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Exchange between researchers and practitioners in urban planning: achievable objective or a bridge too far?/The use of academic research in planning practice: who, what, where, when and how?/ Bridging research and practice through collaboration: lessons from a joint working group/Getting the relationship between researchers and practitioners working/ Art and urban planning: stimulating researcher, practitioner and community engagement/Collaboration between researchers and practitioners: Political and bureaucratic issues/Investigating Research/Conclusion: Breaking down barriers through international practice?

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Investigating Research

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Complaints about the research-practice gap have a long history in urban planning and indeed in most other professions. Professions emerge, institutionalize, find training homes in universities, and develop research arms of various stripes. Professions find it useful to have a group of researchers who watch trends, ask larger questions, and systematically assess both the situation in the world and the effectiveness of practice. Those at universities and similar organizations typically have protocols and methods aimed at building up a body of such work of reasonable rigor and quality. Institutions such as universities provide contexts where faculty can access resources for research – peers, methodological assistance, trained staff, databases – and they often reward research outputs. This institutional context comes with a set of formats for crediting and sharing specific contributions from the refereed article to the scholarly book.

Most practicing professionals, however, are focused on the day to day work of solving specific problems in real time and in very specific geographical, historical, and political contexts. Of course planners need to have an eye to the long-term and wider geographical and social implications, but they also have a compelling need to find solutions to particular problems. Research can seem too difficult to apply. This can be seen as a problem of scholars producing the wrong kind of knowledge (perhaps too theoretical for application or focused on the wrong issues), or failing to transfer it well (due to barriers such as format and cost) (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Krizek et al., 2009)¹. However, as others in this interface argue, it may also be a problem of practice. Practitioner may not prioritize time for analysis. When they do use research it may be incorporated symbolically or politically to bolster pre-existing positions or delay policy change.

In this context I argue that the research practice divide is real but aspects of the division can be better negotiated. There are many dimensions to this problem but here I focus on two that fundamentally limit both research use and researcher-practitioner collaborations. One is the *research/investigation confusion* where practitioners and researchers are saying the same word—research—to mean quite different activities. The second involves differences between

¹ I am using knowledge production and transfer, echoing Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) but I am using the terms in somewhat different ways.

the *research mind and the practice mind*, by which I mean that the two ways of operating look at problems in distinctive ways.

Research/Investigation

Research has a very specific meaning in the academic world: it systematically fills a gap in knowledge, requiring an understanding of current research and scholarship, repeatable methods, rigorous documentation, and substantial quality control review by expert peers. It is made public, at least to those with library subscriptions (Forsyth & Crewe, 2006; table 1). This is research type 1. In contrast, what many practitioners mean when they demand more research, or undertake it themselves, is something I call ‘investigation’ or research type 2. Investigation aims to generate knowledge that is useful for solving a specific local problem rather than a question of broad interest, and may be new to the practitioner or situation, but not necessarily new or interesting to the wider world. Methods are more flexible, documentation less detailed, and if there is peer review it is typically focused on outcomes (e.g. awards). Results are often kept internally.

Table 1: Research, Investigation, and Practice Compared

Dimension*	Research* Research Type 1	Investigation Research Type 2	Practice*
Goals and background	Responds to a question of general interest related to gaps in knowledge or key intellectual problems	Responds to a specific, concrete question meeting a need or solving a concrete problem	Responds to a specific, concrete question meeting a need or solving a concrete problem
Contribution	Contributes to knowledge in a field	Helps solve a problem	Solves a problem; may contribute to the body of planning tools or practices
Methods	Conforms to research protocols, using data that has been systematically collected and analysed, and that is capable of answering a core question	Collects new data and/or compiles relevant existing research in a semi-systematic way	Application of existing knowledge and techniques at a professional level of skill; may involve investigation as one part; adds political problem-solving skills
Relation to earlier work	Builds on and is usually placed systematically in the context of previous research efforts on the subject	May draw on some previous studies	May use standard techniques or best practices
Argument	Makes an argument that at least implicitly counters reasonable objections	Makes an argument that at least implicitly answers the need or question at hand	Makes an argument that at least implicitly answers the need or question at hand

Documentation, dissemination, and evaluation	Documents and evaluates its methods and findings, so that both can be replicated by others; public dissemination	May be documented and made public for evaluation; not essential	May be documented and made public for evaluation; not essential
Peer review	Is subject to peer review	Peer review may occur through awards or job evaluations; not essential.	Peer review may occur through awards or job evaluations; not essential

Sources: Columns marked * adapted from Krizek et al., 2009; Forsyth, 2007; Forsyth & Crewe, 2006.

A great deal of professional ‘research’ is type 2 and includes local site assessments, precedent studies, diagnostic evaluations, inventories, policy histories, and compiling what seems to be reputable information about a topic. Though typically not nearly so complex and time consuming as formal research, when budget cuts come investigation may well be one of the first things to go. My experience from running university research units, technical assistance groups, and service learning courses, as well as observing professional debates, is that when practitioners ask for universities to help fill this gap in “research capacity” they very often want help with investigation. This can be appropriate in a technical assistance and service learning context, though it can be hard for a university to coordinate with practitioners to fulfil these needs.

