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Chapter 16: Concluding reflections - exploring and mapping the knowledge and practice terrain

Sandra Nutley, Rod Bain, Bonnie Hacking, Clare Moran, Kevin Orr and Shona Russell

Introduction

In writing this book our aim has been to contribute to a continuing conversation about knowledge and practice. To sum up our contribution to this conversation thus far, after setting the scene in Chapter 1 (introduction), we have explored the conceptual terrain and some of the key debates about knowledge and practice (in Part A). We have then provided context-specific examples of ways of understanding the relationship between knowledge and practice (in Part B). And in Part C, we have considered different approaches to improving the creation, sharing and use of knowledge, while also providing some initial reflections on their implications for actions. What emerges are the rich and varied ways in which we can understand both knowledge and practice and how they relate to one another.

We could leave it at that. However, as explained in Chapter 1, this writing project has been a learning journey for the authors and for the broader community of people involved. It therefore seems appropriate to share some further thoughts and reflections on our expedition and our emerging map of the knowledge and practice terrain. In offering these reflections, we are not attempting to provide some notion of the final word. We do not wish to foreclose discussion of

other ways of interpreting the key messages to emerge from previous chapters. We hope and anticipate readers will also be drawing and sharing their own conclusions.

This chapter continues by reiterating our diverse points of departure and what we hoped to provide for ourselves and others by embarking on this expedition – issues introduced in Chapter 1. We then turn to consider our intermediate points of arrival, in particular our emerging conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain, which identifies the key domains and 'fault lines' within this arena plus their implications. This is followed by some reflections on how we got to this point: our own knowledge and practice in producing the book, and our approach to moving between and across the fault lines and perspectives depicted in the conceptual map. Finally, we consider future directions of travel (for ourselves and others): domains and fault lines that could be explored; ideas and values to carry with us, and some things we should probably leave behind.

Points of departure

This was a collective writing project, which brought together people who shared a common interest in broadening and deepening their understanding of knowledge and practice. Despite this shared interest, there were diverse points of departure for our individual engagement in the project, including different career histories, disciplinary backgrounds, and areas of research and practice. There were also differences in epistemological positions and methodological choices, the balance between explanatory, normative and critical stances, and attitudes to and experience of applied research and engaged scholarship. It was clear from the outset that we approached, examined, enacted and explained knowledge and practice issues in various ways and in divers settings.

There were, however, limits to both the diversity of our learning community and our ambitions for the journey ahead. We were all primarily concerned with studying knowledge and practice in and between organisations (albeit these included public, private and not-for-profit organisations of varying scales and scopes). We were all based in the UK and this is reflected in the choice of settings investigated in Part B. Although many participants had experience of other national contexts, our focus was on ways of understanding knowledge and practice in organisations and societies shaped by a western intellectual tradition. We recognised that there would be additional insights to be gained from studying these issues in other settings and societies but this was a boundary that we did not plan to cross on this occasion. Nevertheless, through our UK focus we were joining international debates and conversations about knowledge and practice.

Provisional points of arrival

We did not begin with a guiding map of the knowledge and practice terrain or a clear idea of where we would arrive at the end of the project. We did, however, decide early on that we would share the results of our learning with others in the form of an edited collection. Discussing the shape of this book helped to structure our expedition and specific events organised around the component parts of the book provided convenient staging posts along the way.

The individual chapters within this book go a long way towards capturing our provisional points of arrival for the concepts we reviewed (in Part A) and the context-specific examples that we considered (in Part B). In Part C of the book, we began the process of looking across the chapters with the specific aim of considering the implications of our investigations for understanding (and improving) the creation, sharing and use of knowledge. As part of this we considered (in Chapter 14) whether the concept of coproducing knowledge and practice provides a useful way of integrating the insights from the context-specific chapters. We found it a helpful lens for viewing

the relationship between knowledge and practice, but it is just one way viewing this relationship. To more fully capture and map the conceptual landscape covered by the book, we need to think more broadly than this. The results of this broader analysis are depicted in our emerging conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain (Figure 16.1).

