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## Knowledge diffusion from DBA research

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# Knowledge diffusion from DBA research

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## Synopsis

*There is a lack of empirical evidence on knowledge transfer from practitioner research in management. This study will explore whether, how and why such knowledge diffusion occurs in DBA research.*

## Abstract

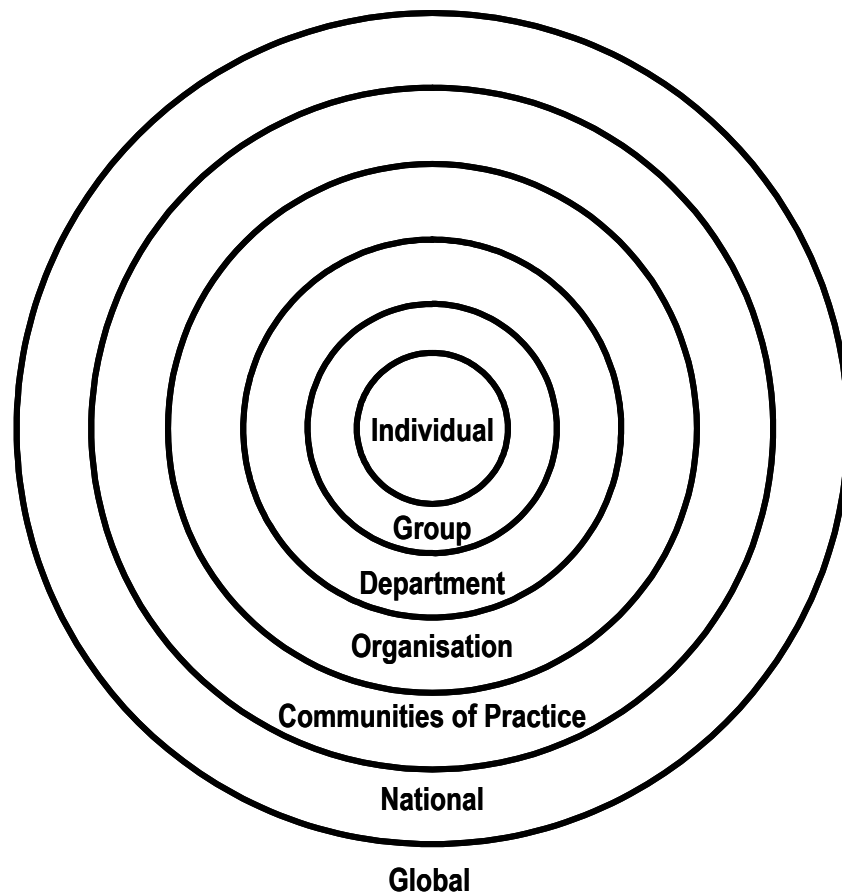
*The gap between academic research and management practice is well documented. Aram and Salipante (2003) point out that behind the rigour-relevance debate lie fundamental ontological and epistemological differences between the academic's search for generalisability and the practitioner's preference for particular solutions. One way forward is to involve practitioners in the research process, which is what the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree attempts to do. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence on knowledge transfer between practitioners and academics, particularly in the organisational sciences (Rynes et al. 2001). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring whether, how and why such knowledge diffusion occurs in DBA research. The methodology involves semi-structured, convergent interviews (Dick 1998). Participants will be a theoretical sample of Southern Cross University DBA graduates. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) techniques will be used for data analysis; however, data collection will be based on a hybrid of grounded theory and responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin 2005). While grounded theory precludes the use of prior literature in the research design, some of my interview prompts will be based on issues identified in the literature as well as those arising from my work, which involves facilitating publication of scholarly papers from DBA research.*

## Keywords

*Knowledge transfer, Doctor of Business Administration, Practitioner research, Rigour versus relevance*

## Introduction

This study seeks to explore whether, how and why knowledge diffusion from Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) research occurs in the organisational contexts of the research projects and the wider practitioner community as well as to academia via the traditional means of seminars, conferences and scholarly publications (Figure 1). It explores a number of areas such as the rigour-relevance debate and the value of practitioner research.



