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What if We Shifted the Basis of Consulting from Knowledge to Knowing?

Abstract *In this article, we argue that a focus on the debunking of consulting knowledge has led to a disconnect between the research and the practice of management consulting. A renewed focus on consulting practice, that is, the doing of consultancy itself, affords an opportunity for bringing clients, practitioners and researchers of consulting closer together. We sketch an outline of an alternative approach to consulting practice, based not on knowledge, but on knowing, the socially situated activity whereby knowledge is applied and created. Borrowing from the practice-based theories of organizational knowledge and knowing, we explore how key aspects of consulting practice—problem solving, participation and knowledge transfer—might be handled differently when we give primacy to practice. We discuss the viability of this alternative approach, and argue that despite established relations of power and politics, the dynamic and indeterminate nature of practice environments does afford some space for this and other alternative forms of consulting practice to take hold. **Key Words:** consulting; knowing; knowledge transfer; practice-based theories; situated knowledge; situated learning*

Introduction

Academic research of management consulting can be divided into two phases (Fincham and Clark, 2002: 387). An Organization Development (OD) phase, authored primarily by practicing consultants and dominant through the mid-1980s, was concerned with ‘maximizing the effectiveness of consultants’ interventions’ (Fincham et al., 2002: 5). A second ‘critical phase’ then emerged, authored

primarily by critical management scholars, who problematized consulting's status as a profession, and the truth status of the knowledge consultancies claimed to possess (Fincham et al., 2002: 6–7). The breadth and creativity of the perspectives brought to bear on consultants and consulting during this critical phase—‘fantasy theme analysis’ (Jackson, 2002), ‘dramaturgical analysis’ (Clark and Salaman, 1998a), even ‘magic’ (Fincham, 2000)—seem to have been eclipsed only by the sheer volume of material produced, prompting Collins (2004) to observe that the debunking of consulting knowledge ‘has become something of a mass participation sport for academics’ (2004: 557).

There is, however, a sobering counterpoint to this discussion: in spite of all the criticism, management consulting revenues, except for a brief slow-down following the collapse of the ‘tech bubble’ in 2002, have increased every year for nearly 40 years (Kennedy Information, 2004). In 2007, the total global expenditure on management consulting services is estimated to have surpassed the \$300 billion mark, a new record high for the industry (Kennedy Information, 2007). Clearly, there is a disconnect between the research and the practice of management consulting. Granted, much of the currently dominant critical research stream has not had the objective of a close alignment with practice (Fincham et al., 2002: 7). But given the increasing impact of management consulting, we advocate here a broadened research agenda, and more active engagement with issues relevant to practice.

For Salaman (2002; see also Collins, 2001) the disconnect results from an overly narrow range of research problematics, in particular a ‘pre-occupation with the truth status of consultants’ knowledge’ (Salaman, 2002: 250). Because consulting knowledge is considered to be flawed, the continuing strong demand for it becomes problematic, and in need of explanation. Not surprisingly, numerous studies have addressed the question: ‘Why do clients continue to purchase consulting advice based on knowledge which objective analysis shows to be flawed?’ (for a review, see Clark and Salaman, 1998b and Salaman, 2002). While instructive, these studies are not highly relevant for practice, since clients are concerned less about the truth of consulting knowledge, than they are about its effectiveness, and how that effectiveness can be measured (Phillips, 2000). Moreover, these studies seem to have diverted research attention away from the development of alternatives for what consulting practice *could be* in the future (Clegg et al., 2004a; Collins, 2001, 2004; Salaman, 2002; Sturdy et al., 2004). Without the provision of alternatives, argue Alvesson and Deetz (2000), research runs the risk of becoming ‘hypercritical’ and ‘sterile’. This coincides with the assessment of Sturdy et al. (2004) of what the research literature on management consulting has already become: ‘largely sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive’ (Sturdy et al., 2004: 337). Thus, developing possible alternatives for consulting practice is important not only for revitalizing the academic research agenda, but also for responding to the needs of consulting clients, who, despite their continued expenditures, are only slightly less vocal than academic researchers in their criticism of what consulting delivers, although for very different reasons (Ashford, 1998; National Audit Office, 2006).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to explore one such alternative for what consulting practice *could be*. Borrowing from practice-based theories of organizational knowledge and knowing, we sketch an outline of an alternative approach to consulting practice based not on knowledge, but on *knowing*, the socially situated

activity whereby knowledge is both applied and created. Practice-based theories (e.g. situated learning theory, see Lave and Wenger, 1991), distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1993), the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1977) and others, have made significant contributions to other fields of research, but have not been applied in any significant degree to management consulting (notable exceptions are: Czarniawska, 2001; Newell et al., 2006). Our goal is not the development of a prescriptive method, but rather to explore how consulting practice could be different, by embracing, rather than attempting only to control for, the indeterminacy of practice. Thus, the central question we address is ‘What if we shifted the basis of consulting from knowledge to knowing?’

The article is written in four sections. In the first, we argue that consulting practice is overshadowed by, and often conflated with, consulting knowledge. Next we introduce practice-based approaches to knowledge in organizations, and show how the notion of ‘knowing’ can disentangle consulting knowledge from consulting practice, as well as form the basis of an alternative approach to practice. In the third section, we sketch an outline of this alternative approach. More specifically, we use practice-based theories to explore how three key aspects of consulting practice—problem solving, participation and knowledge transfer—might be handled differently when we cede primacy to practice. In the fourth section, we discuss the viability of this outlined approach. We will argue that despite established relations of power and politics, the dynamic and indeterminate nature of practice does afford some space for this and other alternative forms of consulting practice to take hold.

