

Generating Research that Matters: The Building Blocks of Engaged Scholarship in Doctor of Management Programs¹

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Engaged Scholarship

Why does the management field worry about the relevancy of its research? The reason is twofold: much of the research conducted by academic scholars is not really helping managers solve their real-world problems; and managers who could benefit from organizational research are not aware of the research, unable to operationalize the research, or, quite frankly, do not understand the research (Van de Ven, 2007). So what to do? The solution has generally been framed as one of increasing collaboration between scholar and practitioner (Van de Ven, 2007). But how is this done? Two types of suggestions from scholars have either been to increase the scholar's exposure in the organization (Bartunek, 2007; Mohrman & Lawler, 2012) or to increase the manager's awareness and appreciation of scholarly research (Rousseau, 2006). The idea behind both of these approaches is to infuse the rigor of scientific research with the relevance of the practitioner's problem.

A third approach that has gained international momentum since the 1990's is the engaged scholarship approach, managers and executives become scholars through entering and completing a doctorate program designed for them, using a practitioner problem as the basis for their research. This approach aims at improved organizational effectiveness by ensuring that empirical and theoretical knowledge is rigorously produced for a relevant problem (Erwee, 2004, Aram and Salipante 2003). As of 2014, over 25 universities around the world offering such doctoral programs, designed for executives and managers in profit and non-profit sectors, are members of the Executive Doctorate of Business Administration Council (EDBAC)². Case Western Reserve University is a member of the council and its Weatherhead School of Management Doctor of Management programs (DM)³ provides one of the longest running executive doctorate programs in the world. Among such programs Weatherhead's is distinctive in its focus on 'wicked problems', persistent problems faced by top-level management leaders-problems that require transdisciplinary understandings. The program has developed and adopted a unique and powerful approach to generate management research that matters what we call engaged management scholarship where DM students attack problems of practice that matter. This short document clarifies the key objectives, assumptions and practical steps involved in this approach.

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² See <http://www.executivedba.org/>

³ See <http://weatherhead.case.edu/degrees/doctorate/doctor-management/>

The Doctor of Management (DM) Approach to Engaged Scholarship

When students enter our Doctor of Management programs, they are introduced to a new world of research. Many of the terms they encounter are unfamiliar and often lead to confusion. This note will discuss the meaning and significance of three critical concepts that you will encounter in either of the DM programs, the Doctor of Management and the PhD in Management. They are: Problem of Practice (PoP), Research Problem (RP), and Research Question (RQ). We use these terms in a particular way, to emphasize the unique problem-driven, practice-based nature of DM research. Table 1 provides examples of how each of these terms was used in actual DM projects. Below, we discuss these concepts in more detail.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE	RESEARCH PROBLEM	RESEARCH QUESTION
Corruption is common and difficult to eradicate in sub Saharan Africa ⁴ .	What are the structural and agency related factors that promote the continuation of corruption in sub Saharan Africa?	How do the World Bank's practices of transparency in government contracting affect the behavior of entrepreneurs in sub Saharan Africa?
We often fail to adequately communicate technical, complex knowledge to senior policymakers ⁵	How is knowledge transferred between individuals who create the knowledge and senior policymakers who make decisions with the knowledge?	How do information overload and equivocality affect the knowledge producer's transfer of knowledge to senior policymakers?
Only 5% of Fortune 500 companies have a dedicated pricing function and formally adopt pricing practices. For those who do, only 20% of them adopt value-based pricing as a pricing orientation. That is despite the fact that marketing and pricing scholars highly recommend value-based pricing ⁶ .	How do companies select and adopt a pricing orientation and how does this influence their organizational design for pricing, their pricing culture, and their pricing process?	What are the organizational factors that influence the adoption of a primary pricing orientation in small & medium B2B firms? How do these factors differ by industry types?

Table 1: Examples of components of DM Research from 3 Thesis studies

⁴ This is from Nnaoke Ufere's thesis (2013): "SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION: A MULTI-THEORETIC, MULTI-LEVEL AND MIXED METHODS ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPLAY AMONG INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS, STRATEGIC AGENCY AND REWARD EXPECTANCY"

⁵ This is from Adrian Wolfberg's thesis (2014): "A THEORY OF OVERLOAD AND EQUIVOCALITY EFFECTS ON LEARNING DURING KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER WITHIN POLICY MAKING DYADS"

⁶ This is from Stephan M. Liozu's thesis (2013): "PRICING CAPABILITIES AND FIRM PERFORMANCE: A SOCIO-TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ADOPTION OF PRICING AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL INNOVATION"

