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COMMENTARY

Bridgers overlooked

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"There's no action without research, no research without action."

Kurt Lewin

Just over 30 years ago, at a graduate student conference, Frank Landy shared that our field has a problem of bridging science and practice. According to Voss et al.'s (2025) focal article, this problem persists, as they document a dearth of practitioners contributing to scholarly journals. They argue that there are not enough practitioner–academic collaborations. However, I take the position that our discipline might be doing better than it appears when it comes to hearing the voices of practitioners in academic journals but worse when it comes to hearing the voices of academics in practitioner journals.

Voss and colleagues' call for more practitioners to be involved in the scientific process comes across as one sided, and the perspective that we need more practitioners involved in publishing scholarly works might be clouding alternative considerations of practitioners' contributions to scholarly works. The metric employed might be missing a large contingency of practitioners who are voices in academic journals. Additionally, it is my view that there are insufficient academic voices in practitioner journals. Academics need to reach over the aisle more intentionally and proactively communicate, in "business speak," to the working world, who constitute most workers (Kożusznik & Glazer, 2021).

In this response, I reflect on people who might have been counted as academics but are really practitioners, as well as on challenges for academics to be voices in practitioner journals.

Practitioners assumed to be academics

Many authors with academic affiliations might be practitioners employed by a university or practitioners using an institutional affiliation for research publication purposes. Thus, Voss et al. might have coded practitioners as "academics" in the focal article because the authors affiliate themselves with a university, even though their work roles are primarily as applied researchers and practitioners. Take for example University Affiliated Research Centers (or UARCs, e.g., Applied Physics Laboratory at Johns Hopkins University) and Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (or FFRDCs, e.g., Lawrence Berkley National Laboratory at University of California, Berkeley). These centers are nonprofit organizations that support the research, development, engineering, and analytic needs of various federal agencies that typically bypass the proposal bidding process for work that is mission critical. The types of research conducted at FFRDCs and UARCs bridge between basic and applied research (e.g., Glazer et al., 2015).

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Researchers in these UARCs and FFRDCs typically do not have teaching requirements; however, they are project leads, bidding on projects, managing personnel, liaising with clients, preparing oral presentations on findings, presenting recommendations, designing interventions, and supervising scholarship that is critical to the needs of the specific agencies. (They are similar to organizations like MITRE and HumRRO that offer consulting opportunities to solve wicked problems in the US government.) Moreover, within the UARCs and FFRDCs are subject matter experts (SMEs), practitioners from government agencies who contribute to the scholarship and research design from Voss et al.'s Phase 0. Both the research scientists' and the SMEs' affiliations are those of the university that houses the UARC or FFRDC. The work is being done for real government clients, advancing real science and practice with actual working professionals that support the mission needs of the country, but the research contributors will typically not be designated as affiliated with the government agency. Even government client SMEs will take on the UARC or FFRDC's university affiliation rather than their government agency affiliation on publications.

Other practitioners are prolific scholars whose primary employment is in a nonacademic organization but who will affiliate or serve as an adjunct faculty with a university to be able to utilize the university's IRB for their research, utilize their employer for data collection, but then publish findings under a university's banner, where IRB approval was provided. These practitioner–scholars, if they want to publish, are often required to retain organizational anonymity. Moreover, because IRB was sought from within the university, plus the full-time employer has no real care for whether advances are published or not, the author maintains the academic affiliation. In addition to practitioners being counted as academics due to their primary employment affiliation with a university (despite their work being directly client facing), some authors who hold positions such as professor of practice while also practitioners publish works from their consulting practice under their academic affiliation. Consequently, articles from the 14 journals might have been counted as being authored by academics, despite an author's primary affiliation with and source of data from a specific (not to be named) organization.

Publishing challenges for academic–practitioners

The challenges of accurately identifying "bridgers" notwithstanding, there are several problems bridgers face with publishing in academic journals. The works produced by scientist–practitioners in FFRDCs, UARCs, and nongovernment or university organizations employ sophisticated, sometimes groundbreaking (e.g., large language modeling or LLM), research designs and technologies. Unfortunately, publication of some of these applied studies have limitations. First, as the work is applied and often utilizes specific samples from the US government, some agencies are more reluctant than others to permit release of findings into academic journals, and when they do, the internal review process can be extremely cumbersome—and that is before the work even hits the journal review process. Some research scientists stick through with the burdensome process and others simply give up or are socialized not to even bother starting the publication internal review process in the first place.

Second, it is not uncommon for research scientists working on applied projects within organizations to pick up the lingo of the organization and having difficulty communicating in the language of scholarship, or worse, they can, but their reviewer panels (going up the chain of internal review) cannot understand the scholarly language and stop the works from going out.

Third, applied research, like basic research, fails and, although those failures are important to publish, works that do not yield significant results are often rejected unless, the design is preregistered. To the first point, if the findings are not sexy and exciting, myriad reasons are given as to why they cannot be published. To bypass this problem of not publishing nonsignificant findings, some journals have been advocating for preregistering studies. However, government agency contracts have tight turn-around times; there is rarely enough time to submit a research

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design for preregistration and submission consideration before launching the study. In fact, oftentimes, projects start the day they are funded, creating a time crunch for the research scientists. And, generally, when conducting research utilizing data from an organization, it can be difficult to obtain permission internally to preregister the research, because they might feel bound to have to reveal results they do not want revealed—especially in a publicly traded organization. When it comes to federal agencies, the concern might be how taxpayers would react knowing if money was spent on failed projects.