[Insert Figure 16.1 here]

Figure 16.1: An emerging conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain

An emerging conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain

Our map of this terrain centres on two dimensions or 'fault lines' emerging first in the conceptual chapters on knowledge (Chapter 2) and practice (Chapter 3), and then revisited and discussed in subsequent chapters. The first of these fault lines (shown on the vertical axis in Figure 1) concerns the conceptualisation of knowledge and practice. At the top end of this axis, knowledge is seen as a product or thing, separate from practice. In terms of Cartesian dualism (see Chapter 3), mind/thinking and body/action are separated and practice becomes defined as the opposite of theory or simply what people do. At the bottom end of this fault line, knowing is viewed as a process, wherein knowing and doing are intertwined. A fracture point in conceptualisation occurs somewhere between the two ends of this dimension, but we find many authors (in this book and beyond) cluster around the middle. For example, they may recognise the importance of viewing knowing as a process but nevertheless still frame much of their discussion in terms of a gap between knowledge and practice. For this reason it is not always easy to see which side of this conceptual divide is ultimately driving their thinking and actions.

The second fault line or dimension (the horizontal axis) concerns the unit or level of analysis used to study knowledge and practice. At the left-hand side of this dimension is the study of knowledge

and practice at different levels of granularity (micro, meso and macro levels). The micro level typically involves considering the knowledge and practice of individuals and/or groups. At the meso-level the focus is on the knowledge and practice of larger collectives, particularly organisations. At the macro level the focal point moves to wider systems, inter-organisational relationships and institutions. The wider level may include, for example, a sector-by-sector analysis of knowledge and practice, or an analysis of national policy making. At the right-hand side of the horizontal dimension we find the 'flat ontology' of practice theory (see Chapter 3), where the unit of analysis is practices (and bundles of these). The perspectives of the majority of authors in this book cluster towards the left-hand side of this horizontal dimension, but three of the conceptual chapters - Chapters 3 (on practice), 4 (on power) and 6 (on identity) - highlight some of the benefits of adopting a practice-theory ontology. Two of the context-specific chapters – Chapters 7 (on sensing bodies) and 8 (on advertising) also demonstrate the insights provided by adopting this perspective. In addition, the commentary by Blue and Shove in Chapter 15 teases out the implications of practice theory for developing know-how.

The placement of these two dimensions at right angles to one another produces a figure which demarcates four perspectives or domains of thought on knowledge and practice. The characterisation of each of these domains (below) captures the main debates in the field (as examined by this book). The figure is not intended to depict a desirable progression between the domains; rather it indicates the differences between them. And it is, of course, only one way of mapping the terrain. Like all maps, it is selective in what is captured, but we offer it as a potentially helpful guide.

Four domains of thought on knowledge and practice

The summary text provided for each domain in Figure 16.1 indicates how knowledge and practice *tend to* be approached and characterised by those adopting the assumptions and unit of analysis associated with the domain. We use the phrase *tend to* advisedly because the position of the boundaries between the domains are porous and there is some cross-over in the language and images used in each. Nevertheless, the tendencies are sufficient to enable us to characterise the enquiry focus, types of explanation, and recommendations associated with each.

In the top left-hand domain, *knowledge-into-practice*, knowledge is viewed as somewhat separate from practice and the relationship between them is often considered as a problem to be addressed, a knowing-doing gap (see Chapter 13 on knowledge mobilisation). Different sources and forms of knowledge are recognised (as outlined in Chapter 2). However, the varying interests, needs and preoccupations of different epistemic and practice communities (Haas 1992) often mean the value they place on different forms and sources of knowledge varies. In this way, boundaries develop between interest groups and communities and this hampers the process of knowledge sharing and practice development. Boundary spanners are envisaged as key agents in enabling knowledge to flow across these structures and communities (see Chapter 10 on environmental policy and Chapter 11 on healthcare). A relationship between knowledge and power is frequently recognised. Power tends to be viewed as a resource: those who have greater power in a system influence which forms and sources of knowledge have greater voice and traction (see Chapter 9 on accounting). Knowledge is also viewed as a source of power. In line with this, knowledge workers (Chapter 5), from this perspective, have greater status due their possession of a valued resource.

In the bottom left-hand domain, *knowing-and-doing*, the separation between knowledge and practice is less evident, and is fully dissolved at the bottom margin. There may still be recognition

of different forms of knowledge, but these are more likely to be viewed as intertwined strands (see Chapter 2 on knowledge). The focus is less on different forms of knowledge than on the processes by which individuals and groups come to know how to do things, and the processes which lead to certain ways of knowing and doing becoming recognised and valued. This involves understanding relationships between individuals and groups. It also involves an appreciation of the dynamics of complex systems (Best and Holmes 2010). The concept of co-production (Chapter 14) is sometimes used to describe the basis and politics of intertwining relationships, but it is also used in a normative sense to indicate what are envisaged to be more effective ways of approaching the development of knowing and doing. The concepts of knowledge work and identity work intersect with these process explanations. Within this domain both concepts are viewed as processes representing how people act in the workplace and why this is the case (see Chapter 5 on knowledge work and Chapter 6 on identity).

In the top right-hand domain, *doing-with-knowledge,* the focus is on empirically-grounded descriptions of what people do – the activities they undertake. The extent to which knowing and doing are viewed as separate activities within this domain varies across studies. As noted in Chapter 3 (on practice), one branch of empirical work adopting a practice-focused approach has tended to study the detail of practices, unmediated by *a priori* theoretical frameworks. Such an approach does not feature strongly in this book and the closest example we provide is the study of advertising agency practices (Chapter 8). A focus on practices as the unit of analysis is associated with the idea that learning, knowing and skills are developed through practices. Theorised knowledge may be viewed as somewhat disconnected from what happens in practice (a doing-knowing gap) leading to a disregard for much academic research (as discussed in Chapter 9 on accounting).

An examination of what people do is also at the forefront of the approach represented in the bottom right-hand domain, *knowing-in-doing*. Here practice theorising features more strongly than in *doing-with-knowledge*. With this come particular assumptions about the intertwined nature of knowing and doing. The importance of the material as well as the social world is emphasised, and both of these are viewed as inseparably entangled. The focus in this domain is on explaining the production and reproduction of practices, with the promise of greater insights into continuity and change, and the development of know-how. Chapter 7 (on sensing bodies) provides a good example of this approach. The perspective represented by this domain is challenging because it suggests that 'practices survive and thrive through producing and re-producing the appropriately skilled activity of practitioners' rather than vice-versa (Blue and Shove, Chapter 15, p x) That is, practices rather than people have agency.

Related social science concepts

The social science concepts intersecting most directly with discussions of knowledge and practice are depicted in the outer circle of Figure 16.1. We have only highlighted those concepts that feature strongly in the analyses presented in this book; other analyses are likely to reveal a wider range of intersecting concepts. As already indicated, the way these concepts are interpreted and expressed in each domain varies. This is illustrated by focusing on just one of the concepts: power. The approach to power in the *knowledge-into-practice* domain is more likely to adopt a resource-based and coercive view of that power. In contrast, in the *knowing-and-doing* and *knowing-in-doing* domains the focus is more likely to be on the productive capacity of power and power as doing (see Chapter 4 on power). In the *doing-with-knowledge* domain, the view of power may emphasise its productive capacity, but power may also be viewed as something which is possessed and exercised coercively (as in the jurisdictional disputes reported in Chapter 9 on accounting).

These related social science concepts not only shape approaches and explanations in each of the domains, but the discussion of these concepts in the context of knowledge and practice also influences debates about the concepts themselves. For example, Chapter 4 (on power) illustrates the way in which a practice-theory perspective, *knowing-in-doing,* can help to refine our conceptualisation of power. Similarly, Chapter 6 (on identity) discusses the way in which the same perspective, offers new ways of thinking about identity and identity work.

The concepts are depicted (in Figure 16.1) as somewhat separate and removed from discussions of knowledge and practice. However, in some analyses, particularly those adopting perspectives towards the bottom of the figure, concepts such as power and identity are seen as intrinsic to understanding knowledge and practice. It would be interesting to see what other concepts and connections might emerge as key from different portfolios of knowledge and practice explorations.