**Figure 1** Extent of knowledge diffusion.

## **Core concepts**

This section briefly discusses the core concepts involved in the research problem, namely, ‘knowledge’, ‘diffusion’, ‘theory vs practice’ and ‘DBA vs PhD’.

### **Knowledge**

Since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, Western thought has been dominated by the study of epistemology, or the nature, sources, limitations and validity of knowledge. There are numerous definitions and taxonomies of knowledge from a variety of perspectives. Plato in 360 BC, defined knowledge as ‘justified true belief’ in his *Theaetetus* (Project Gutenberg 1999). Although debated and modified in many ways, Plato’s concept of knowledge is still predominant in Western thought (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995).

More recently, Drucker (1993) coined the term ‘knowledge worker’ and argued that, in the ‘knowledge society’, the basic economic resource is no longer capital, natural resources or labour, but knowledge. Business is increasingly knowledge-driven and ‘knowledge management’ is recognised as an important capability in organisations.

### **Diffusion**

Diffusion has been defined by Rogers (1995, p. 5) as ‘the process by which an innovation is communicated within a social system, and adopted or rejected by its members’.

## Theory vs practice

The gap between academic research and management practice is well documented (Aram & Salipante 2003; Starkey & Madan 2001; Rynes et al. 1999; Tranfield et al. 2004). However, there is also a sense that academic research is behind, rather than ahead of, organisational practice (Barley et al. 1988; Rynes et al. 2001; Schön 1995). The academic-practitioner gap is represented in the literature by the debate over rigour versus relevance (Grey 2001; Huff & Huff 2001; Rynes et al. 2001; Starkey & Madan 2001; Tranfield et al. 2004). Aram & Salipante (2003) point out that behind the rigour-relevance debate lie fundamental ontological and epistemological differences between the academic's search for generalisability and the practitioner's preference for particular solutions. However, globalisation and super-competition have made practitioners more receptive to any research that might give them competitive advantage (Abrahamson 1996; Rynes et al. 2001). Meanwhile, cuts in government funding have increased higher education's reliance on the private sector. Furthermore, corporate and for-profit universities are beginning to emerge as serious competitors to university researchers (Rynes et al. 2001).

Gibbons et al. (1994) distinguish between two modes of knowledge production: mode 1, which is theoretical, discipline-based and generated primarily by individual creative efforts; and mode 2, which is problem-focused, transdisciplinary and generated by short-lived heterogeneous groups. Huff (2000) suggests that as social and organisational problem-solving gain in importance, business schools are in a position to offset the weaknesses of both modes 1 and 2. She proposes a third form of knowledge production, mode 1.5, which uses mode 1's disciplinary knowledge and academic skills to develop definitions, compare data across organisations and propose generalisable frameworks, but addresses issues that arise from practice, as in mode 2.

One way forward is to involve practitioners in the research process (Hirsch 2000; Rynes et al. 2001). Scholar-practitioners, or 'pracademics', promise to be 'boundary-spanners' who can move between the worlds of academia and business to generate new theoretical knowledge as well as organisational results (Hay 2004; Salipante & Aram 2003). Recently, the divide between theory and practice is being bridged through innovative doctoral programs devoted to the development of practitioner-scholars. Their purpose has been to produce knowledge that is relevant and accessible as well as rigorous. The rationale behind this is that practising managers can be *generators* as well as users of knowledge (Salipante & Aram 2003; Tranfield et al. 2004).

## DBA vs PhD

There has been a rise in the number of alternative doctoral programs devoted to the development of practitioner-scholars in recent years, with the DBA being the main alternative offered in business schools. The DBA originated in the United States in the 1980s and was introduced to Australia in the late 1990s, and by 2003, more than half the universities in Australia were offering the program (Sarros et al. 2004).

