop increased ability to perceive and will receive positive feedback for their reflections. These positive feedback systems will create barriers that inhibit either point of view from seeing the other. In a sense, filters are created that block the learning from crossing the boundaries. Scholars see managers as acting without proper reflection and managers see scholars as "contemplating their navel".
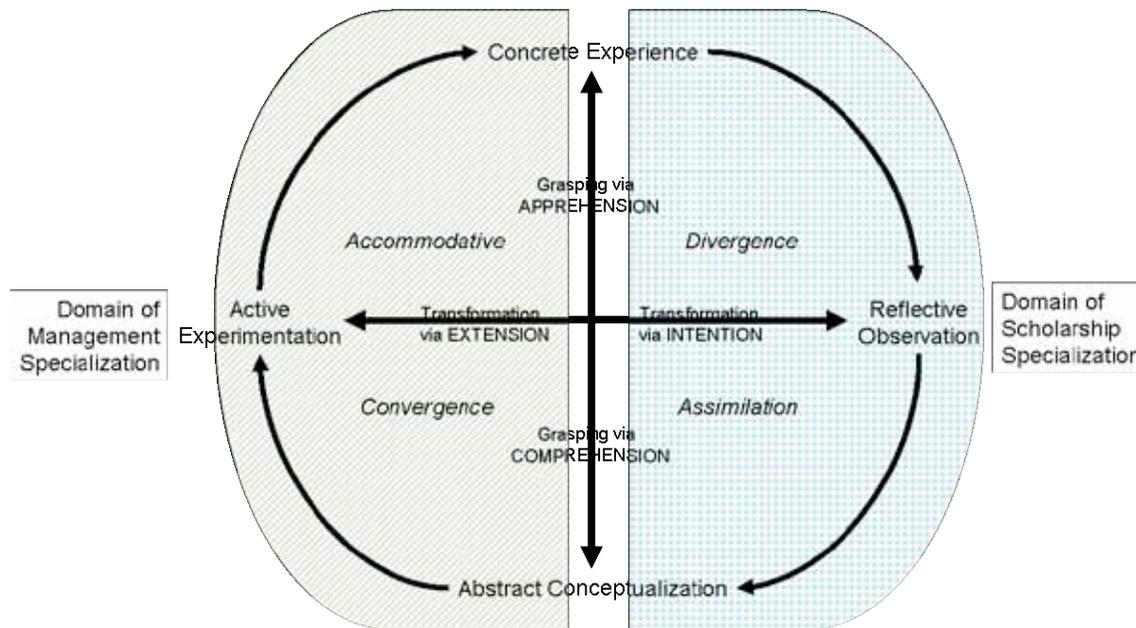
Figure 2. Domains of Management and Scholarship Specialization

But where does this leave the OD consultant? We contend that the OD consultant

attempts to bridge these two fields and in doing so creates their own barriers. OD consultants

generally work in two areas. One area is the sub-field of what we will call classic consulting.

These consultants are concerned with understanding the natural laws and structures that govern

organizational behavior. Armed with this understanding they help managers select the right

course of action. The classic consulting field has its roots in scientific management movement

and continues today with large consulting firms such as McKinsey, Accenture and Price

Waterhouse Coopers. Though these firms usually conduct research of their own which may lean

toward the scholarly, they are hired by their clients to first understand the problem then

recommend and sometimes even implement a solution. Classic consultants are working in the

learning modes of assimilation, grasping via comprehension and transforming through intention

and then converging, grasping via comprehension and transforming through extension. As they

develop into the specialization stage they will increase their ability to use concrete symbolic

operations and use formal hypothetico-deductive reasoning. These are the skills the clients ask

for. Clients want experts in organizations that can deduce the right course of action. At first

glance it might seem that this learning mode bridges the gap between the scholarly field,

especially the natural science scholar, and the management field. The classic consultant will be

concerned with getting the manager more perceptive and making the scholar more practical.

Unfortunately, though they can begin to help bridge the gap, they will be rewarded for increased

conceptualization and objectification of their recommendations. In doing so, they miss the

manager's concern with the people in the organization and the scholar's understanding of the

organic nature of social systems. So another barrier is created between the manager, scholar, and

classic consultant as each is skeptical that the others have the correct view.

Finally, the remaining OD consultant we will call the humanistic consultant. This sub-

field is concerned with the people. They are pragmatic and are motivated to achieve harmony

within the social system. Their view is contextual and centered on the individual. The humanistic

consultant combines a discrete and integrative synthesis of the individual to the whole system.

This sub-field has its roots in the social psychological movement and socio-technical systems

theory. As they develop to the specialization stage, the humanistic consultant develops the ability

to be aware of their own, other's, and the system's values and sentiments. They are hired by their

clients to help understand and adapt to individuals' and the organizations' emotional needs. This

often is exhibited by the process of coaching, a typical method of the humanistic consultant.

Once again, it would seem that the learning mode by the humanistic consultant creates a

bridge between management and scholarship. They understand the social science scholar's

organic view of social systems and then can help translate that understanding in to

accommodative action for the manager. They will be rewarded for their ability to understand and

appreciate the individual and their uniqueness. This concentration on the concrete experience

leads them to filter out the natural science scholar's view of objective mechanistic laws and

ignore the managers concern about how to turn their theories in to action. Barriers are created

between all four fields of scholarship, management, classic consulting, and humanistic

consulting. Perhaps the worst barrier is between the two fields that are attempting to bridge the

gap as the classic consultant sees the humanistic consultant as too "touchy-feely" with no

practical value and the humanistic consultant sees the classic consultant as not able to appreciate

that organizations are really made up of people with their own unique issues and concerns.
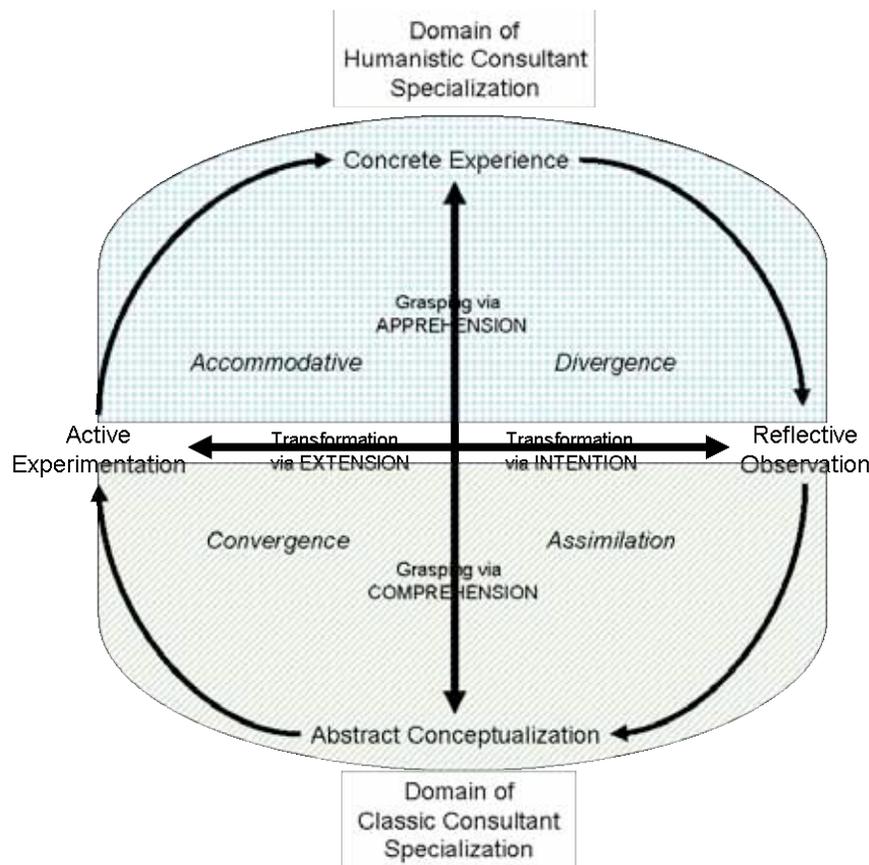

Figure 3. Domains of Classic Consultant and Humanistic Consultant Specialization

A Vision for Better Learning

From our discussions we see the possibility for improved learning and therefore

knowledge transfer between scholars and practitioners. The Kolb learning model provides us

with a language and lens to explain the actions for improvement. If OD practitioners concretely experienced research and the associated reflective observations, and scholars were directly involved in more applied work, the knowledge transfer would occur via socialization. Collaborative action research projects with OD practitioners, managers, and scholars as equal partners can bridge the gaps between the specialized communities. We would need to understand the incentives for such projects within each of the communities such that attention and resources could be made available. Each specialized community will need to take a step outside their island to begin to build the bridge. This begins with individuals taking a risk and then telling the story of their adventure.

Another bridge building approach is hosting cross-community events which bring together scholars, OD practitioners, and managers for social interaction and dialogue. This would allow the actors to gain an understanding and appreciation of the world view of the other. Rotations and partnerships that establish concrete experience in the other's world would also be beneficial. Scholar-practitioners, such as those at Fielding, often have the ability to set the foundations of these bridges within their own organizations and communities. In fact we are already experiencing this in our Fielding journey.

The Fielding Graduate University learning model emphasizes personal growth, development, and transformation. It also provides varied opportunities for collaborative and experiential activities between the communities of scholar and practitioner. The OPS sessions are designed to utilize the experiential learning process model. Fielding is also more accepting of non-traditional research methods which may help bridge the gap between scholar and practitioner use of knowledge.

On a more personal level for Keith and Joan, we are each schooled in specializations (physics, math, computer science) that accentuate the abstract conceptualization learning mode and the assimilation and convergent learning styles. This awareness has helped us realize we need to stretch our own development to become more integrated and conscious in our own learning. We will look to use the accommodative and divergence learning styles to develop further as individuals.

For our own research, we are each looking for opportunities in research and practice to collaborate with OD consultants, managers, and ourselves as scholars. We want to see knowledge created in a way that all the participants learn and gain a capacity for different action as well as increased recognition of theories underpinning human and organizational systems.

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