Fourth, most publishing agreements require authors to give up copyrights over their works, unless the authors agree to pay the hefty fee associated with open access. In other words, going the traditional publication route could be preventing some works from being published in traditional scholarly journals. It is rare that FFRDC or UARC budgets would include a funding line for open access journal publishing, and it is not necessarily considered desirable for for-profit organizations to allocate funds toward open access publishing. In essence, academic models for publishing do not offer sufficient incentives for the practitioner and its sponsors.

The academic–practitioner gap may not be so wide

Despite all appearances, there are scholar–practitioners working to bridge gaps between science and practice. However, practitioners may be guised as traditional university faculty. These bridgers of scholarship and application are often overlooked, but they are truly championing the aim of connecting science and practice.

Academics as practitioners and engaged scholars

Why is it up to practitioners to join in academic journal publications? Academics also ought to share their scientific findings more broadly in practitioner-oriented journals. Lewin once said, "there is nothing more practical than a good theory"; but, how valuable is the theory if the practical use of a theory holds little merit in the eyes of academic evaluators? Disseminating scientific findings in the language of practitioners and non-industrial, work, and organizational psychology (IWOP) professionals is essential for bridging the science–practitioner gap and advancing the changes in organizational practices and policies (Kożusznik & Glazer, 2021). Unfortunately, there are structural impediments in the academic tenure and promotion process that prevent such dissemination. The incentive for publishing in practitioner-oriented journals is absent for budding scholars striving toward tenure.

Impact and significance of practical reports

As Voss et al., pointed out, publication record is one of the most important metrics in academia. Even in FFRDCs and UARCs, publishing is important, but for the sake of evaluating scholarly contributions toward promotion, there is more grace around the publication outlets and venues given the limitations of bringing to light applied research. However, the grace is often absent for IWOP university faculty who contribute to applied projects. Although faculty research on client projects adds value, university settings do not put much stock in technical reports delivered to clients. The position taken in the academy is unfortunate given the practical implications of the work probably having far-reaching relevance to the livelihoods of people compared to publications in an academic journal. Works produced at FFRDCs and UARCs, for example, may get disseminated to hundreds, if not thousands, of relevant stakeholders, who are much more impacted by the findings than much of the scholarship contained behind journal paywalls.

Moreover, although Voss et al. list two top-tier practitioner-oriented journals, there are many more (targeted to specific industries). Academics should become more familiar with them and cross bridges by contributing to them. A problem for academics, however, is that these

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practitioner-oriented journals do not have impact factor (IF) scores, thus limiting its value in academics' tenure and promotion review.

One argument in favor of counting technical reports and publication in practitioner-oriented journals is that the IWOP practitioner sector reaps the greatest benefit from such reports and publications, which is ultimately the aim of our science. There needs be stronger advocacy within universities to evaluate IWOP academics' contributions beyond a journal's IF score or an author's citation counts, to include the impact and significance of their works on a specific industry or work sector.

Engaged scholarship

In addition to faculty contributing as scholars to applied projects that will not come to light in traditional academic journal outlets, some faculty teaching in applied programs weave in experiential learning opportunities for students. Through experiential learning activities, faculty sometimes gather relevant data about the experiential program that can be analyzed for empirical peer-reviewed articles. Publication about the experiential program is one form of engaged scholarship, which is still not warmly received in academia. Moreover, the scholarship is not getting published in top journals, at least not the ones identified by the focal article. Most are published in teaching-oriented journals (e.g., *Teaching of Psychology*). Ideally, those publications will be in collaboration with the client partner(s), but affiliations may be anonymized. Other times the results are targeted and relevant only to the company client, but hopefully engaged scholars and clients will collaborate to write scholarly works on experiential learning.

A bridge overlook

The lens taken by Voss et al. appears to be that of encouraging more practitioners to be involved in publishing in academic journals, but why aren't academics reaching to practitioners to publish in practitioner-oriented journals? Both sectors have their boundaries. For practitioners, making it evident where the data are from (vis a vis author affiliation) could have legal implications, but for the academic, publishing in a low or no-tier journal that is better recognized by practitioners is discouraged. Perhaps one way not to overlook anybody trying to create bridges and instead have the bridge serve as an overlook is to encourage editors to solicit information informally about authors' *additional* affiliations or work activities. They could ask to what extent was the accepted work the result of efforts of unnamed practitioners in the design, implementation, or analysis of research? Another question for those whose works are accepted: Are any authors with a university affiliation also practitioners?

Additionally, academics who work also as practitioners might want to include a publishing clause in their contracts and have frank conversations over expectations for authorship and affiliation. If practitioners do not want authorship, then at least, the scholar should negotiate to have a footnote that indicates that the works are based on a collaborative effort with practitioners, but that for a given reason they cannot be listed as authors.

In short, there are likely more collaborations than apparent by author affiliation, and there are probably practitioners who affiliate with universities; we need to do better revealing those. Voss et al. present a starting point from which to take stock of the bridgers. Journal editors can do more to gather data that would reveal a more accurate state of collaborations. The visibility of bridgers will be clearer when both academics and practitioners reveal their affiliations to both practice and academia. The extent to which IWOP professionals have practitioner, academic, and scholarly backgrounds is probably more extensive than we currently know. Finally, bridge building will be fortified not only when practitioners contribute to academic journals but also when academics are incentivized to contribute to practitioner journals and have those contributions matter toward promotion and tenure reviews.

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