Even if a request is potentially for research of type 1, the chance that it aligns with the expertise of a specific cutting edge faculty member is slim, in part because there are relatively few planning researchers. Of course many university faculty and research staff take on ‘research’ contracts for agencies and non-profits, but this often involves an investigation (type 2) for the client into which a research project (of type 1) is added on the side. As I have argued elsewhere, many faculty members are drawn to projects of practical relevance (Forsyth, 2012). But to make a contribution to knowledge such projects still need to conform to the requirements of research and are rarely either as timely or project-specific as practitioners would like.

Perhaps some of the greater use of research by German planners outlined in the introductory piece of this Interface is to do with the form of research – type 1 or type 2 – with the Germans perhaps having a more capacious view of research that includes investigation. It is interesting that in both Australia and Germany professional web sites are major sources of ‘research’ knowledge. While many do contain material from research of type 1, my experience is they contain many more investigations of topics, using less systematic methods but aiming at timely advice. In addition, research of type 1 can sometimes be used in a small part of a planning project – for example, some technical aspect – while other areas as based on other sources of information such as general professional experience, anecdotal case studies, and the like (Krizek et al., 2009).

Investigation, or research type 2, is a good thing. It should be fostered. It is different from academic research, however. For practitioners wanting problem-specific investigations, research of type 1 can seem very distant, theoretical, overly time consuming if done from scratch, or hard to apply in a new circumstance when it is available and complete. One of the

strategies for researchers is to make research summaries and the like with more of a feel of investigation, create evidence-based tools and manuals, or to take on more applied research contracts – I have done all of these. However, these attempts at improving knowledge transfer can only go so far given the myriad of time-sensitive and highly specific planning questions to be examined, the limited bandwidth of planners for extra data, and numerous other demands on their attention.

On the other hand, researchers see practitioners latch onto free-online sources that may be of dubious quality or only show part of a complex picture. When practice is based on such partial views, that may be selected because they make intuitive sense even if they are not correct, then practice loses.

Research Mind/Practice Mind

These issues are difficult enough. More complex is a difference in the way information is processed in research and practice. While I am a faculty member, conducting a great deal of type 1 research, I am also someone who has practiced with varying levels of intensity over three decades. As such I have experienced the more fundamental disjunction between how I (and my research peers) think when doing research and how I (and my practice peers) think when doing practice.

A first cut is that planning researchers are interested in a situation in the world. We create conceptual models of how the world works and attempt to identify key determinants or causes of outcomes, at least mentally exploring most potential variables even if we only end up studying a few in depth. In order to look beyond familiar answers, we defer judgement while we probe more fully. Researchers often find our initial assumptions are proved incorrect in some interesting way.

There are, of course, different flavours of research even within planning. Some work at the scientific frontier, others focus on practical relevance (though for many practitioners not nearly relevant enough), others look back at practice typically from a historical point of view, and yet others ask the enduring questions about ethics, values, and recurring human problems (Forsyth, 2012). As I have articulated elsewhere there is a great deal of conflict between these research positions – some work in teams and others value individual work, some are highly funded and others labours of love, and their products are different in length and tone. Further, not all production by planning faculty is research – some is plain consulting and other work is scholarly (demonstrating great learning) without having to make a new contribution (Forsyth & Crewe, 2006). However, the work that is research conforms to the standards of type 1.

A planning practitioner, in contrast, is interested in making a specific intervention and wants it to be a success. Situations are very specific, constantly evolving, and multidimensional, so that in order to overcome paralysis one has to bracket a great many of the questions that would be interesting to researchers. Instead practitioners need to focus on finding a viable solution. Practitioners are certainly open to new ideas but to make timely, politically savvy, and site-specific actions, they are likely to rely a great deal on prior learning, personal experience, professional judgement, good practices elsewhere, and investigations into the specific situation. Relying on formal research for more than a modest number of dimensions would slow planning

to a standstill. Of course evidence based guidelines, research summaries, and the like can be immensely useful. But the culture of practice is not used to using them in any large scale.

Is effective exchange between practitioners and researchers in urban planning an achievable objective or a bridge too far? Exchange is possible but it seems to me that there need to be better models of how to incorporate research of type 1 in ways that are efficient. They need to avoid many potential pitfalls: bogging down the project in analysis, merely placing a veneer of research on common-sense or political judgement, or applying research to the wrong domain (for example, to a technical issue when it may be more useful in process). On the other hand, much could be done to make investigations more systematic. Just how systematic the investigation needs to be will depend on the scale, effects, and reversibility of the project or plan. Much, however, could be done to clarify and improve the outputs of research of type 2. This is an area where both academics and practitioners have much to gain.

Notes on contributor

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