

Closing the Research to Teaching Gap in HR

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ABSTRACT

Recent attention in the management literature has focused on the research-practice gap. Given the potential of research to inform, enlighten, and improve management practice, we suggest that closing the research-practice gap at least in part requires a closer examination of the role of teaching. As such, this paper focuses on the relationship between research and teaching in human resource (HR) management and how to synergize the research and teaching roles of HR faculty. The paper provides a brief review of relevant literature, examines reasons for the existence of the research-teaching gap, and provides practical suggestions for closing the gap in HR.

Keywords: research-teaching gap, human resource education, management faculty

INTRODUCTION

In examining and attempting to close the research-practice gap, some have questioned the relevance of human resource (HR) management research (Markides, 2007; Mowday, 1997; Weiss, 1983). Others suggest that not only is HR research relevant, but point to studies that show such positive outcomes as higher survival rates and higher financial performance for companies that are aware of HR research – suggesting that lack of awareness is likely to result in a competitive disadvantage (Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002). Consequently, questions arise as to the best means of disseminating research findings to practitioners (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007).

Recently, a few authors have drawn attention to the critical role that teaching plays in closing the research-practice gap and have encouraged closer examination by writers and instructors (Brew, 2004; Cohen, 2007). Specifically, Cohen (2007) suggests that the educational route to closing the research-practice gap may be an important piece and that it has been dismissed by other writers too quickly. As such, this paper focuses on the relationship between research and teaching in HR and how to narrow the gap between the research and teaching roles of HR faculty. In addition, the paper provides a brief review of relevant literature, examines reasons for the existence of the research-teaching gap, and provides practical suggestions for closing the gap in HR.

RESEARCH – TEACHING GAP

“One of the principal justifications for asking (or requiring) professors to perform research is to increase the stock of knowledge we can pass on to future generations. If we do not find mechanisms for transferring recently developed knowledge into curriculum and teaching

materials then we will not have fulfilled completely our responsibilities as educators” (Kaplan, 1989, p. 129). Thus, the research and teaching roles should not be isolated and disparate. Inherent in management education is the notion of evidence-based management which “derives principles from research evidence and translates them into practices that solve organizational problems” (Rousseau, 2006, p. 256).

Questions arise concerning how successfully knowledge of management research is transferred to our students. For example, Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007, p. 987) point out that “even the acquisition of a formal master’s or bachelor’s degree in business is not a guarantee that a student has learned evidence-based principles.” This is a clear indication of a research-teaching gap, suggesting that knowledge and insights gained from research are not always effectively reflected in the classroom and adequately transferred to students. This fissure may be the result of weak connections between research and education resulting from shifts in the focus of business education and methods of teaching business.

Shifts in Business Education

Trank and Rynes (2003, p. 193) attributed the shift in business education from “theory, abstraction, and general knowledge” to more commodified knowledge to corporate preferences for specific skills training. In essence, they and others (Weiss, 1983) suggest that business schools have dumbed down material to focus on current practices rather than sharing research knowledge supported by theory and empirical evidence. At the same time, students express a desire for curriculum that has immediate career relevance and prefer simple, ready-made solutions in lieu of science-based principles to lay the ground work for sound organizational practice (Rousseau, 2006; Trank & Rynes, 2003). What has gotten lost is the need for understanding the underlying theoretical principles and the general knowledge that allow students to adapt to the complexities they will face in the business world.

Pfeffer and Fong (2002) suggest another major weakness of business education lies in the lack of practice opportunities where students can apply knowledge learned in the classroom to the work setting. This claim implies that business schools should build in some component similar to the clinical experience that other professional fields require to be effective. While a spotlight only on application risks reducing students’ understanding of theory and principles, focusing entirely on theory may leave students unable to apply knowledge in real-world situations and result in graduates who are unprepared to take on roles as managers (Mintzberg, 2004; Wren, Halbeslen, & Buckley, 2007). Business schools have thus struggled with appropriately balancing theory and application. The study by Wren et al. (2007) shows shifts in this emphasis over time; particularly relevant to our focus in the present paper is a shift in HR courses from theory in 1977 toward application by 1989 and a return to emphasis on theory around 2005.