Elements of DM Research

The term Problem of Practice (PoP) is especially important and plays a critical role in distinguishing research in the DM Programs from most academic management research. PoP emphasizes that DM research focuses on and is grounded in problematic situations, as experienced by high-level executives. A PoP is a work-related challenge seen by managers from their practical perspective and going concerns. The Research Problem (RP), in turn, is a refined, focused aspect of the PoP, suitable for developing a social science research project. The PoP is usually too broad and complex of a problem-in-the-world to address in a well-defined research project. In stating an RP, you will be reducing the wicked, larger PoP to a more manageable size, identifying the core features of the PoP that correspond to the managerial realities. The RP, then, specifies a research domain that captures the most consequential factors confronting the executive. Stating a Research Question then specifies the research project, by concisely mapping the RP into research terms and multiple, transdisciplinary concepts so that a set of methods of research can be identified that will be able to reliably answer the question in a timely way.

The DM research process is a guided, methodical exploration of a problem of practice that concerns a DM student. It is aimed at creating new, actionable, knowledge in that problem area. It is worth re-emphasizing that the key outcome of the research is *new knowledge validated (both empirically and theoretically)* about “the problem.” However, the purpose of DM inquiry is *not to solve* the problem you have articulated as a “PoP.” The purpose is to ask, frame and refine it into a *research problem* and generate *research questions* about the PoP in a (new) way that helps reveal a greater understanding of the problem. The problem needs to be multifaceted and important, and there needs to be scientific and empirical evidence that we do not have a good grasp of it. If you knew how to solve the problem, it could or would already be solved.

Due to the open nature of the PoP and its relationship to the RP, the DM program is fundamentally an iterative and open inquiry process into the unknown. This requires the student to ‘cycle’ through and integrate a set of previously unconnected concepts to execute a successful DM inquiry.

In the DM programs, a problem of practice (PoP) is expressed as a chronic difficulty, a source of concern, an opportunity, or ambiguity that you have encountered in your managerial practice. It does not have to be a totally unique phenomenon – in fact its commonality is a mark of its relevance. It is a problematic aspect that stands out in everyday organizational settings and calls for attention and improved understanding – it includes aspects of concern for effectiveness or improvement and it often involves ethical choices of doing good and improving the situation for critical stakeholders. It should be written, for example, in the form of a statement “Physicians many times are poor leaders.” This type of articulation of a problem of practice is not a research question - it is the domain of action experienced by managers in which a relevant research question can be posed. One must first analyze the problem of practice, reflect upon it and reframe it into its underlying issues and dynamics in order to identify a research problem and then propose a set of research questions possible to pursue to address the research questions during a DM inquiry.

A "research problem" guides how a scholar characterizes and frames the PoP in a way that makes the PoP conducive to scientific investigation. During this process the student needs to think about the PoP as an expression of a "type" of broader area of interest that he or she will be exploring in his or her research project. He/she needs to generalize the kind of problem and, and by doing so, begin searching for related research and theory that could be helpful. For example we can ask, "How do physicians become effective leaders?"⁷ He/she will then need to narrow down the interest into a specific *research question(s)* that has not been asked before about the research problem. The research question asks *what, how* or *why* and guides the conduct of a research project and the writing of research paper during the DM inquiry. For example a research question would be "What factors associated with emotional intelligence distinguish effective physician leaders from ineffective ones?"

Becoming a Practitioner-Scholar: Why DM Research is Different

In the DM programs, we emphasize the pivotal role of a "problem of practice" as the origin of the research problem. A DM research problem does not emerge from theory or past research conducted by your mentors. Grounding DM research in a PoP is a means to pragmatically validate the actionable nature of DM research. Classic doctoral programs in management usually address research problems that can be (and usually are) based on some wrinkle or question that has been raised in in prior research applying or validating existing theory within strict disciplinary boundaries. It is typically informed by an established theory adopted from one social science (economics, psychology, sociology etc.) and applied in a management discipline (such as marketing). Because scholars are 'applying' it to an organizational setting, they believe its use is relevant to managers. In other words, in the classic doctoral process, work on a research problem starts with selecting an incomplete, tenuous or challengeable theory that intrigues a student, and then finding or testing an application for that theory in the discipline they are studying.

