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# The Interconnectedness of Scholarship-Practice: A Perspective from a Practitioner-Scholar

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# The Interconnectedness of Scholarship-Practice: A Perspective from a Practitioner-Scholar

## **Abstract**

As a new faculty member teaching graduate students in student affairs, I am keenly aware that my responsibility is not simply to disseminate knowledge from the field, but to engage students in the process of developing and defining their roles as scholar-practitioners. In designing my course syllabi or planning course learning outcomes, I attempt to answer these questions: How will this information enhance their work as scholars? How will this information enhance their skills as practitioners? Having worked in a variety of administrative, programming, and advising positions within higher education - both in student and academic affairs for almost 20 years - how I would answer these questions? What has influenced my work as a scholar? What has influenced my work as a practitioner?

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Instruction | Higher Education | Higher Education and Teaching | Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## **Comments**

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**Examining the Interconnectedness of Scholarship ↔ Practice**

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### **Examining the Interconnectedness of Scholarship ↔ Practice**

As a new faculty member teaching graduate students in student affairs, I am keenly aware that my responsibility is not simply to disseminate knowledge from the field, but to engage students in the process of developing and defining their roles as scholar-practitioners. In designing my course syllabi or planning course learning outcomes, I attempt to answer these questions: How will this information enhance their work as scholars? How will this information enhance their skills as practitioners? Having worked in a variety of administrative, programming, and advising positions within higher education - both in student and academic affairs for almost 20 years - how I would answer these questions? What has influenced my work as a scholar? What has influenced my work as a practitioner?

With several years of experiences as a practitioner and now transitioning to a more “scholarly” role, I have become increasingly aware how these two roles (scholar and practitioner) and two activities (using scholarship, doing “practice”) are seemingly distinct yet irrefutably interconnected – my practice has been influenced by scholarship in the field and my scholarship has been influenced by my practice.

Why is it important that student affairs practitioners have skills in both areas? I agree with Blimling’s (2011) perspective that the terms scholar and practitioner are not mutually exclusive but both are needed to inform professional judgment. Unfortunately, as Blimling alluded, the way in which we discuss scholar-practitioner implies a bifurcated meaning – they are two separate entities with scholarship informing practice. I would challenge this idea, however, and suggest a slightly altered conceptualization, that of scholar ↔ practitioner: the double arrow symbolizing the interconnected relationship between scholarship and practice.

This reconceptualization provides new challenges to our profession and for the education of new professionals. As faculty, how do we communicate how our coursework can be applied to or is impacted by practice and as practitioners can we articulate how our work is supported by research and theory? What is the relationship between scholarship and practice and how do we communicate this relationship in our graduate preparation programs or in our mentoring of new professionals?

To begin this conversation, I offer three personal examples to illustrate my experience of the scholar ↔ practitioner relationship. I share these experiences in the form of questions versus statements as a way to invite the reader into the conversation, a conversation that, I hope, invites all of us to ponder and question and critique what it means to be both scholar and practitioner and most critically, how scholarship and practice can best be integrated to improve student success.

### **For Whom Does This Scholarship Apply?**

The concept of utilizing scholarship to inform practice was first introduced to me as a college student majoring in psychology and minoring in sociology. While I have always been interested in human and group behavior – why did people make the choices they did, why did they behave in certain way – through my psychology and sociology courses I now had theoretical concepts and language as a way to articulate my observations. If I wanted to explain why people did what they did and more importantly, make an evaluation of them, I now had a language. I had discovered the DSM-III – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual that provided the classification of all mental disorders. (In retrospect - this is a very dangerous book to give a novice psychology student. But admittedly, - it does make family gatherings much more fun!)

While in college, Carol Gilligan's (1982) book, *In a Different Voice* was gaining wide recognition. A developmental theory based on women? And around the same time, a new version of the DSM was published, and in this revision, "homosexuality" was removed. Hmmm, so Kohlberg's theory of moral development – which I had learned two years earlier - didn't accurately describe the experiences of all individuals? And the "approved" manual written by experts is subject to change? I began to wonder why should we study theory and rely on experts if everything may change.

Neither theories nor the people who create them are infallible; yet, they are also not worthless. Theories can be useful in providing a language, a conceptual framework, a way of making sense. However, it is equally as important to understand the population and context within which and for whom the theory was intended. It is also, as suggested by Reason & Kimball (2012) important to differentiate between formal theories and informal theories that inform our work as each make significant contributions to our practice. Regardless, theory – those formal or informal and even those that we believe to be biased or inaccurate are useful in that they cause us to articulate why we believe what we do and through our disagreements, we begin to uncover what we believe to be important.