Method of Teaching

Management education has also been criticized for teaching inappropriate content using ineffective methods (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004). Some suggest there is a weak connection between research and education as evidenced by the lack of research and theories in

textbooks and, in some cases, inclusion of various older, discredited theories while omitting what current research has unveiled (Rousseau, 2006; Trank & Rynes, 2003). Thus, the transmission of contemporary management theories and related empirical findings to management textbooks may be lacking, and in turn contributing to the research-teaching gap.

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) advocate the use of a professional model as an approach to business education emphasizing an integration of knowledge and practice. The integration of knowledge and practice may be as simple as integrating cases, personal research, and examples into classroom curricula or as complex as completely changing the way courses are taught. For example, some suggest involving students more in the learning process by applying knowledge, reflecting on it, and deriving principles themselves rather than learning through lectures (Rousseau, 2006; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007), while others advocate a more radical re-conceptualization of higher education as a whole (Brew, 2003; Clark, 1997) focusing on academic communities of practice and a creation of knowledge that changes the nature of the teacher-student relationship. Such proposed changes in education methods would link research more closely to teaching, in part helping to address the research-teaching gap. In addition, the anticipated changes would make learning a more active process, which should stimulate greater interest, enhance learning, and possibly result in the active exploration of more relevant topics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HR EDUCATORS

Based on the prior discussion, we see that the research-teaching gap is not an unexplored concept in higher education, although it has received relatively scant attention in the HR literature. We agree with Deb Cohen (2007), chief knowledge officer of SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management), that the role of teaching and instruction can and should play a critical role in closing the research-practice gap and that its role has been underemphasized in recent discussions (e.g., Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007). Instead of isolating the research and teaching roles and viewing teacher and researcher skills sets as opposites, we should allow and encourage free interplay between the roles and capitalize upon the synergy of the required skill sets. In doing so, management instructors may be able to enhance student learning and ultimately management practice.

It is important to focus on what HR educators can do to bring a reflective research mindset to the classroom so that students – present and future managers – are informed of relevant, useful findings as well as embrace an evidence-based approach (Holton, 2004) to management practice. Next, several ideas are examined to promote *research-inspired teaching*, defined in this paper as instruction that draws upon and is grounded in relevant discipline research. Hutchings and Shulman's (1999) discussion of "scholarly teaching" emphasizes that faculty be: informed of the latest ideas in their discipline; reflective; and evidence-gathering. Such an approach may also help to break down students' and others' perceptions of faculty as inaccessible data-crunching eccentrics.

Research-Inspired Teaching in HR

As a baseline, instructors can and should be transmitters of research findings and information (Brew, 2002). Some writers have argued that management instructors avoid this

level of research infusion into their teaching for fear of not having enough useful information to share or for fear that students will be bored or overwhelmed by complicated, highly contingent relationships (Weiss, 1983). Yet, the present authors have found students intrigued by their instructor's research publications when they are value-adding to course content. More importantly, other research findings buttress these anecdotal experiences: students, especially those who are motivated, appear to value teachers who are engaged in research (Breen & Lindsay, 1999; Jenkins, Blackman, Lindsay, & Paton-Saltzberg, 1998); and Euwals and Ward (2005) found that productive researchers tend to be successful teachers. As such, students may perceive researching instructors as current and knowledgeable and consequently more engaging in the classroom.

Perhaps the first question to ask regarding the research-teaching gap in HR is: what do HR instructors have to share? Albeit a relatively young discipline, we believe that HR research has produced useful, relevant, and interesting perspectives and learning points for discussion in the classroom. Aside from generated paradigms (i.e., classical, behavioral, systems) that have important implications for framing classroom discussions of managerial roles (see Lemak, 2004), HR researchers are increasingly summarizing well-documented lessons for management practice, all useful classroom fodder.

