Practical Theorizing: Bridging the Relevance Gap between Theory and Practice

ABSTRACT

Students in professional master’s programs and executive development programs are typically viewed as “evolving professionals” who leverage their learning experience in their workplace environment. Given the wealth of theoretical knowledge, a typical learning experience would be to gain a basic understanding a few classic theories, but seldom see how those theories inform practice in an actual organizational context. The assignment described here attempts to bridge the theory-practice divide and build competencies to more fully interpret practical organizational problems through a theory lens.

Keywords: Threshold Concepts, Evolving Practitioners, Innovative Pedagogy

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

 Arguments by Van de Ven (1989 and 2007) set the stage for the value of learning that connects theory and practice. Lauder and Harrison (2011) argue for the importance and value of understanding and leveraging theory lenses in practical work environments. Christensen and Raynor (2003) establish the relevance for a theoretical lens to understand organizational problems. Weick (1995) successfully argues the value of being able to interpret a theory lens to explain the workings of an organizational problem or situation, and enhance a practicing manager’s ability to address it. Editors’ Comments in AMR (2016) describe the value of theory building to understand an organizational problem.

PEDAGOGICAL GROUNDING

 Bresciani and Eppler (2009) explore the value of visualization and conceptual interpretation of organizational phenomena through a theory lens. Usher and Bryant (2014) and Meyer and Land (2005) make the case for understanding threshold concepts as a gateway to integrate theory and practice rather that learning either in isolation. Lauder and Harrison (2011) and Tsang (2010) make the case for a learning experience of emerging professionals in masters-level and doctoral courses to have learning experiences that bridge theory and practice that build essential professional competencies.

PRACTICAL THEORIZING ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is titled “Building a case for theoretical interpretations of a practical management problem.” Students in masters-level programs may be considered as “evolving professionals” with at least some level of practical experience (Tsang , 2011). Their employment experience would reasonably enable them to recognize conditions that present observable organizational problems (Weick, 1995). In this assignment, students would complete the following steps:

1. Access and review a series of learning resources that explain how practical theorizing explains an observable organizational problem through the lens of one or more management theories.
2. Derive a series of keywords and management themes that express relevant aspects of that organizational problem.
3. Conduct a search of literature databases to yield at least 20 +/- sources that address the organizational problem from a theory perspective.
4. From the list of 20 +/- sources, select 5-6 relevant articles or studies that inform the nature of the organizational problem you’ve identified.
5. Prepare an interpretation of each of the 5-6 sources in the format of a “Critically Appraised Topic” where each source is interpreted in a carefully written paragraph of about 250-300 words to capture the essence of each source’s argument and how it would inform the selected organizational problem.
6. Compose a concept graphic or model that illustrates relationships between theory elements that inform your organizational problem. This concept graphic is intended to portray causal relationships—a key competence for evolving professionals.
7. Prepare a concept narrative explaining how key theoretical ideas extracted from the Critically Appraised Topic are expressed and related in your concept graphic.

ASSIGNMENT DELIVERABLE

Provide a convincing argument for how a management theory explains the issues surrounding your selected organizational problem, including:

1. A reference list (in APA format) of the 20 +/- sources informed by a keyword search.
2. A rationale for your selection of the 5-6 key sources that inform the organizational problem.
3. A Critically Appraised Topic for each of these 5-6 sources.
4. A concept graphic (Novak, n.d. and Dubberly, n.d.) portraying sources of the organizational problem and theoretical interpretations of causal relationships.
5. A concept narrative that explains theoretical interpretations of the organizational problem.
6. As a complement to your written explanation, prepare a 5-minute briefing of your analysis conveyed in language that a typical management executive would readily understand. This briefing is to be captured in a form that could be delivered virtually to an executive team (e.g., in a narrated PPT format or video using Camtasia or a similar screencast tool).

LEARNING OUTCOME

The learning outcomes of this assignment can be aligned with competencies scaled to Bloom’s Taxonomy. We expect that students in undergraduate courses would meet the two lowest levels of competency in Bloom’s Taxonomy: remembering and understanding, with some evidence of progress in analyzing an organizational problem. For masters-level students, the expectation would be to achieve the middle and upper levels of competency in Bloom’s Taxonomy: analyzing, applying, and evaluating. For very experienced professionals in either an Executive MBA or Executive Doctorate program, the expectation would include all the masters-level competencies plus the highest level of Bloom’s Taxonomy: Creating/Innovating a potential solution to the organizational problem.

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