Consulting Knowledge vs Consulting Practice

Knowledge is of central importance to management consulting (Davenport and Prusak, 2005). Consultants apply their knowledge to solve client problems, transfer their knowledge to clients through ‘skill transfer’, and actively promote themselves as demonstrating ‘best practice’ in the management of knowledge resources (Empson, 2001). Critical management scholars, of course, have a very different view. For these researchers, consulting knowledge is a rhetorical construction, made possible by the exercise of consultant power (Fincham et al., 2002). Clients, meanwhile, despite their criticism of the outcomes of projects involving and/or led by management consultants, continue to cite ‘gaining access to consultant knowledge’ as a primary reason for their use of external consultants (Davenport and Prusak, 2005: 305; Werr, 2002: 92; Wood, 2002: 57–58).

What About Consulting Practice?

But what about the *practice* of consulting itself? Empirical research suggests the skilful application of knowledge, that is, *practice*, is as important for the success of consulting assignments as the possession of knowledge resources—this according to both researchers and the consultants themselves (e.g. Alvesson, 1995; Crucini, 2002; Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Nevertheless, it appears that the overriding focus on consulting knowledge—whether criticized, promoted or

purchased, by researchers, consultants, or clients, respectively—has overshadowed further exploration of the how-to of consulting practice, in other words, the *doing* of consultancy itself.

A limited understanding of practice is not confined to consulting, of course, but is a well-recognized characteristic of the study of the professions in general (Abbott, 1988; Reed, 1996). Many explanations are given for why professional practice—compared to professional knowledge—remains relatively unexplored. The environments where professional practice is situated, for example, are considered indeterminate, thus limiting exploration and formalization (Alvesson, 1993, 2001; Schön, 1983; Sturdy, 1997). The language and vocabulary of practice—for not only describing current practice, but for creating new forms of it—is said to be under-developed (Nicolini et al., 2003). Taxonomies for categorizing different types of static knowledge, for example, are numerous and sophisticated (e.g. Grant, 1996; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Spender, 1996), but the language of practice is often left to a list of not-so-illuminating verbs: ‘apply’, ‘leverage’ and so on. And for closure theorists (e.g. Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 1988; Larson, 1990) and researchers focused on organizational politics (e.g. Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; Ferdinand, 2004), the ‘mystification’ of practice by practitioners is *intentional*, so as to protect their autonomy and power. These are familiar arguments, all of which we will address in this article, but there is yet another reason for why the ‘black box’ of consulting practice may be particularly difficult to open.

As discussed, consulting knowledge is considered to be consultancies’ single most important asset. Yet, compared to the traditional professions, the boundaries delimiting consulting knowledge are ill defined (Fincham, 1999). This combination of high importance and ill-defined boundaries, along with an under-developed language of practice, results in what we see as a fairly pervasive conflation of static knowledge with dynamic practice. In both the research and practice of consulting, it is often unclear where *possession* (of knowledge) ends, and the *practice* (of consulting) begins. Thus, as a first step in the development of an alternative approach, we begin with some ‘disentangling’ of knowledge and practice, to gain a more discrete focus on consulting practice itself. To do this, we turn to the so-called ‘practice-based approaches’ to knowledge in organizations. As their name implies, practice-based approaches take the dynamic ‘doing of’ practice and the ‘using of’ knowledge as their primary focus, as captured in the notion of ‘knowing’.

Practice-Based Approaches to Knowledge and Knowing

The practice-based approaches can be demarcated as studies that develop accounts of practice, or those studies that treat the field of practice as the primary site for study (Schatzki et al., 2001). They include situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), situated action (Suchman, 1987), distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1993), activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the theory of affordances (Gibson, 1977) and others. Where a functionalist perspective is focused on knowledge, a practice-based approach is focused on knowing. ‘Knowing’ is defined here as the socially situated activity whereby knowledge is both applied and, thereby, created during practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Cook and Brown, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991;

Orlikowski, 2002; Schön, 1983). Knowledge is what one *has*; knowing is what one *is doing*. Borrowing from Polanyi's well-known example, knowledge is the advice a child *has* from parents about how to ride a bicycle, while knowing is *riding* it (Polanyi, 1967). Cook and Brown (1999: 387) make a distinction between 'knowing' and 'practice', with the latter being not just any doing or acting, but doing or acting that is 'informed by meaning drawn from a particular group context'. But in this article, and following Maturana and Varela (1998) we will treat 'knowing' as synonymous with 'doing' and also with 'practice', and we will use all three terms. Next, we offer two examples of the conflation of knowledge and practice, and show how 'knowing' can help to disentangle them. The first example is related to knowledge management, and the second to knowledge transfer.

Diagnosing the Difficulties with Knowledge Management and Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge management is big business. In order to promote reuse of knowledge, transfer best practices, or improve collaboration, organizations—and especially consultancies—have invested heavily in knowledge management systems and 'knowledge repositories'. Yet after implementation, many of these knowledge repositories remain either empty or idle (Hansen et al., 1999; Newell et al., 2006). As McDermott (1999) points out, 'if a group of people don't already share knowledge, don't already have plenty of contact, don't already understand what insights and information will be useful to each other'—in other words, if they don't already collaborate, then collaboration is unlikely to begin, simply through the introduction of a knowledge repository (McDermott, 1999: 104). In this example, problems of practice are addressed *as if* they were solely problems of possession, or rather insufficient possession, of knowledge resources. When the primary focus is on knowledge resources, problems are often framed as *not having enough* knowledge, and 'solutions', therefore, call for *having more*. And without sufficient language to enable a more discrete focus on practice itself, the problem of insufficient collaborating goes either (1) unrecognized as a problem with practice, or (2) misdiagnosed as solely a problem of possession. Diagnosing this same example using the idea of 'knowing', however, we get some sense of explanatory power regarding the limited success of these initiatives. It enables us to say, for example, 'they took care of knowledge, but overlooked knowing', and thus also begins to improve our vocabulary and our ability to focus discretely on practice and practicing.

Similar difficulties exist with a number of well-known studies of knowledge transfer (e.g. Szulanski, 1996; von Hippel, 1994). In these studies, the difficulty of transfer is attributed to knowledge itself, which is considered to be 'sticky', for example (von Hippel, 1994). The perhaps equally well-known critiques of such studies often invoke Reddy's (1979) argument against a conduit metaphor of communication. According to the critique, the reason why 'knowledge transfer' is problematic, is not because knowledge is sticky, but because the *meaning* of the knowledge being transferred is different for the sender than it is for the receiver. This is indeed problematic, but there are other difficulties—in both the original studies and the critique—which the idea of 'knowing' helps to make clear.

In neither the original studies nor the critique, for example, is there any explicit provision for the dynamic *using of* knowledge, that is to say, for knowledge creation, or knowing. Regardless of whether it's 'knowledge' or 'meaning' that is being transferred—both rely solely on the metaphor of 'transfer'. But the 'transferring' of knowledge or meaning will always be one step short of the 'using' of it, or, one step short of knowing. The word 'meaning' is indeed some improvement over the word 'knowledge', because it at least implies that some knowing is happening, but it is left unclear as to when and by whom, and continues to depend on the same 'transfer' metaphor. The word 'transfer' is sometimes replaced by 'sharing' (e.g. Bechky, 2003), to render: 'the sharing of meaning', instead of 'the transfer of knowledge'. As before, 'sharing' seems to be an improvement over 'transfer', because it implies some interaction, but again it is only implied. It also assumes that meaning is *something* that can be *shared with* some person, as opposed to that which must be *created by* that person. To summarize, the phrase 'the sharing of meaning' is seen as only a slight improvement over the phrase 'the transfer of knowledge'. It continues to rely on a functionalist treatment of knowledge, but more problematically, makes no explicit provision for knowledge creation, and thus leaves knowing or practice non-discrete and unclear.

A metaphor from the telecom industry can hopefully clarify. In that industry, people speak of 'the last mile', which refers to the point at which larger, long-distance cables, arriving near the final destination, must be separated into smaller, shorter cables to connect with individual customers. Compared to the work of moving data across long distances, the 'last mile' is short, but expensive, involving tricky issues of property access and so on, and is generally considered difficult to administer. Nevertheless, until the last mile is covered, service cannot begin. Similarly, 'the transfer of knowledge' or 'the sharing of meaning' make no provision for the critical 'last mile'. For knowledge to have an impact on practice—positive or otherwise—knowing is an obligatory passage point (Callon, 1986). The point is not that these studies are wrong, but that they make no explicit provision for knowing. Thus, their usefulness for gaining a discrete focus on practice, for the purposes of understanding and improving it, is limited.

A renewed focus on knowing, however, does not mean that knowledge resources then become any less important—on the contrary, both are required for effective practice. Thus, having spent some time attempting to first disentangle knowledge and knowing (or practice) into somewhat discrete and separate strands, we will now attempt to weave them back together again, but in such a way that they remain discrete and clear, yet connected.

Knowledge and Knowing as Mutually Constitutive

In the previous paragraphs, we discussed how successful performance in practice depends on both knowledge and knowing. Nevertheless, much of the literature on knowledge in organizations (e.g. Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Spender, 1996), and in consultancies (Hansen et al., 1999; Sarvary, 1999) presents an 'either/or' treatment of knowledge and knowing, in other words, 'knowledge as an asset' or 'knowing as a process' (Empson, 2001: 812). The 'codification vs. personalization' strategies for managing knowledge (e.g. Hansen et al., 1999), are a well-known

example of this either/or treatment. But if we strictly adopt a 'knowledge as an asset' approach, then no provision is made for the *using of* that asset, and practice thus remains under-served. On the other hand, strictly adopting 'knowledge as a process' risks overlooking knowledge resources and experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, more recent empirical research shows that in practice, consultants routinely use both knowledge and knowing, or some processual equivalent, and regardless of whether the consultancies are strategy- or technology-oriented, or local or global in scale (Crucini, 2002; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003).

While this more recent research does recognize the importance of both knowledge and knowing, the relationship between the two remains undeveloped. For example, knowledge and knowing are said to be 'complementary' to one another (Crucini, 2002: 128). Or, for Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) there is a processual component only at the time when knowledge is first 'converted' from tacit to explicit. Once the explicit knowledge has been created, however, it can then be 'readily transmitted between individuals' (Nonaka and Konno, 1998: 42), and assumedly without further assistance from the 'conversion' process.

Compared to research that (1) adopts an either/or treatment of knowledge and knowing, or (2) does not clearly define the relationship between the two, Orlikowski (2002) offers a promising alternative:

It leads us to understand knowledge and practice as reciprocally constitutive, so that it does not make sense to talk about either knowledge or practice without the other. It suggests there may be value in a perspective that does not treat these as separate or separable, a perspective that focuses on the knowledgeability of action, that is on *knowing* (a verb connoting action, doing, practice) rather than *knowledge* (a noun connoting things, elements, facts, processes, dispositions). (Orlikowski, 2002: 250–1, emphasis in original)

Following this from Orlikowski (2002), and incorporating similar insights from Tsoukas (1996) and Cook and Brown (1999), we will adopt the view that the relationship uniting knowledge and knowing is *mutually constitutive*. Thus, knowing creates knowledge, which in turn guides and influences future knowing. Knowledge is 'a tool at the service of knowing' (Cook and Brown, 1999: 388). Knowing is performing, and is dependent upon relevant knowledge for the performance to be an effective one (Cook and Brown, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowing without relevant knowledge to draw from is still a performance, but is likely to be amateurish or inappropriate for the purpose at hand. From this perspective, existing knowledge is not simply 'transferred' as-is into a new context (Freidson, 1988). Rather, with recontextualization, knowledge is changed, and thereby created anew, but only for an instant, as it immediately begins slipping into a decontextualized past. Because of decontextualizing, the knowledge, which enabled past successful performances, may not be available or appropriate for future performances. In other words, 'expertise' is no longer seen as a possessed and portable capability, but as an *emergent accomplishment* (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orlikowski, 2002; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

We now have a better understanding of both knowledge and knowing, and also how they can be combined, not haphazardly, but in a mutually constitutive relationship, so as to form the basis of an alternative approach to consulting practice.

What if We Shifted the Basis of Consulting from Knowledge to Knowing?

We return now to our central question, and sketch an outline of an alternative approach to consulting practice. We do this by considering the implications that result from shifting the basis of consulting practice from where it is today—knowledge, to where it could be—knowing. This is not a trivial shift, because it means to embrace, rather than attempt to control for, the indeterminacy of practice. Practice environments are indeterminate *precisely because* they call for knowledge and experience that are not ‘ready to hand’ (Heidegger, 1962). This does not mean abandoning existing knowledge or methods, but it does mean giving primacy to practice, and exploring how problem solving, participation and knowledge transfer might be handled differently. Practice-based theories provide useful vocabulary, some level of processual guidance, and help make the description of the alternative approach to consulting practice more full and concrete.

Problem Solving

Problem solving is a central activity of consulting practice. Traditionally, it is a matter of ‘applying’ knowledge resources to the problem at hand. But without a default reliance on a body of knowledge, how might the problem solving activity be different? The theory of affordances, based on the work of Gibson (1977) can be a useful guide for problem solving amidst the shifting environments of practice.

Ecological Psychology and the Theory of Affordances How do we perceive a given situation? For Gibson (1977), perception is guided by the opportunities for action that the situation *affords*. A tree in a park, for example, affords us an opportunity for taking shelter from the sun on a hot day. An ‘affordance’ is thus an opportunity for action, that exists for a given agent, in a given situation (Gaver, 1996; Greeno, 1994). An architect, for example, may be commissioned to redesign an office to afford more opportunities for collaboration.

Gibson’s (1977) theory of affordances, a part of his theory of ecological psychology, differs from cognitive, social or behavioral psychology in a number of ways. First, ecological psychology considers the environment not as background or the inert context for perception, but as *constitutive of* perception (Greeno, 1998). Thus, as the environment changes, so too does our perception of the opportunities that are afforded to us. For example, on a rainy day, we see that the same tree in the park now affords us the opportunity to stay dry. Ecological psychology is also interactionist; that is, it seeks to understand perception from the perspective of an observer that is not only moving, but moving in relation to, and in interaction with, the environment (Greeno, 1994). The actor is not simply *in* an environment, they are *an inseparable part of* the environment, in a way that cuts across traditional subject–object dualities (Gaver, 1996).

By introducing more of the vocabulary of ecological psychology, we can describe how it helps to guide problem solving. ‘Affordances’, as explained, are opportunities for action. An ‘ability’ is, as expected, the ability to do something. Importantly, however, abilities are related to the affordances of a given situation. ‘Neither an affordance nor an ability is specifiable in the absence of specifying

the other' (Greeno, 1994: 338). A crowded auditorium, for example, affords an opportunity for someone with the ability to perform well in front of a large audience. Finally, 'attunements' are the adjustments made by the problem solver, in response to 'constraints' that are encountered within a problem space. Pulling all this together, problem solving then becomes the following: taking advantage of positive affordances, by enacting abilities, and making attunements to constraints, while interacting with and progressing through a problem space. When confronted with the indeterminacy of practice, problem solving 'is controlled not by reinstated grammars and previously constructed plans, but adaptively re-coordinated from previous ways of seeing, talking and moving' (Clancey, 1995: 49). The typical project plan, in contrast, sets out prescribed actions that have no connection with the current situation. As a result, we often ask 'How can the plan be tailored for the current situation?' The theory of affordances goes one important, and possibly creative step further, to ask 'What actions are *possible*, given the current situation?'

The use of affordances can also help to mediate the influence of politics on decision making. As shown by Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988), politics in decision making are related to *covert* actions and 'behind-the-scenes coalition formation' (1988: 738). By forcing the question of not just 'What's next?' but rather 'What's possible?', affordance theory helps bring any preconceived or covert rationale to the surface, and makes attempts at premature closure—by clients, consultants or anyone else—more obvious. In addition, the open-ended nature of 'What's possible?' is essentially an invitation to participate, which in turn brings us to another aspect of consulting practice that stands to be affected by a shift of primacy to practice.

Participation

Who participates in the consulting process? In a traditional expert-driven approach, participation is primarily limited to those who are in *possession* of the knowledge considered necessary for the task at hand. Giving primacy to practice, however, and embracing the indeterminacy of practice environments calls for more inclusive participation. It brings more and different perspectives, and additional challenges as well. For example, how can the 'dispersed bits of incomplete and contradictory knowledge' (Hayek, 1945) of multiple individual team members be coordinated and synthesized to successfully accomplish complex tasks? Distributed cognition provides some possible answers.

Distributed Cognition Distributed cognition 'is not some "new" kind of cognition, [but] rather a recognition of the perspective that all of cognition can be fruitfully viewed as occurring in a distributed manner' (Halverson, 2002: 248). Similar to the theory of affordances, distributed cognition looks beyond individuals to focus on 'systems', that include a 'distributed collection of interacting people and artifacts' (Nardi, 1995) such as, for example, an 'airplane cockpit system', or, we propose, a consulting engagement. Because of their distributed nature, we cannot understand how system goals are achieved by understanding individual agents alone. Hutchins (1993), for example, shows how the determination of a ship's bearing is accomplished only through the *collective* action of several crew members.

Distributed cognition involves more than information exchange between individuals. Rather, each subsequent action is contingent upon its predecessor, and new knowledge is thus created through what Weick and Roberts (1993) refer to as 'heedful interrelating'. Successive interactions build on one another and are not reducible to, or traceable back to, any one individual (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Stahl, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Extending the idea of individual expertise as an 'emergent accomplishment', Weick and Roberts (1993) introduce a similar, group-level concept they refer to as 'collective mind', a notion adopted and further developed by Tsoukas (1996):

the collective mind is an *emergent joint accomplishment* rather than an already defined representation of any one individual: the collective mind is constituted as individual contributions become more heedfully interrelated in time. Being an emergent phenomenon, the collective mind is known in its entirety to no one, although portions of it are known differentially to all. (Tsoukas, 1996: 15, emphasis in original)

More recently, based on interviews and observations of management consultants, engineering design consultants and internal consultants, Hargadon and Bechky (2006) offer several examples of how 'the locus of creative problem solving shifts, at times, from the individual to the interactions of a collective' (2006: 484) in moments of 'supraindividual' or 'collective creativity'. They also identify four activities that precipitate moments of collective creativity: 'help seeking', 'help giving', 'reflective reframing' and 'reinforcing' (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). During these activities, implicit framings of problems or issues are made explicit, combined, and made sense of anew, potentially leading to creative or useful insights.

Distributed cognition and related theories (cf. situated cognition, Suchman, 1987; activity theory, Engeström, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978) thus provide rich vocabulary and methods for the study of collective and collaborative knowing. As we will discuss later, this wider, more inclusive participation is also an important vehicle for the establishment of power relations that are more evenly and widely distributed.

Knowledge Transfer

For many of the projects that make use of external consultants, knowledge transfer from consultant to client is a common goal (Werr, 1997, 2002). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the research findings presented in this article so far, the results of these transfer efforts are typically considered to be poor. But if, as we have proposed, knowledge is not so much transferred as it is created during knowing, then effective learning would seem to be dependent not on knowledge transfer, but on participation in the activity of knowing or practice. This, in turn, is the essence of the theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Situated Learning Theory Learning, according to the traditional view, is 'a cognitive process involving a selective transmission of ... codified bodies of knowledge within and from one context ... to the sites of their application' (Contu and Willmott, 2003: 284). In their study of four different types of apprenticeship, however, Lave and Wenger observed that while apprenticeship was effective at producing 'skilled and respected' masters, very little direct instructing of the

apprentices by the master took place (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 30). Based on these observations, Lave and Wenger theorize that learning is not a matter of 'transmitting' or 'transferring' knowledge from expert to apprentice, but rather the creating of knowledge, by the apprentices as they participate in and collaborate with their peer group. From this perspective, learning is not an independent process that happens separate from social practice, but rather 'an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' (1991: 31–34)—in other words, not just 'learning *by* doing' but rather 'learning *is* doing'. Thus, by redirecting current 'knowledge transfer' or 'skill transfer' efforts toward 'learning through participation', the potential for enhanced learning in consulting project environments—for clients, consultants and everyone involved—seems promising. The distinctions between learner/teacher, client/consultant or expert/novice are blurred as each contributes to and learns from what is collectively known and constructed by the community of practice—indeed the roles themselves become situational. As we will return to later, power relations are important here as well, acting as a gatekeeper on the scope of participation, and thus the degree of learning that can take place.

With the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in a community of practice, situated learning theory provides useful vocabulary for the 'practice' of learning. Participation, and thus learning, is 'legitimate' in the sense that one belongs to or has a right to participate, and thus learn, in the community of practice—including so-called 'novice' clients, junior consultants and so on. As a learner, one's participation in the community of practice is 'peripheral', moving toward 'full participation' as one gains experience and the ability to successfully perform. However, there is no specific place designated as the periphery, and 'most emphatically, it [the community] has no single core or center' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 37). It is more like the 'problem space' of ecological psychology. With situated learning theory, the focus of instruction broadens to include attention to and design of the context, such that it affords greater opportunities for participating. In a consulting context, this would include, for example, the creation of a designated space for the project team, facilities for displaying in-progress work, and for gathering input from those beyond the immediate project team.

An Alternative Approach to Consulting Practice

In Table 1, we summarize the preceding discussion and put forward an outline of an alternative approach to consulting practice. In an approach based on knowledge, client and consultant roles are different, distinct, and fixed. In an approach based on knowing, practice is primary; client and consultant roles converge, and are situational. The general focus shifts from possession to performing. The alternative perspective makes explicit provision for both individual and collective knowing, in context, according to locally determined, situational needs. The focus of problem solving shifts from accuracy to actionability, taking advantage of situational affordances, abilities and artifacts. All individuals, by virtue of being 'legitimate' participants, are empowered. Power consists of not only entitative power, such as that *held* by the project manager, because of their position, but also power created through performances that are considered to

Table 1 Alternative approaches to consulting practice

Aspect of Practice	Basis of Practice	
	Knowledge	Knowing
Role of client	Implementer	Co-constructor of problems; joint participant in actions to address them
Role of consultant	Expert; diagnostician	Co-constructor of problems; joint participant in actions to address them
Problem identification method	Diagnosis; values accuracy	Framing; values 'actionability'
Problem-solving approach	Application of pre-defined body of expert knowledge	Applying of knowledge and experience, regardless of source or ownership, as required by the situation; proactively seeks affordances; makes use of mediating artifacts
Participation	Exclusionary; limited to those in possession of expert knowledge	Inclusionary
Learning	Transfer of expert knowledge; unidirectional from expert to novice	Transfer of knowledge, and explicit provision for creation of knowledge through participation; multidirectional
Treatment of knowledge	Individually possessed resource; atemporal; portable	Product of knowing; temporal; situated
Relationship between knowledge and practice	Separate, or no defined relation	Mutually constitutive
Nature of expertise	Possessed, individual capability	Emergent accomplishment, of both individuals and collectives
Power relations	Based on possession; asymmetrical, comparatively undistributed; centered on expert	Based on possession and performance; comparatively distributed; periodically centerless

be successful, in context. Engagement with highly complex problems and other periods of intense collaboration can give rise to episodes of fully distributed or 'centerless' power relations.

On the Viability of Consulting Practice Based on Knowing

In this section, we discuss the viability of the practice approach outlined earlier. As this article is exploratory, we do not see 'viability'—in the sense of, for example, 'likelihood of adoption'—as the primary concern. Yet it is also our objective to produce something of relevance to clients, practitioners and researchers alike. To be useful, research should not only avoid being hypercritical, it should also avoid the provision of alternatives that are simply utopian (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The grounds on which the charge of 'utopian' would be leveled against this article are most certainly those of power and politics. Thus, leaving aside more 'operational' questions such as, for example, how the structure of consulting engagements and consulting firms might change, we will look instead at viability as: the possibility of achieving the distributed power relations upon which this more open-ended, participatory approach to consulting practice depends. Our claim will be that, even amidst existing power relations, the dynamic nature of practice does afford sufficient space for alternative forms of practice to take hold.

As highlighted by a number of studies, power and politics have not been well integrated into the literature on organizational knowledge and knowing (Blackler and McDonald, 2000; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Coopey, 1995; Ferdinand, 2004; Marshall and Rollinson, 2004). Fortunately, three short but relevant articles (Clegg et al., 2004a; Clegg et al., 2004b; Sturdy et al., 2004), in a back-and-forth exchange, focus on the power and politics of management consulting, and in particular, the possibility of achieving alternative forms of consulting practice, given entrenched power relations—much the same question we face in this article.

To briefly summarize the debate from these three articles, Clegg et al. (2004a) propose a new role for the consultant, as one who *disturbs* or *interrupts* organizational practice, for the purpose of opening up new 'departures for action', as opposed to their more traditional role, as one who seeks to *improve* or *transform* organizational practice, toward the goal of enhanced economic performance. In response, Sturdy et al. (2004) argue that the entrenched and managerialist power relations prevent the creating and sustaining of the 'emancipatory space' wherein an alternative form of consulting practice could take hold. Establishing a new form of practice, they argue, requires "interrupting" and "transforming" power relations rather than tinkering with *managerial practice*' (Sturdy et al., 2004: 339, emphasis in original). In other words, the challenge of changing consulting lies with changing power, not with changing practice.

Our response would be that the two—power and practice—are inextricably related (Bourdieu, 1991; Clegg, 1989a; Foucault, 1977). Power is not only what one *has*, but also includes the power that (any) one *constructs*, through practice (Lave, 1993; Morriss, 1987). 'Power is not a thing, but a process constituted within struggles' (Clegg, 1989b: 97). The question then becomes whether or not, within consulting

practice and the power relations thereof, sufficient opportunities exist for *practicing alternatively*, such that an emancipatory space for alternative practice is thereby created. Within the dynamic and unpredictable environments in which consulting work is situated, we argue, it seems infeasible that *all* opportunities for alternative practice can be intentionally closed off, and that some opportunities for participation and power creation remain. In a comparison of Marxist and Weberian views on power, Hardy and Clegg (1996) argue that power in organizational contexts is not simply a case of 'the haves' and 'the have nots'. For Marx, power is held by those with control and ownership of the means of production. For Weber, however, while acknowledging that power did indeed result from such ownership (entitative power) he argued that power nevertheless 'was not reducible exclusively to the dichotomous categories of ownership and non-ownership ... Weber's insights indicated that all organizational members had some creativity, discretion and agency' to create power and a space for themselves, by applying their knowledge of the processes of production (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 623–4). In consulting practice, as the project unfolds, so too do the required abilities, and 'without a total theory of contexts, which is impossible, one can never achieve closure on what the bases of power are. They could be anything under the appropriate circumstances' (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 626).