Just as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) represented a specialised form of Masters degree that addressed the needs of careers in management a few decades ago, the DBA offers a specialised form of research degree aimed at the practice of business management in the new knowledge economy (Bareham et al. 2000).

The main difference between the DBA and the traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is that whereas the latter aims to develop 'professional researchers', the former aims to develop

‘researching professionals’ (Bareham et al. 2000, p. 397). Unlike PhD research, which tends to start from an identified gap in the literature, the starting point of DBA research is likely to be a problem arising from professional practice. Thus the PhD demonstrates that the candidate has made an original contribution to theory, while the DBA demonstrates that the candidate has made an original contribution to practice. In addition, personal development is a specific aim of the DBA, so the learning outcomes of the DBA are much broader than the intended learning outcomes of the traditional PhD (Bareham et al. 2000).

The entry requirements for the two degrees are different. The entry requirement for the DBA is subject knowledge up to the Masters level, usually an MBA, which is not the case for the PhD (Bareham et al. 2000). Moreover, DBA candidates are expected to have significant work experience (Sarros et al. 2004). The relationship between the doctoral candidates and their academic supervisors is also different for the two degrees, since DBA candidates are experts in their own fields. And while the PhD is generally a solitary journey, the DBA provides opportunities for candidates to network with the other researchers in their cohort.

Practitioner-scholars continually engage with three groups – practitioners, a community of practitioner-scholars and traditional academics – to maintain their special orientation towards knowledge generation (Salipante & Aram 2003, p. 147).

## **Significance of study**

Although many scholars have written about the gap between theory and practice, and some have suggested that the practitioner-scholar may be the answer to the problem, there is a lack of empirical work on knowledge transfer between practitioners and academics, particularly in the organisational sciences (Rynes et al. 2001). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring whether, how and why such knowledge diffusion occurs in DBA research.

Tranfield and Starkey (1998) hold that diffusion of knowledge occurs initially to those participating in the knowledge-production process, that is, at the point of discovery rather than later. This study will therefore explore whether diffusion to practice occurs in the organisational contexts of the DBA research projects. It will also examine whether this knowledge is being transferred to academics via the traditional means of seminars, conferences and scholarly journals.

## **Methodology**

Since I am doing exploratory research, I will be using semi-structured, convergent interviews (Dick 1998) as my research methodology and grounded theory techniques to code and analyse the transcripts. Participants will be a theoretical sample of Southern Cross University DBA graduates.

### **Convergent interviews**

Convergent interviewing (Dick 1998) combines some of the features of structured and unstructured interviews, and uses a systematic process to refine the information collected. It starts with an opening, content-free question, which is followed by appropriate probe questions seeking specific information. While the information is determined by the person being interviewed, the process is tightly structured.

### **Grounded theory**

Grounded theory has been defined as a research methodology in which ‘the researcher attempts to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in

the views of participants in a study' (Creswell 2003, p. 14). It was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) who later differed in their formulations of it, with Glaser (1992) advocating a more laissez-faire approach and Strauss and Corbin (1998) a more linear approach. As there seems to be no consensus as to what grounded theory is, even by its founders, my study will take a pragmatic approach. I will follow Glaser's (1992, p. 40) advice to analyse 'key points' rather than individual words to protect against data overload and 'over-conceptualisation'. I will also follow Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendation to use the literature for analysing the data. Hence, the review of the relevant literature, or what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as 'literature sensitivity', will be ongoing.

Grounded theory, however, precludes the use of prior literature in the interview design, especially in the Glaser variation. Of course, even Glaser and Strauss accept that a complete tabula rasa approach is unrealistic. However, as Bryman and Burgess (1994, p. 6) point out, few users of grounded theory are strict about keeping out theoretical presuppositions at the start of analysis. Besides, the purist's approach to grounded theory may leave the researcher vulnerable to criticism from examiners, referees or colleagues (Dick 2002).