For example, Rynes, Colbert, and Brown (2002) assessed HR managers' knowledge of 35 well-documented HR-related empirical findings in the areas of recruitment, employee selection, compensation, training, and performance appraisal. Certainly, not all of Rynes and colleagues' substantiated research findings were obvious to the sample of practitioners. Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) more recently asked top HR journal editorial members what fundamental research findings practicing managers should know about. Their interesting findings similarly can and should inform our teaching and instruction at the undergraduate and MBA levels. On more specific topics in HR, meta-analytic findings can be useful in the classroom (e.g., Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998 on performance appraisal participation; Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2002 on training effectiveness; Collins & Holton, 2004 on leadership development programs; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007 on psychological contracts). Using such articles in undergraduate and MBA courses as lecture inputs, assigned readings, and/or content for graded in-class discussions, students can learn of empirical support (or the lack thereof) for various HR practices and ponder additional questions.

A second relevant question in the research-teaching gap is: how do or should research-inspired instructors teach? It has been argued that the process of learning closely mirrors the process of research (Brew, 2003) – we identify a research question or topic of interest, identify and gather information, and analyze possible explanations while attempting to minimize personal bias. Management students arguably need to learn about effective research practices as a general competency in their personal and work lives so that they effectively question their own assumptions and uncover (or create) documented findings. Indeed, taking undergrad students beyond their frequent one-step Google or Wikipedia “research approach” would be a welcome change in management education. So, as we transmit and discuss established findings in the extant HR literature, students will likely need to learn more about the research process (e.g., effective sampling procedures, research designs), which will likely only enhance students' transferable skills, making them more workplace ready.

Interestingly, a baseline transmission role of conveying relevant HR research will likely require enhanced student understanding of effective research processes and in turn place both instructor and student in a more inquiring, exploring role. Classrooms in which students are asked to analyze and potentially even implement effective research procedures may indeed require a less autocratic and status-based setting and instead support a more egalitarian search for answers and learning (Brew, 2002). This type of transition would necessitate different models of doctoral student development, management faculty development, and administrative models of selection, awards, and professional development.

We argue that research-inspired teaching is relevant at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels of management instruction and should no longer be selectively tapped for a privileged few students (e.g., honors classes, independent studies, etc.). Ultimately, if faculty members listen closely to student questions and comments in the classroom they could even uncover seeds of future research studies. We propose that research-inspired teaching can subsequently inform our research, yielding synergy across the traditionally-conceived disparate roles of research and teaching.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the research-teaching gap in management and subsequent implications for HR instructors. We believe research-inspired teachers likely: connect more than isolate; reflect and improve versus stagnate; and inquire as much as tell. Consequently, the skills traditionally assigned to the research and the teaching roles can and should inform each other. For example, the analytical, inquisitive, methodical, critical-thinking skills ascribed to research activities can help scholarly teachers go beyond superficial learning to deep learning, logically progress through concepts in the classroom, and question unsubstantiated generalizations. At the same time, the simplifying, orating, organizational, and evaluation skills attributed to teaching activities can help researchers clearly communicate their research findings across diverse audiences, solicit feedback on their research ideas, and present a fair interpretation of their results. As such, the skill sets underlying teaching and research should not be placed at opposite ends of a continuum but should be examined and developed more synergistically.

By narrowing the research-teaching gap, HR faculty members will increasingly merge their roles and skill sets, which have been distinctly and ineffectually segregated. Perhaps research-inspired teaching can even place research and teaching activities on playing fields of similar status and produce a higher, more integrative value to the consumers of our endeavors. Regardless, the research-teaching gap merits more explicit attention in the HR literature and closer scrutiny by researchers, doctoral institutions, and administrators.

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