Enquiry goals and methods

Different analytical goals can influence the nature of the approach taken in each domain. The chapters in this book have varying emphases on explanation, critical assessment, and more normative judgements about what needs to change in relation to knowledge and practice. Although there is a risk of over-generalising, we note (based on the examples in the book) that those operating from the *doing-with-knowledge* and *knowing-in-doing* domains tend to focus on description and explanation (e.g. Chapters 7 and 8 on sensing bodies and advertising respectively). Whereas those operating from the *knowledge-into-practice* and *knowing and doing* domains have a greater tendency to critically assess (e.g. Chapter 12 on philanthropy) and provide more normative judgements (e.g. Chapter 11 on healthcare and Chapter 13 on knowledge mobilisation). These differences in analytical goals are linked to the breadth of possibilities offered by different ontologies (the horizontal dimension of Figure 16.1).

A combination of analytical goals and ontological perspectives influences the range of enquiry methods used by researchers operating with or across the domains. Empirical studies reflecting the two domains on the right-hand side of the figure tend to adopt broadly ethnographic methods. In contrast, a wider mix of research methods is more evident in studies conducted within the domains on the left-hand side. These include case studies, surveys, and experimental methods, as well as more observational methods.

Complementary or incommensurate perspectives

We have used the phrase 'fault lines' to characterise the two dimensions depicted in Figure 16.1 because they capture different ontological and epistemological perspectives on knowledge and practice. This raises the question of whether the domains in Figure 16.1 represent 'incommensurable paradigms' that provide alternative rather than complementary world views (see Burrell & Morgan 1979). Our use of dotted lines to portray the boundaries between the domains suggests there is some fluidity across the boundaries: some sharing of ideas. However, at their heart, the domains represent different philosophical positions that cannot be simply disregarded or fully dissolved. Accordingly, we do not consider it feasible to arrive at an integrated 'grand theory' of knowledge and practice; one that pays due attention to the assumptions and concerns of all domains. This does not mean researchers or other practitioners necessarily need to confine themselves to investigations (or other practices) that are shaped by the perspectives of only one domain. On the contrary, they may profitably choose to offer multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon or act differently in different situations.

One of our guiding principles in this project has been to value the insights offered by different perspectives, even when these do not fit with our own approaches to understanding knowledge and

practice. However, reflecting on the conclusions drawn in each of the chapters, we realise they tend to cluster towards the bottom two-thirds of the diagram in Figure 16.1. Hence our instincts to promote the equal value of all perspectives needs to be qualified by the realisation that, in practice, we are somewhat sceptical of drawing a sharp distinction between knowledge and practice. Although many of the chapters still use the language of 'knowledge' and 'practice', what they actually say is not far out of line with the ideas of knowing as a process and the intertwined nature of doing and knowing (*knowing-and-doing* and *knowing-in-doing*). In terms of the unit of analysis, the perspectives taken in this book cluster more towards the left-hand side of figure, but our learning community could, nevertheless, still see the merits of focusing more on practices (*doing-with-knowledge* and *knowing-in-doing*). The fact that empirical studies adopting these perspectives are not exemplified more frequently within the book may just reflect happenstance and the composition of our learning community at the time the book was produced.

While we have argued above that it is not possible to disregard or fully dissolve the differences between the four domains in our conceptual map, this does not rule out the potential for productive dialogue across these boundaries. We next discuss how this was achieved during the process of developing and writing this book.

Reflections on the learning journey

As already indicated, our aim has been to stimulate open and constructive dialogue between people with different work roles, experiences and perspectives. We did not strive to achieve an overarching consensus about the nature of knowledge and practice, but we did want to appreciate more fully points of difference and commonality. In some senses, our intentions around working together could be characterised as 'agonistic' (Mouffe 2013), reflecting an approach where conflicting views

are valued and the aim is to foster 'diverging and converging interactions in a way that recognises opportunities for collaboration, without losing sight of diverse interests and frames' (Frame & Brown 2007:234).

But how could we achieve this? What would be a productive way of working and learning together? We were not entirely sure at the outset, but over time we established some norms and principles for working together. These included a norm of constructive rather than confrontational dialogue. Chapter authors were not expected to defend or justify their draft chapters, but instead take on the role of active listeners when their chapters were being discussed. There was an expectation of constructive feedback, underpinned by principles of respect, equality of voice and a duty of care towards others. There was a strong sense of the need to value the process of working together as much as the intended product – this book. There was a preference for conducting much of this interaction through face-to-face dialogue rather than relying mainly on written communication, because it was felt to be more generative and satisfying for participants.

These ways of working together emerged and developed during a schedule of retreats, workshops and seminars organised to plan, develop, and review chapters, and to reflect on their relationship to one another. This process involved extensive and repeated peer reviews of all chapters, which developed a sense of collective responsibility for the shape and quality of the overall book.

Members of our group had differing levels of involvement in these activities. Some dipped in and out, but a substantial core of people participated throughout the process. The sense of being part of a learning community was felt most strongly by core members, indicating the benefits of sustained interaction when seeking to build a community. There were costs of working in these ways,

particularly in terms of the amount of time devoted to learning together. The need to maintain an open mind and suspend judgement was also not without its stresses and strains. Nevertheless, it was an energising and rewarding learning process that developed individual and collective understandings, and our writing, reviewing and editing skills at the same time.

Future directions of travel

Although the publication of this book is an important landmark for us, this is not the end of our individual or collective travels. We are also not alone in our explorations: there are many fellow travellers out there, and our choice of citations and suggestions for further reading, in each of the chapters, gives some indication of the many people who are inspiring our own academic practices.

A key question is in what directions future explorations should be heading. There are many possibilities and we reflect on some of these. We hope others will join us in seeking to extend, revise and refine our conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain (Figure 16.1). This will undoubtedly involve extending the examination of related concepts. It is also likely to involve further analysis of how the existing and additional concepts intersect with and provide new insights into knowledge and practice. The domains lying at the centre of our concept map should also be debated, refined and challenged, particularly in the light of a wider range of context-specific empirical studies.

There is a need for continuing exploration of knowledge and practice in disciplines and in settings other than those related to work and organisations. There is also potentially much to be gained from developing a richer understanding of knowledge and practice in other societies, particularly those which are not steeped in a Western intellectual tradition, for instance by drawing on and
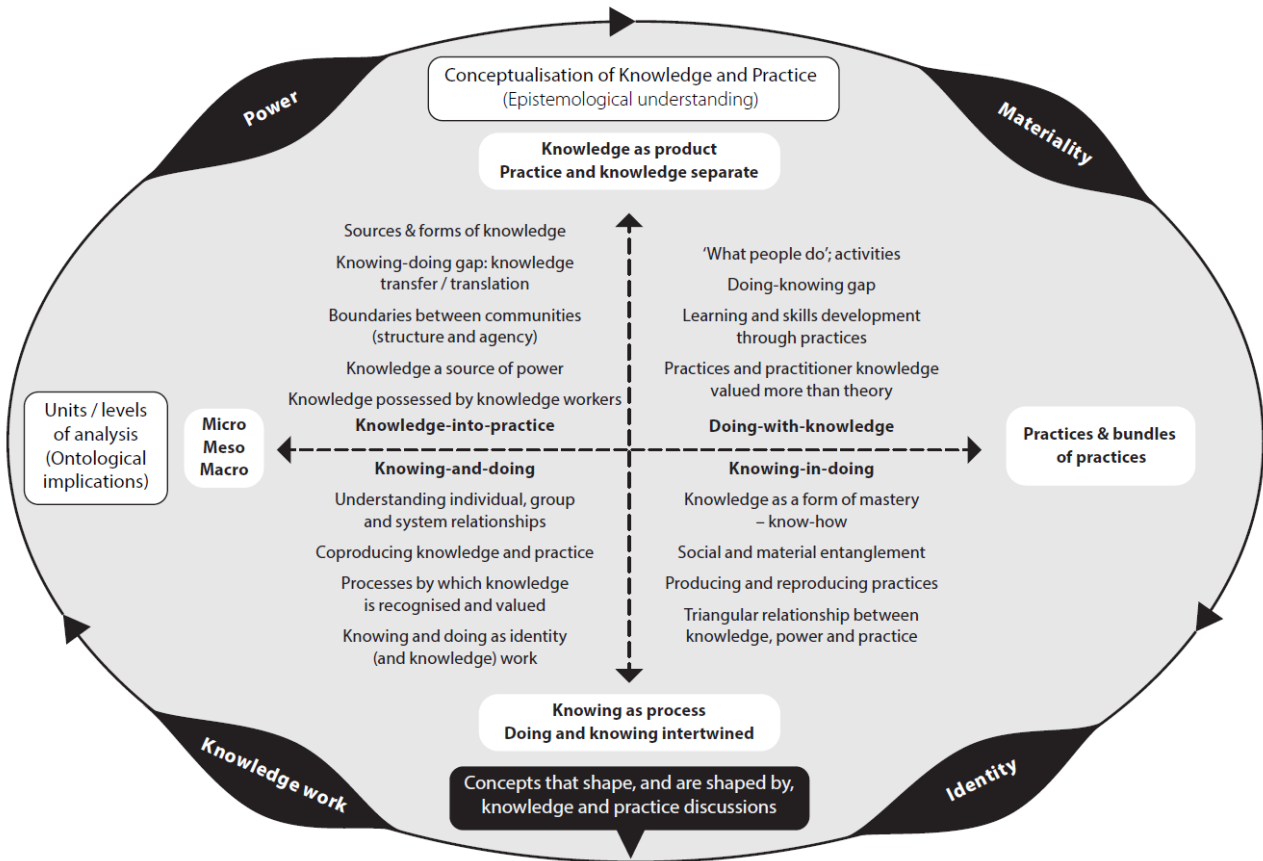
collaborating with social anthropologists. While extending the scope of our empirical gaze, we need to consider how insights from such studies can inform our understanding of knowledge and practice in organisations.