Selden (2005) suggests that there are alternatives to keeping oneself ignorant of the literature in one's research area, and offers the phenomenological tool of 'bracketing' one's prior knowledge and assumptions as one such strategy.

The defence is to take special pains to be responsive to the data, to seek disconfirming evidence assiduously, and to defend by careful argument your decision to do so (Dick 2002).

Therefore, my data collection will be based on a hybrid of grounded theory and Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interviewing technique, as some of my interview prompts will be based on issues identified in the literature, for example, Nutley et al.'s (2001) compilation of the characteristics of evidenced-based policy and practice, as well as those arising from my work, which involves facilitating publication of scholarly papers from DBA research.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Due to the nature of my research problem and methodology, data collection and analysis will take place simultaneously.

### **Steps in data collection and analysis**

The steps in my data collection and analysis will be as follows:

- Decide on the person 'most representative' of the population to be interviewed first. Then nominate the person 'next most representative, but in other respects as unlike the first person as possible'; then the person 'next most representative, but unlike the first two ...' and so on (Dick 1998). 'Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges' (Glaser & Strauss 1967, p. 49). 'Saturation', defined as no new ideas emerging (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 136) with each new interview, precludes predetermination of sample size.
- Conduct and record the first interview.
- Transcribe and analyse the data.
- Proceed to the next interview, and compare the findings to the previous findings. This 'constant comparison' (Glaser & Strauss 1967, pp. 104-105) will continue throughout the data collection and analysis process.

- As categories emerge from the data, add to the sample to increase diversity in useful ways.
- Continue this process until no new ideas emerge. At this point saturation would have been reached. ‘Theoretical saturation’ of a category occurs when no new information seems to occur during coding, that is, when no new properties are seen in the data (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 136).
- Finally, selective coding will be used to integrate the categories that have been developed to form the initial theoretical framework. If the data is analysed without a preconceived theory or hypothesis, then the theory that emerges will be truly ‘grounded’ in the data because it came from nowhere else.

### **Computer assisted qualitative data analysis**

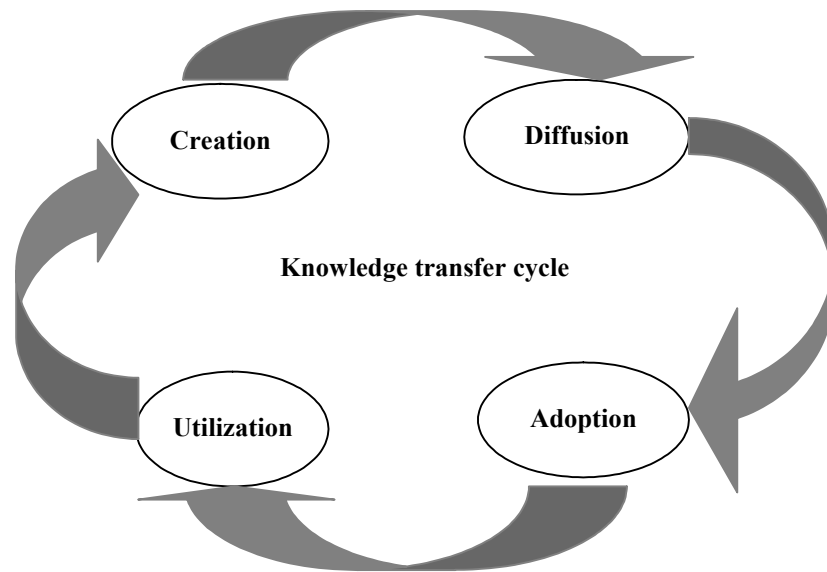
I will be using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to analyse my data. There is an expectation in qualitative research that the data analysis should be ongoing from the start of the project. Qualitative data tend to be voluminous. Moreover, in grounded theory, ‘all is data’ (Glaser 1998) – interviews, observations, documents, not only what is being told but also all the data surrounding what is being told. Hence reading all the text, looking for examples to code and all the time remaining unbiased is hard work (Gibbs 2002). The use of qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, ensures that the data processing tasks do not overtake analytic insights. Working linearly almost always creates problems for qualitative analysis. NVivo supports crucial reflexive techniques in qualitative research (Bazeley & Richards 2000). However, the computer can never do all the work for you. Therefore, the researcher has to guard against being seduced by the technology; otherwise there is the danger that ‘the technical tail is beginning to wag the theoretical dog’ (Miller 1997). Besides, I will ensure I keep close to the phenomenon I am studying by doing all the transcriptions and analysis myself, keeping in mind experimental psychologist Bob Grice’s advice to ‘always handle your own rat’ (Hackman 1992, p.75).