We now offer two examples from practice, to demonstrate that in project environments, power relations can be sufficiently distributed as to allow for the creation of emancipatory spaces. We also hope to show that consulting practice is often emergent and participatory and not dissimilar to the alternative approach to practice outlined earlier.

The first example is taken from Blackler and McDonald (2000), and their involvement in a two-year action research project studying the innovation processes of a high-tech engineering organization in the defense industry. The authors are full-time academics, acting in a consultative role during the project. Near the mid-point of the project, the problems at hand became more 'complex and diffuse', and the team entered a four-month period of what they refer to as 'institutionalized knotworking' and 'decentered collaboration'. 'Knotworking', a useful term from Engeström (Engeström, Engeström, and Vahaaho, 1999), refers to 'a rapid, distributed and partly improvised collaboration of actors and activity systems that, aside from the knot, are otherwise loosely connected' (Blackler and McDonald, 2000: 840). For example, during complex collaborations, team boundaries and team membership change, as do priorities, technologies and procedures—but stable throughout this is a 'knot of interaction'. The following extract is their description of this period of the project:

As top managers developed an interest in the project and the interests of both groups converged on issues that were of interest to everyone the process of collaboration displayed some of the characteristics of 'knotworking'. No one was in overall control of the collaboration. Those involved each contributed as best they could towards the understanding of an unfolding and complex series of problems. At this time it was the intrinsic interest of the situation, rather than external pressures, obligations or trade-offs, that motivated the collaboration. Access to, and relations between, key participants possessed an urgency and flexibility that was driven by task priorities. (Blackler and McDonald, 2000: 847)

In this passage the authors describe experiences not dissimilar to those we have outlined earlier in the article: Power relations seem distributed; collaboration (and therefore learning) is 'decentered' and occurs across hierarchical levels, from board-level to project team members; and required skills were dictated by the unfolding situation, with each person contributing according to their own abilities. We would argue this constitutes a kind of emancipatory space. This space was temporary, and yet powerful enough to bring about important changes in the team members, and in management. After this period of decentered collaboration they report:

things were now different than before. Management showed a continuing interest in, and respect for, the research project. The researchers' orientation to the company in particular and management problems in general had also changed significantly. Personal relations between all who had been involved remained cordial. Beyond this group the achievements of the project as a collaborative exercise was later to be acknowledged externally, in particular by a number of academics, industrialists and research administrators who had become interested in promoting closer industry/university links. (Blackler and McDonald, 2000: 847)

The close collaboration 'stretched [the authors'] behavior, imaginations, attitudes and skills in such a way that it was simply not possible (for the authors at least) to shake free and walk away from the knot unchanged' (Blackler and McDonald, 2000: 848). We maintain that cases such as this demonstrate the viability of emancipatory spaces and power relations that are, even if temporarily, distributed.

As a final example, we draw from our own experience as consultants, representing a total of 15 years spent with the business strategy units of two different mainstream management consultancies, across a number of industries in the Asia Pacific region and North America. In general, our project experiences were quite similar to those described by Blackler and McDonald (2000): dynamic, complex, and (usually) rewarding. More important for our purposes here, however, were our experiences with creating, sustaining and then occupying what we now have the vocabulary to describe as an 'emancipatory space'.

During our time as consultants, we began to develop, for whatever reason, a knack for framing complex client problems not only creatively, but also in such a way that they were highly actionable for our project teams. 'If you can't solve the problem, change the problem you're solving' was a phrase we used often. Our 'knack', however, did not match well with the firms' official skill classifications, and our projects were not always carried out in strict accordance with approved methodologies, even though the pressure to do so was at times considerable. Nevertheless, we were fortunate enough to have developed a positive reputation with our clients, and also with a network of internal sponsors who understood 'what it was that we were able to do'. In other words, we had successfully carved out an emancipatory space for ourselves and our project teams. This space was never completely stable and was often contested. For us, politics primarily took the form of steering covertly toward desired customers and projects, and avoiding having to publicly turn down requests from others that would have pulled us too far out of our own space. Many other such spaces existed as well, created by different

people and groups, each with its own size, character and strength. There was a marked decrease in the level of politics inside the space, where decisions were more open and pragmatic, largely because of the often significant pressure to make progress toward addressing the clients' business issues.

Returning to the debate summarized earlier, Sturdy et al. (2004) question the availability of opportunities for social actors—in this case consultants—to 'step out and back from their roles and renegotiate them', and argue that Clegg et al. (2004a) 'do not discuss how these spaces are created, maintained and sustained' (2004a: 338). In our experience, it was less a matter of stepping back and negotiating a new role, but simultaneously *creating* that role and the emancipatory space for it, through practice that was considered valuable by clients. The opportunity to carve out one's own niche has traditionally been a distinguishing, if diminishing (Poulsen et al., 2005: 17) characteristic of the somewhat porous partnership structure of consultancies.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that there is a disconnect between the research and the practice of management consulting. While acknowledging the value of critical research, we advocate a renewed focus on consulting practice as a way of bringing clients, practitioners and researchers of consulting closer together. We have borrowed from the practice-based approaches to knowledge in organizations, and the notion of knowing as the basis of an alternative approach to consulting practice. Finally, we have provided some examples in an attempt to show that, largely because of the dynamic nature of practice environments, alternative forms of practice are possible and ongoing, even amidst entrenched relations of power and politics.