In undertaking future explorations in this terrain, we would recommend that there are some values and practices to 'pack' for the journey: valuing and respecting difference; suspending judgement; opening up rather than closing down conversations; including a diversity of voices and ensuring equality of voice. There are also some things that we should probably leave behind: rigid baggage and frameworks from the past that overly constrain where we can travel in the future and our means of getting there. We may also wish to jettison unrealistic expectations of quick journeys with clear and tangible outcomes.

Finally, before heading off in different directions, we should reflect on why we are doing so. There are potentially many reasons why researchers and other practitioners are interested in the relationship between knowledge and practice. At least three underpinning motives are evident across the chapters of this book. First, for some authors the underpinning motive is to enhance understanding in order to improve opportunities and processes for learning and development (at individual, group and organisational levels), which in turn has the potential to improve performance. Second, other authors are primarily driven by a desire to better understand and challenge evident inequalities of voice, opportunities, resources and rewards in organisations and societies. Finally, some authors seek to develop and enrich our understanding of continuity and change (at organisational and societal levels), which in turn can help us to challenge the status quo. These motives are not mutually exclusive and they are all important. For this and many other reasons we wish you well on your future travels and we hope to hear from you, in some form or another, along the way.

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Power

Materiality

Conceptualisation of Knowledge and Practice
(Epistemological understanding)

Knowledge as product
Practice and knowledge separate

Sources & forms of knowledge

Knowing-doing gap: knowledge
transfer / translation

Boundaries between communities
(structure and agency)

Knowledge a source of power

Knowledge possessed by knowledge workers

'What people do'; activities

Doing-knowing gap

Learning and skills development
through practices

Practices and practitioner knowledge
valued more than theory

Units / levels
of analysis
(Ontological
implications)

Micro
Meso
Macro

Knowledge-into-practice

Doing-with-knowledge

Practices & bundles
of practices

Knowing-and-doing

Understanding individual, group
and system relationships

Coproducing knowledge and practice

Processes by which knowledge
is recognised and valued

Knowing and doing as identity
(and knowledge) work

Knowing-in-doing

Knowledge as a form of mastery
– know-how

Social and material entanglement

Producing and reproducing practices

Triangular relationship between
knowledge, power and practice

Knowing as process
Doing and knowing intertwined

Concepts that shape, and are shaped by,
knowledge and practice discussions

Knowledge work

Identity

Figure 16.1: An emerging conceptual map of the knowledge and practice terrain