By contrast, in the DM programs, we do not choose research questions based on a theory that interests us, but based on the experience of difficulties, openings and opportunities in the world as encountered by managers. Our research begins with the experience of a problem of practice, which is carefully articulated and conceptually developed into a more defined research problem and then further refined into a specific research question. During this process we use multiple points of evidence and thought to clarify the research problem, including literature reviews, discussions with faculty and other DM students, and interviews and discussions with colleagues in your work domain. This back and forth from literature and theory to the experience of practitioners is key: it is a 'cyclical' process of reflection and articulation that unfolds throughout your whole DM journey as you develop a deeper understanding of the relationships between your problem of practice, your research problem and your research question. You will both refine and expand each of them during your ongoing inquiry.

When you finish a research project, what you assumed to be the thrust of your focus may change so do not be surprised that your PoP and RP and RQ's have changed along the way. You should

⁷ This is from Joann Farrell- Quinn's thesis (2013): "THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCIES AND ROLE FACTORS ON THE RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATION OF PHYSICIAN LEADERS"

keep this expectation of change in mind as you conduct your research project. This means that from the start you should identify a PoP, an RP and an RQ in such a way that all of them can be transformed during the inquiry; the DM program will help you with this but you must be open to this possibility and necessity. For, if this is not the case, the study is not worth conducting. This is why we say the inquiry you will conduct in the DM programs is a door into the unknown. The DM experience can be very different from your day-to-day management experience, where evidence-based certainty and execution towards solutions are valued. The fluidity and constant tacking back-and-forth between the problem of practice, research problem and research questions is a central point on which the DM programs differ from much of traditional discipline-based management research.

How DM Research is the Best of Both Worlds

The difference between DM inquiry and classical doctoral study boils down to two fundamentals: (1) the source of a research project flows from the experience of a troubling issue that is encountered in the practice of management, in other words, by you, the management leader; and (2) the research project is conducted by you, the manager, trained in doctoral level research to produce new knowledge about a significant problem in the world. The classical, theory-driven doctoral approach has a higher probability of appearing to be scientifically rigorous, but also has a higher probability of being irrelevant to managing organizations. If a research question is irrelevant to management at its inception, relevance cannot simply be added to it later. The DM approach, in contrast, has a higher probability of being relevant and we work to make it as or more rigorous, right from the start, by using appropriate controls and careful methods to ensure the integrity of the collection, analysis and interpretation of your data, along with a constant search for better alternative theoretical explanations of your findings. In contrast to research that is framed within a single discipline, the search for relevant concepts is often multidisciplinary. The program's courses provide exposure to a variety of bodies of knowledge that have aided previous graduates successfully address their problems of practice, including but not limited to concepts of systems and design.

During the DM program, you will become a practitioner scholar. Basing your research on problems of practice that you have experienced in being a manager is a powerful and distinctive mode of research that makes the DM programs unique in the integration of both scholarly and practitioner perspectives. We believe that only someone who has been actively involved as a manager and has also been well-trained in conducting research, has the ability to be a practitioner scholar and to conduct the unique, practice-driven research so badly needed in the world today.

Positioning DM-created Knowledge

Now that you have a better idea of the DM program, it is important that we explain the strategic relationship between its knowledge (and that from other executive doctorate programs) and from classical academic and practitioner knowledge. If knowledge created by the DM programs is neither classical nor practitioner, then how does that knowledge fit into these two communities? There are two answers: first, it can be made to fit, and second, we have created a knowledge dissemination venue specifically designed for DM knowledge. These are discussed below.

DM knowledge, with some modification, can fit into either or both of the scholarly and practitioner communities. DM alumni have successfully modified their research papers for submission to scholarly journals, which usually involves identifying a theoretical basis from which the research is motivated, instead of the PoP basis from which it actually was motivated. Alumni may do this if their career goals reside in tenure in a research university. DM alumni have also successfully adapted their research for practitioner journals and conferences. Alumni typically do this as they reenter their professional world. As high-level executives in that world, they influence thought and practice from within through social transmission of their knowledge (see Aram and Salipante 2003)

A new mode of knowledge dissemination emerged in 2015 to highlight the increase in PoP-motivated empirical research from the growing number of executive doctorate programs. Weatherhead School of Management's DM programs created an official outlet for engaged research by EDBAC graduates and other practitioner scholars, in order to professionalize engaged scholarship research. A peer-reviewed, online journal titled Engaged Management ReView ([EMR](#)) has been designed for relative easy packaging of research from the DM programs to be of interest to all three types of audiences: primarily for the engaged scholarship faculty, alumni and students, but also for the reflective practitioner as well as the classical academic involved in engaged scholarship.

DM research is unique, rigorous, and relevant. You will have a wide range of flexibility for putting it to use.

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