Similarly, research and scholarship, like theory, can inform practice but all scholarship – both at the macro and micro level - must be viewed through a critical lens. For example, when we think about benchmarks that so often are used to evaluate our institutions and our students: retention rates, graduation rates, reading scores, math competencies, do we allow one number to define us or do we begin to investigate how different populations of students are faring? Are we satisfied with only quantitative data or do we also explore the stories behind the data? We make

judgments and statements and opinions about the quality and prestige of our institutions based on these numbers. But what and who do these numbers represent?

As practitioners it is necessary to consider whose voices are being considered and whose voices are not being heard. For whom does this scholarship apply?

### **How Do I Know If My Practice – Which Was Based On Scholarship - Is Effective?**

As an academic advisor pursuing a doctoral degree I enrolled in a program evaluation and assessment class. Sadly enough - up until that point I had focused primarily on how research impacted practice, but I had not always considered if my practice was any good. I mean, I knew I was good, or at least I thought I was good, and I knew that what I was doing was effective, or because, well... I didn't really "know" that. And thus, I was intrigued by the need to do assessment.

While I did not go into student affairs because of my love for assessment, I have come to embrace and respect assessment as a way to critique both practice and scholarship. As I mentioned, research can inform practice but assessment serves the dual role of questioning the research behind the practice and assessing if the practice was effective. In the assessment course I teach, I partner with staff in the Division of Student Affairs to offer students in the course the opportunity to conduct an assessment project in student affairs. Student affairs professionals provide a list of possible assessment projects and students may choose from this list. Throughout the semester the students then learn about and then apply their knowledge of assessment to their project. As they craft their assessment purpose statement, develop their assessment methodology, and analyze and interpret results, they engage in the work of scholar-practitioners. In some cases, student have found that assessment results can be used to inform

the broader research on a topic or practice and in other instances, assessment can be used to understand the success of the practice.

Assessment can be a bridge between scholarship and practice. Assessment helps to answer the question: How do I know if my practice – which was based on scholarship - is effective?

### **How Would I Practice The Scholarship?**

As a practitioner and an administrator, I could articulate how scholarship has impacted my practice. I could discuss Astin's (1984) theory of involvement or Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory or elaborate on how the many student development theories helped to frame how I approached student issues and concerns while working in residence life, campus ministry or academic advising. Ironically, now as a faculty member focused more on creating scholarship and teaching in the areas of research, higher education and student affairs, I find myself asking the question: "How would I practice this scholarship?"

I can "teach" individuals the criteria to developing a strong assessment plan, I can teach elements to analyze in a campus environment, I can challenge them to think about issues of social justice, access, equity. But being a successful practitioner involves more than "knowing the facts."

I can use language like "safe space and inclusivity and intentional learning environments" and while there is theory and research to define and support each of these, they are also intensely personal – they require skills of reflection and communication... and practice.

How easy it can be to theorize, provide recommendations, and implications and suggestions for improvement – especially when I am not the one to implement these theories or suggestions. As a "scholar", it is possible to overlook the realities faced by practitioners: campus politics,

personnel difficulties, institutional bureaucracies, or financial constraints, - to name a few. We discuss the importance of utilizing scholarship to inform practice. Do we not also need to consider - as scholars - how we would practice this scholarship? Would we be able to implement those findings we are suggesting?

### **Summary**

Through my experiences as a practitioner and now as a faculty member, the relationship between scholarship and practice – as with any healthy relationship continues to grow and evolve. My belief is that this interconnectedness will help to enrich and improve my work as graduate student educators and student affairs professionals. The challenge then, for all of us - practitioners and scholars - is to remember and embrace the interconnectedness. Upon graduation, does one leave scholarship behind to become a practitioner? As “practitioners”, do we allow time to become aware and incorporate new research into our work? As “scholars” do we continue to remain “authentic” and “in touch” with the practice? Most critically, what does it mean to be a scholar ↔ practitioner and how does this integration ultimately benefit the students, institutions, and profession that we serve?

### **Guiding Questions:**

The article is based on assumption that to effectively serve students, institution, and profession, student affairs professionals and faculty must embrace the interconnected nature of scholar practitioner. Do you agree?

What are the challenges of being a scholar-practitioner? How can you/do you overcome these challenges?

What other questions arise regarding the role of scholarship and practice?

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**Author's Biography**

Ann Gansemer-Topf is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at Iowa State University where she teaches courses in assessment, campus environments, and academic issues and cultures. Her research interests include: assessment of student learning, effective teaching/learning pedagogies, student success, and educational policy related to strategic enrollment management. Prior to assuming her current position, she most recently served as Associate Director of Research for the Office of Admissions at Iowa State University and Associate Director of Institutional Research at Grinnell College. She also has prior professional experience in residence life, admissions, student financial aid, new student programs, campus ministry, conference services, and academic advising. She holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from Iowa State University, a MS degree in Higher Education from Iowa State University and a B.A. in Psychology from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa