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Building a case for the co-production and re-integration of practice and theory: PRADAN's Development Apprenticeship Programme

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Abstract

This paper is organised on the premise that practice and theory are an integrated whole. The practice-theory disconnection is conceptualised as a 'constructed' phenomenon and, a dualism that sets the normative framework and maintains the social and institutional relationships that underpin it. This paper attempts to articulate the need to reinforce the integration of theory and practice through an exploration of the boundaries and the spaces within and between these. Lessons are drawn from the experience of PRADAN's Development Apprenticeship programme (DAship), initiated in 1990 in what may be termed a response of a social sector organisation² to this disconnection. The processes engendered by PRADAN have led to the birth of a cadre of professionals for social change, and to recognition of PRADAN as 'a leader in bringing professionalism to the NGO movement in India' (citation, Deep Joshi, Raymond Magsaysay Award Foundation, 2009)³. Building such a pool of professionals is located as the *raison d'être* for PRADAN, influencing its philosophy and approach, internal culture, norms and values, strategies for human resource development, and its interaction with its changing environment. It is argued here that such efforts would be far more effective if practice and theory were co-produced and re-integrated.

Key Words: PRADAN, knowledge production, theory, practice, praxis

The Disconnection between Practice and Theory

As practitioners, we may not know or understand the theory behind our actions when we perform them. That we may not be able to explain the theory or the knowledge that underlies a certain practice or phenomenon in no way indicates that performance or practice is bereft of a base of knowledge and theory. Indeed, some posit that theory and practice are both knowledge - different kinds of knowledge - with different cultures and structures. For instance, Schon (1983) and Argyris (1987) are scholars who have coined 'knowing-in-action' and 'theory-in-action', and Polanyi (1967) 'tacit or implicit knowledge', both referring to particular kinds of knowledge. Sandelands (1990) undertakes a fresh examination of Lewin's epigram, 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory'⁴, which is embedded in the value of 'theorizing about persons, groups, organizations, even societies, so that we can make them better'. Sandelands' survey of the problem of relating theory and practice compares the two as types of knowledge. Theory talks to 'knowing that certain things follow from other things' whereas practice talks

¹ These are views of the authors, listed in alphabetical order, and may not represent the views of PRADAN.

² www.pradan.net is a public service organisation registered as a Society in Delhi, India in 1983.

³ <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/awardees/awardee/profile/313>

⁴ Quoted in Marrow, 1969.

to 'knowing how to make certain things happen'. Theory may be seen as 'the knowledge that explains things' and practice may be seen as 'the knowledge that gets things done'. Carlile (2002) describes 'knowledge in practice' as 'localised, embedded and invested in practice', drawing on Bourdieu (1977) and Lave (1998).

Theory and practice have an integrated existence, and it is often in our minds that we segregate the two, with that segregation perhaps developed in our education. In order to comprehend a 'whole' we find it convenient to break it up into 'parts'. The 'whole' might appear to be too much to digest. 'Parts' often help us to delve deeper into the constituents of the whole, and the separation into parts makes it easier to transmit to others through teaching. Perhaps the segregation of knowledge from practice takes place in our minds due to such considerations. Long (2002) traces the roots of such segregation to Aristotle and his prioritisation of theory over practice, of *sophia* over *phronesis*. Schon (1983) highlights that the divide between research and practice has emerged in terms of a hierarchy of status appointed to knowledge of academic importance over skill and competence valued in professional practice. The institutional spaces occupied by the two are also thus hierarchised, with practitioners occupying the 'swampy lowlands' and researchers the 'high, hard ground'.

It is neither our intent nor our ability to explain, build postulates about or address this disconnection. Rather, we take the position that our collective endeavor needs to be to unpack the parts, the different kinds of knowledge, with different cultures and structures, and engage with the hierarchies so that a more comprehensible whole emerges. It is through DAsip, viewed as a response to manifestations of the problems of relating theory to practice and vice-versa, which we attempt to articulate some blocks/issues faced, exploring how such an endeavor might take us to a different level of appreciation, understanding and practice. Blocks/issues may be categorised into two; those emanating from the paucity or absence of theory, and the other, from the paucity or absence of knowledge of and about practice. Figure 1 represents schematically what this paper attempts to do, and how it is organised.

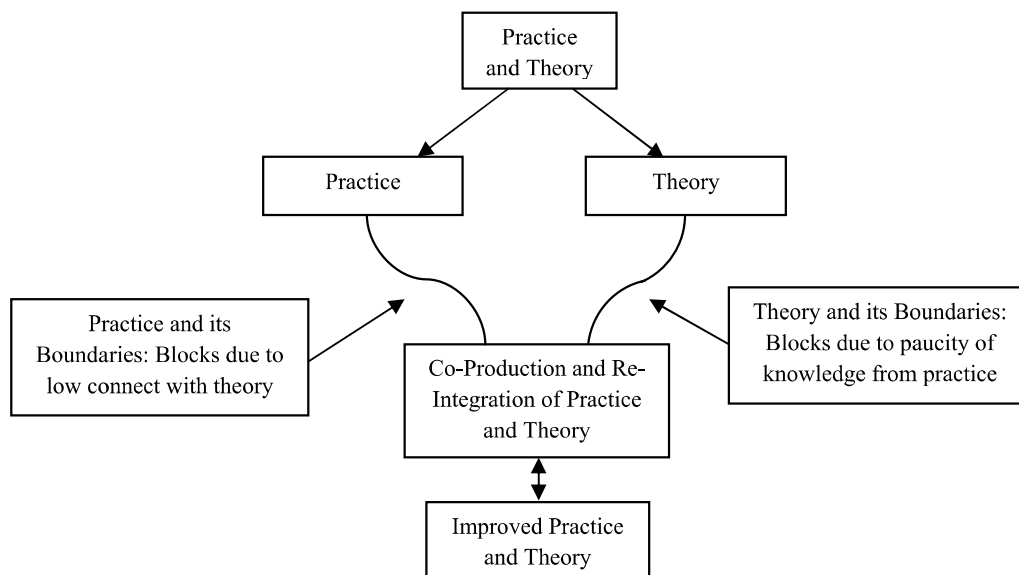


Figure 1. Schema underlying the organisation of this paper.

PRADAN's Response to the Disconnection between Practice and Theory

The Genesis

Indian rural poverty is large, diverse and complex. The founders of PRADAN believed that people are central to the process of development. People make choices, take risks and bear responsibility so that, over time, they are able to take charge of the process of change. Development thus becomes empowering and liberating, affording individuals and groups a measure of dignity, and opportunities to exercise meaningful choices. The development agency in this schema is a catalyst, innovator and enabler rather than a dispenser of progress. It neither directs nor delivers. It mainly facilitates, valuing people's inherent potential to lead the process of socio-economic change, and to solve their own problems, to innovate.

A critical gap in engendering processes of change is not material resources, but capable people, individuals with knowledge and empathy towards the marginalised who can act as agents of change. PRADAN recognised that processes of transformation could best be triggered through human intervention by people who were endowed with qualities of both the head and the heart⁵, and of course hands, with action as the credo. Such people needed to display an ability to reach out to others and empathize before they are able to facilitate any change in the human condition. In this idea or approach, the 'facilitator' must have a strong belief in the innate capability of others, an orientation towards processes that empower others, as well as a range of practical skills and knowledge to purposefully

⁵ Magsaysay Award Acceptance Speech, Deep Joshi

intervene in evolving situations, and to solve problems that are often unique and always complex. S/he must be self-critical so as to clarify values in an evolving context, reflective so as to challenge their own actions and generate knowledge to deal with such contexts, purposive to be willing to adapt and learn skills to perform new tasks, and daring enough to experiment to expand the arena for action.

A starting point to foster the process of development and to make it effective, therefore, is to put the 'right kind' of people to work at the grassroots. However, the world seems to have been divided into two categories of 'thinkers' and 'doers'. Academic institutions, by and large, lean towards the cultivation of the head excluding any application to practice as well as to stirrings of the heart. Furthermore, there is little preparation to work with and at the margins. The development sector has largely also not been an exception to this division. 'Following the logic of state bureaucracies, the grassroots workers of these (state delivery) agencies were expected primarily to carry out routines designed at higher levels. Notwithstanding the concern ritually voiced about the importance of grassroots workers, power, authority and human capability resided far away from the place where change was to take place, the grassroots. The more capable, thoughtful and socially motivated people, by design, remained in policy making, programme design, supervisory and coordination roles; implicitly, thus little value was assigned to human resources for grassroots work for development' (PRADAN, internal document, 1988). PRADAN's experience suggested that this formulation had to be inverted, (i.e. people who were both doers and thinkers and able to integrate the two in their thought and action, were needed in the forefront).

The founders of PRADAN perceived the need to provide a space for young professionals to come together and give a part of their lives to address one of the most pressing needs of our society, the alleviation, if not removal, of poverty. PRADAN realised that a certain kind of climate, culture and interactive space was needed to nurture the minds and to sustain the flow of energies of young, educated Indians in a developmentally meaningful and significant manner. This interactive space was necessary so that these practitioners could get together to share, to learn from each other, and from professional peers elsewhere, and to contribute to the body of 'knowledge' about development. It was also built on PRADAN's belief in the investment in young people as a source of human capital for the future, focusing on the development of the self of the young person, both as a person and as an emerging professional. This is in contrast to focusing *predominantly* on the outputs that the young person can produce. These processes were embedded in assumptions about and knowledge of growth, development and change in individuals, groups and organisations. In addition, 'theory' informed an overall perspective about development and the nature of institutions that foster and sustain professional practice for social change.

An Overview of the Development Apprenticeship

Educational institutions in India did not produce the graduates required to engender processes of change and development. Simultaneously, working in villages after a premier college education ran counter to social norms, entailed cultural isolation and physical hardship and required complex negotiation of expectations from their peers and the back home social milieu. Very few educated youth

thus ventured into this territory. Those interested to work in villages moved on to conventional careers for want of appropriate opportunities, guidance and support, and only the exceptionally entrepreneurial would set up independent projects. Recruiting such youth and expanding opportunities for them to work with village communities through the DAship was a key strategy to bring in young educated youth⁶. It involved experiencing the living conditions and broad content and pace of work in villages, stimulated reflection and introspection to be in touch with one's being, connection with the people as well as the work 'out there'. Exploration of their inner calling formed an integral part of the entire process. It also provided opportunities to learn through guided practice at the grassroots, equipping themselves with knowledge, orientation and skills to engender processes of change and development with and among poor rural communities.

The broad notion of the graduating apprentice was someone with an enhanced sense of professional growth and commitment to the vocation. More specifically, the following areas were in focus: Understanding community and its context with a developmental perspective, interest in community work, abilities to comprehend the task at hand and application of self to work, effective membership of a group and team, and functioning in the public sphere.

The DAship is dynamic. Since its inception in 1990, it has been through 3-4 stages of evolution. The current form described here is a year-long programme. It has four phases:

- The first three months involve staying in the village with a family and conducting a village study, after which apprentices visit their home for seven days. The purpose of the visit home is to share the experience and meaning that their work has for them, and explore resonance with their family and back home social milieu.
- In the fourth month the DAs congregate for a foundation course, which provides space for reflection and conceptual/theoretical inputs to help make sense of their experience. They explore different aspects of their selves, interpersonal and group relationships, and relationships with the people and their contexts, and with PRADAN. They build an understanding of the village as a multidimensional arena for work. These discussions equip the DAs to start their phase of 'learning by doing'.
- The fifth to eleventh months are spent 'learning by doing' where the DA takes responsibility working with a cluster of self-help groups (SHGs) on issues and initiatives that they are pursuing. This is within their field guide's area of operation. They also visit another PRADAN team to build their perspective about PRADAN's approach to development.
- The last month is spent in a foundation course, which provides space to crystallize learning during the entire DAship, explore relevant concepts and theories especially in areas related to group mobilisation and facilitation, natural resources management, livelihoods, well-being and claims on rights and entitlements. They also visit another NGO or social movement (e.g. Narmada Bachao Andolan, Jan Swasthya Shayog, Digantar, and Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) to understand different approaches to development in the sector and the role of the professional.

⁶ Those with a Baccalaureate in the professions or a Masters degree in any discipline are eligible to apply.

The foundation courses are conducted by experienced PRADAN professionals with some external faculty drawn from academia, consultants and experts from other organisations. The action and learning space have been assiduously integrated, and provide opportunities for both the DA and the guide to step back and focus on processes of learning and growth for both.

The relationship between the DA and the guide is the backbone of DAsHIP. From the time the DA joins, s/he has a designated field guide who is equipped for the role by a specially designed three-phased programme. The process of guiding follows Carkhuff's model of 'helping and counseling' (Fuster, 1964) and Schon's (1987) model of coaching. This supports the DA to navigate both her/his internal and external journeys.

Outcomes

PRADAN has an intake of over 100 DAs a year. About half graduate as what are referred to in PRADAN as executives. These graduates are trained and inspired to find a calling in serving India's poor⁷. That all this happens in a decentralised way, demonstrates that the processes have been institutionalised and are integrated into the working of PRADAN. Further evidence of the efficacy of the programme is illustrated by the role they have played in PRADAN and in other organisations after graduation. For example, 180 PRADAN professionals have over four years' experience, and form its leadership pool. Second, a tracer study of the DAsHIP programme conducted by Start Up in 2011 identified that 89 % of executives who left PRADAN continued to work in the development sector. Fifteen of them have founded new development organisations.

The 'practice of' DAsHIP has helped standardise a programme that has the potential of wide transferability, characterised by active participation of apprentices in the learning experience, and in creating meaning from daily living and working (later referred to as 'situated learning', Lave & Wenger, 1991). The importance of a systematic way to nurture and bring professionals into rural development work has been recognised and validated, in policy and practice circles. PRADAN's own performance is one example, the Magsaysay award to co-founder Deep Joshi being an indication of this. There is recognisable influence on rural development policy, for example strategies adopted by the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship and other government programmes. Other organisations in the social sector have introduced several similar elements into their induction and professional development programmes.

DAsHIP has been a response of a largely praxis-based organisation to the neglect of the higher education system to produce quality practitioners oriented towards and equipped to work for social change. However, achieving its potential, and further 'scaling out' (increasing number of DAs) needs to be tempered by the potential to 'scale up' (linking organisations in the social sector with those in higher education) (Douthwaite, 2003). It was recognised that, for its continued success, the DAsHIP needs to

⁷ Internal documents and reviews of the DAsHIP, 2005 and 2011.

link with the 'world of theory' from which it seemed to be growing distant over the past years⁸.

Boundaries of Practice and Theory

If the assumption that practice and theory are one integrated whole is not widely held, then boundaries grow, with negative connotations of limitation and inaccessibility. This may be accompanied by seemingly conflicting values, view points, preferences and power relations. Outlined below are some blocks/issues faced by the DAship because of this divide between practice and theory. This section also attempts to identify the issues that we think the 'world of theory' may be facing owing to which it does not engage with possibilities of extracting new knowledge from initiatives such as the DAship, and contribute to their strengthening. The last section of this paper explores alternative conceptualisations of boundaries as social constructs and opportunities to expand horizons. An endeavor informed by such approaches may facilitate attempts to take stock of the lack of comprehensiveness and possibilities to address it.

Practice and its Boundaries

Inadequate dialogue with 'theory' has circumscribed the possibility to make greater and deeper meaning of experience, with several manifestations. For instance, PRADAN relied upon the principle of learning by doing (Kolb, 1984), which entailed deriving meaning from experience which resulted from action. This needed conceptual anchoring. It may be expected that with adequate cognitive support, learning will be distilled, spiraling into a state where action becomes more effective. Such conceptual anchoring is also typically multi-disciplinary, and boundaries *between* disciplines (such as the behavioral sciences and agricultural sciences) often seemed as intractable as boundaries *between* practitioners and each of these disciplines. Lack of thematic or 'expert' knowledge at times also served as a block to guiding the people in their initiatives, and to optimum utilisation of available resources. This covered a range of disciplines and facets including specific technical knowledge and skills, groups, collectives and organisation development, and guiding and coaching. For instance, the process of facilitating the DA's search for her/his inner calling and helping the her/him stabilise in the choices that s/he makes is circumscribed by inadequate appreciation of and knowledge about what contributes to shaping of an identity and its grounding. Similarly, an inadequate cognitive map restricts the scope of linking the climate, culture and interactive space necessary to nurture young people's minds and to sustain the flow of their energies in a developmentally meaningful and significant manner.

The DAship has not contributed significantly to the body of knowledge about development, nor has it challenged existing notions and explored alternative articulations. This has two components, one of which is present and the other one lacking. The component present is each DA's deep engagement with the people, listening to their feelings and thoughts and building shared thinking and action. However, the component lacking is that this needs to operate in conjunction with dialogue with theory and existing knowledge through reading, systematic documentation, and engaged practice with a variety of

⁸ Internal reviews as also project reviews conducted in 2005 and 2009.

practitioners, policy makers and academics. It is only then that deeper reflective practice and contribution to a new body of knowledge may emerge. Secondly, the construct of the DAship (the education and transformation of the development practitioner) as an integral part of the development process itself, rather than an instrumental means to deliver projects as an end, is yet to be articulated. The MPhil in Development Practice offered by Ambedkar University Delhi⁹ in collaboration with PRADAN is one fledgling, perhaps pioneering, attempt by a social sciences university to do so.

Even the most well conceived programme operating in such a bifurcated environment may lead to cultivation of a 'doer' rather than an enquiring mindset (characterised by continuous churning of different ideas, approaches and possibilities). The field guide is an important source of knowledge, supporting the learning journey of the DA. However, a design based on 'practitioners managing somehow with available knowledge resources' has resulted in limited sources for the guides' renewal of knowledge and energy. Chambers (1983) pointed out that professional methods and values set traps that lead practitioners to oversimplify complex problems and to ignore people and environmental factors in farming systems and development programmes. Such task orientation may be off-set by reflective practice, which reinforces the formation of a habitual cycle of reflection in action and learning. However, lack of inputs from outside may lead to a state of stagnation as far as learning and development are concerned. Tacit knowledge, which typically helps the evolution of a reflective practitioner, may turn into a block, into habit unchanged owing to lack of import of fresh knowledge and perspectives in the learning system of the professional.

Theory and Its Boundaries

The 'world of theory' has grappled with issues of relevance and connection with the empirical and social realities. Lewin (1947) pointed to changes in the social sciences as it moved towards greater integration, from description to dynamic problems of change and towards developing new 'research techniques' for planned social change. He drew a triangle to represent the interdependence of research, training, and action in producing social change. Parsons et al (1965) worked towards conceptualising a general theory of action and Bourdieu (1990) has outlined a theory of practice and action, 'a reflection on scientific practice which will disconcert both those who reflect on the social sciences without practicing them and those who practice them without reflecting on them.' Chambers (1983) articulates the disconnect from realities that afflict most researchers in development and the low value accorded to the 'periphery', and to reservoirs of knowledge that people hold. He argues for a philosophy of reversals as a transformational process. Long goes so far as to say '*phronesis* because it points to the possibility of developing a critically self-reflective model of ontological knowledge firmly embedded in the finite world, emerges as a genuine alternative to *sophia*.' Johns (2013) credits Schon for 'turning on its head the established epistemological hierarchy of professional practice, suggesting that 'swampy lowland knowing' is more significant than technical rationality because it is the knowledge practitioners need to practice.' Emerging networks and consortiums also attempt to bridge this divide. For instance, the South

⁹ www.aud.ac.in

Asia network of Universities and Intermediaries for Inclusive Innovation and Development (UNIID)¹⁰ has explored and compiled experiences around the theme 'Rethinking Universities in India: Intermediaries for Socially Inclusive Development.' The GUNI¹¹ network focuses on recovering and strengthening universities' critical functions and visions, for anticipating social needs and advice for societal development and transformation.

It is not our intent to exhaustively study, explore, comment on or critique these internally transformational intellectual initiatives in the 'world of theory'. It is perhaps important to recognise such efforts, as we outline the boundaries that theory seems to have placed around itself through the prism of the DAship experience. The knowledge generating and disseminating world, that of higher education in India, lacks connection with practice. It barely recognises different cultures of knowledge, nor does it look at a person as 'a whole'. It also does not equip the person to deal with the 'reality' of life and work in engendering transformational processes in the rural. The lack of connect between what transpires in the pages of a book and the world out there creates boundaries for a student to bridge theory with practice. Students entering from different fields of study¹² face similar issues as they begin their journey as development professionals, reflected in the objectives of the DAship.

Most education seems to be based on 'received knowledge'. This often falls short of coming up with new knowledge that will respond to the emerging changes and needs, particularly of the developmental variety. Practitioners too, unless deliberate and consciously aware, are influenced by this and tend to follow a didactic approach, disseminating received knowledge whilst neglecting the voices and lived experience of the people, and perhaps their own experience too.

Scholars, academics and researchers often remain within their own spheres. The purpose of knowledge for a researcher seems to be more to '*know that*', whereas for a practitioner it is more about to '*know how*', and reflexivity between the two is often lacking. The time frame for the researcher is much longer, whereas the practitioner needs knowledge *now*, and knowledge that is specific and decisive and may be used for problem solving. The researcher hesitates to be certain and would rather generalise keeping caveats in view. The constituencies are different, with academics and researchers focused on their fellow academics, and the practitioner looking at communities and fellow practitioners. They thus do not seem to find meaning in going beyond, not only to deal with practitioners but also with other disciplines or scholars. Similarly, there are very few instances of interest among academics to work with people in the villages, or in PRADAN (including Apprenticeship) in the spirit of discovering something new together. The dialogue between this world of theory and experienced practitioners is lacking. Thus those conducting foundation courses and guiding students, and the entire curriculum, remain disconnected from the world of theory, neither contributing to nor gaining from it.

¹⁰ Universities and Intermediaries for Inclusive Innovation and Development (UNIID)
<http://ced.org.in/docs/kics/UNIID/title-workshop.pdf>

¹¹ Global University Network for Innovation (<http://www.guni-rmies.net/#sthash.ZZWtm7ne.dpuf>)

¹² Discipline-wise break up of DAs over 2010-15 is as follows: Engineering: 48%; Management: 18%; Social work and rural development: 13%; Agriculture and allied disciplines: 10%; Social science and humanities: 5%; Science: 3%; and others (computer applications, law, commerce): 2%

Co-Production and Re-integration of Practice and Theory: A Menu for Transformation

The exploration of the 'limits of practice' and 'limits of theory' may be conceptualised in the interplay between 'communities of practice' (of theory and practice here) with the 'learning possibilities at the edges of competence' (Lave, 1991). The distinction between learning 'inside communities' and learning 'at the boundaries' opens the spaces in between for examination and action. Both are valued, and yet different. The competence and experience *inside* communities, by and large, converge. Competence and experience diverge at the edge, between communities. Such a 'boundary interaction' is one of being exposed to a 'foreign competence'. One way to facilitate this movement between boundaries is participation in 'communities of learning', attention to boundary processes, and attention to identities shaped by participation in these processes (Lave, 1991). It is envisaged that these may lead to 'personal transformation with the evolution of social structures.'

Again, it is not our intent to articulate the collective endeavor required towards this goal. For co-production of knowledge to come about, it might require building communities for learning comprising a new cadre of peers, from academia, people and practitioners and creating a mutually supportive and reinforcing environment. Such an endeavor might require a stance of openness to change and transformation, and to different forms and cultures of knowledge that respond to questions from academia, practitioners and 'the people'. For instance a recent symposium held by the UNESCO Chairs highlighted, 'If we are going to resolve social challenges, new partnerships and collaborations between academia and civil society organizations are required'¹³.

This is likely to facilitate DAship to nurture a cadre of development professionals, who will personify the blending of the streams of theory and practice. It could lead to knowledge in the form of fresh insights and theory embedded in practice. It could also lead to fresh practice embedded in the practitioner-theorist's ability to examine and understand a composite phenomenon and act on it in an integrated meaningful manner.

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¹³ http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/unesco/pdf/10_April_2015_event_report.pdf

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