### **Evaluation**

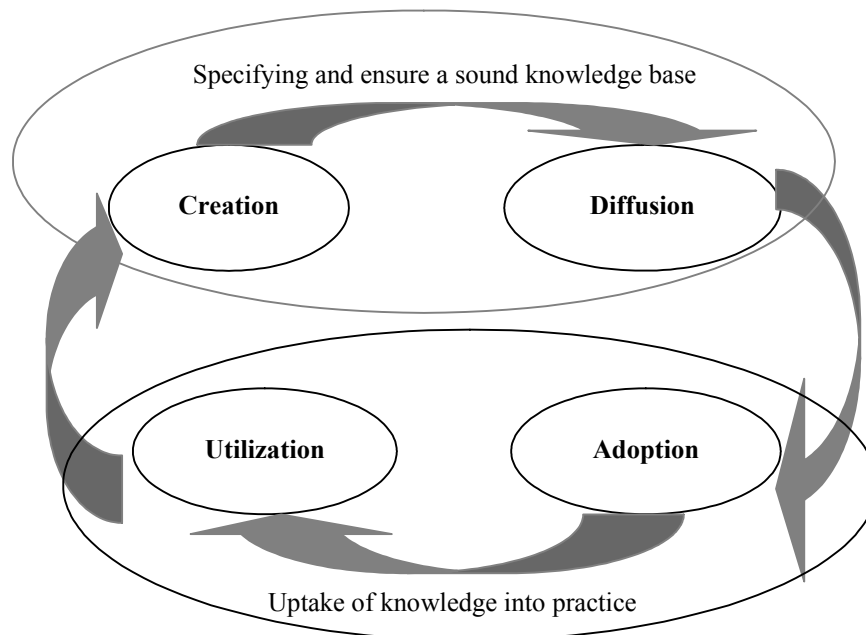
The use of research-based knowledge involves applying findings to real-world problems. Beyer and Trice (1982) suggest that there are three main types of knowledge use, which differ in degree: symbolic, conceptual and instrumental. Symbolic use is the use of knowledge to legitimate positions or justify actions and decisions. Conceptual use is a change in understanding. Instrumental use requires some form of change in behaviour. This study will examine all three uses of the DBA research projects.

### **Co-production of knowledge**

In terms of Tranfield et al.’s (2004) knowledge transfer cycle (Figure 2), using knowledge in these ways involves organisational change. This highlights two key barriers to the successful transfer of research-based knowledge in management (Figure 3). First, academic research findings are often difficult to locate, select, appraise and synthesise. Second, uptake is critical and is inherently a social process (Rogers 1995). Tranfield et al. (2004) hold that in the practitioner-scholar approach to management research, knowledge is jointly created by academia and industry and can help overcome the twin problems of knowledge creation and uptake – the ‘knowledge co-production model’. This research will evaluate whether this is in fact the case.

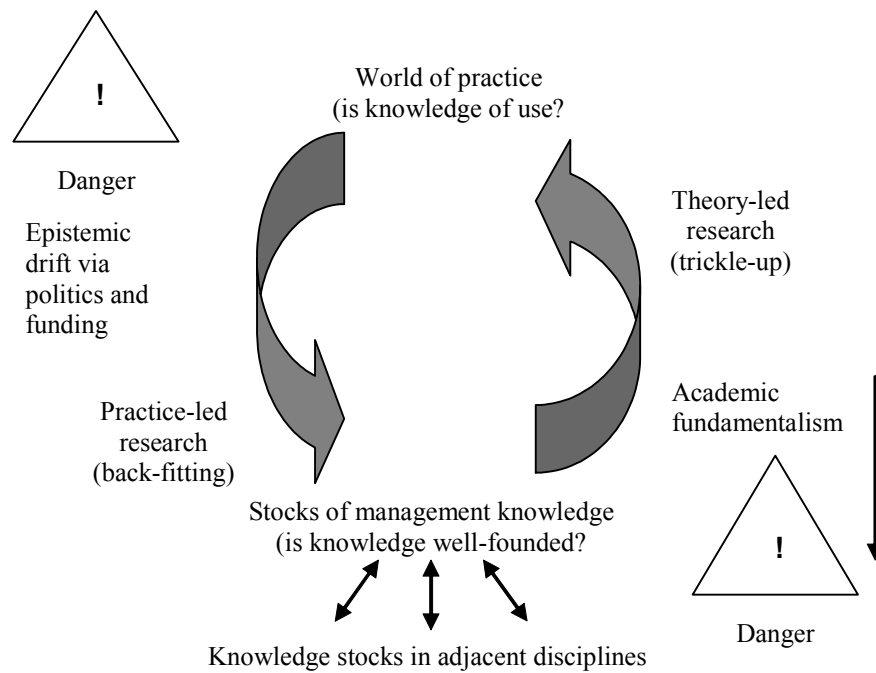


**Figure 2.** *The knowledge transfer cycle (Tranfield et al. 2004, p. 377).*



**Figure 3.** *Two challenges to successful knowledge transfer (Tranfield et al. 2004, p. 379).*

At the same time, many academics worry that collaborating with practitioners may mean that: only commercially profitable projects will be undertaken; managerial interests will be pursued at the expense of employees or the broader society; scientific progress will be affected by corporate restrictions on data collection, interpretation, and dissemination; or researchers may be co-opted by corporate interests and incentives (Figure 4, Tranfield and Starkey 1998). This study will examine to what extent these concerns are valid with regards to DBA research.



*Figure 4. The dual approach to the production of knowledge (Tranfield & Starkey 1998, p. 350).*

### Validation of findings

Triangulation will be achieved by content analysis of documentation produced by the participants and confirmation/disconfirmation from the literature. Secondary analysis is the analysis of previously collected data for a purpose other than that for which it was collected. This could apply to my analysis of the DBA theses from a knowledge diffusion perspective.

Member checking has become de rigueur for qualitative studies. However, Morse et al. (2002, p. 4) observe that there has been a gradual shift from constructive (during the process) procedures for ensuring rigour in qualitative research to evaluative (post hoc) procedures. They contend that running the overall results past the participants is not actually a verification strategy as the study results would have been synthesised, decontextualised and abstracted from (and across) individual participants, and so individual participants would be unable to recognise themselves or their particular experiences. On the other hand, researchers who want to be responsive to the particular concerns of their participants may be forced to restrain their results to a more descriptive level in order to address participants' individual concerns. In which case, member checks may actually invalidate the work of the researcher and keep the level of analysis inappropriately close to the data (pp. 7-8).

Keeping this in mind, I will incorporate member checking as a continuous process during data analysis (Guba and Lincoln 1981), in addition to giving participants the findings of the study. Besides which, strategies for ensuring rigour such as 'investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, and active, analytic stance and saturation' (Morse et al. 2002) will be built into my research process as described in the methodology section.

I will also conduct a Delphi study to validate my findings. This would involve assembling a panel of experts from fields that are relevant to my research question to comment on my data (Dick 2002).

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