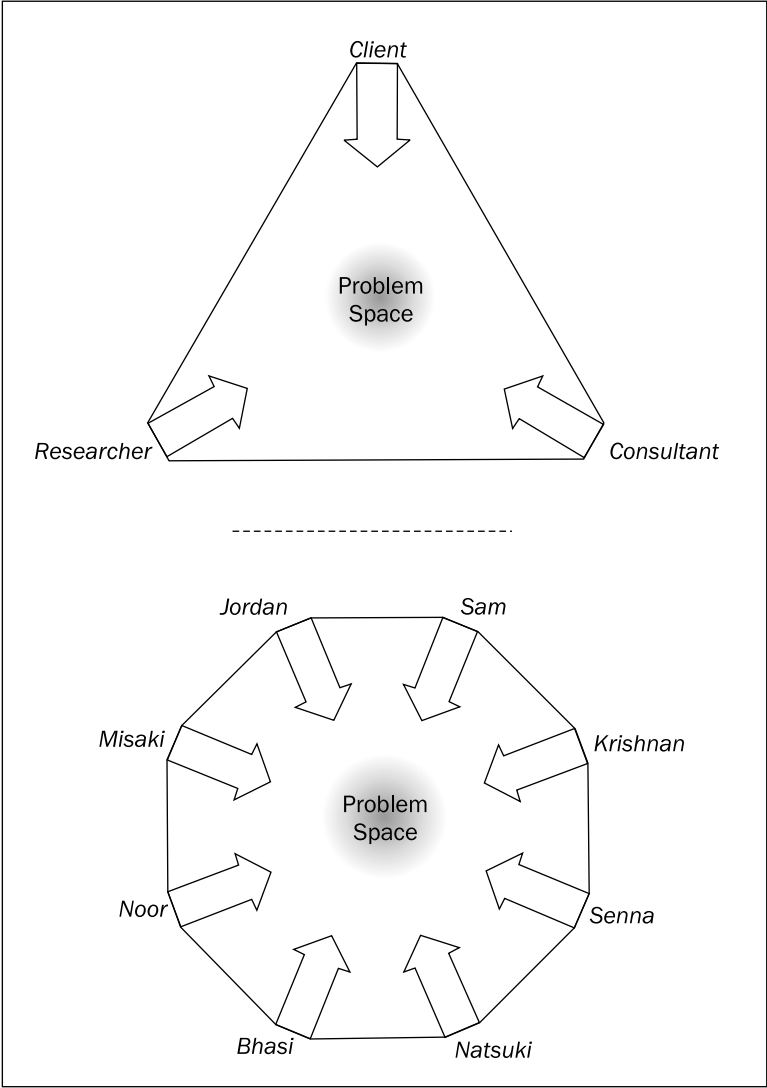
This article, then, could be viewed as a call for a third phase of research on consulting, a call originally made several years ago, by Collins (2001), Salaman (2002), and Heller (2002). Our vision of this new phase of research would be one that avoids hypercritique, as well as the less critical and 'self-congratulatory' manner (Fincham and Clark, 2002: 7) of much of the earlier, OD-influenced research on consulting. In our view a useful research stream would embrace, pragmatically and critically, some level of 'performativity of practice', with project success to be judged by those directly involved. Seeing other articles that also explore alternative forms of consulting (e.g. Clegg et al., 2004a; Czarniawska, 2001; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006), perhaps a new and different phase of consulting research may already be under way.

One note of caution, however, as sounded by Collins (2001, 2004) is that earlier attempts at 'a more constructive engagement' with the consulting industry' have been less than successful. They have, for example, focused on a debunking agenda, that is, 'the substitution of academic truth for consultancy distortion' (Collins, 2004: 558), or a 're-education' agenda (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001), both of which are essentially remedies for a condition the clients do not believe themselves to be suffering from. Other authors (e.g. Mohrman, 2001: 58) argue in favor of active engagement with companies and the practitioners who design and lead organizational change activities, from corporate restructuring all the

way down to intradepartmental process improvement, and this is indeed commendable. What we find missing, however, is the recognition that many of the ‘practitioners’ that are performing and even leading these change activities are *consultants*, to whom on occasion entire functions of the business have already been, essentially if not officially, outsourced. Thus, to speak of ‘practitioners’ is to speak of both clients *and* consultants.

This in turn brings us to one last reason for a renewed focus on practice, and how this attempt at rapprochement between researchers and practitioners (i.e. both clients and consultants) could be different from past attempts: we can put organizational problems ‘in the center’ and explore how the practice of consulting, that is, the practice of addressing organizational problems, ‘really’ works,

Figure 1 Problem-centric consulting practice



and quite regardless of who is performing that practice—researchers, consultants, clients or some combination thereof. This would certainly not be an ‘expert-driven’ practice, and neither would it be ‘client-centric’. It would instead be ‘problem centric’ (Figure 1).

We have the image of an equilateral triangle, with a problem space in the middle, and one of the three players at each of the three points. The more fully we embrace the problem space—each with our own personal and unique abilities, and irrespective of our official roles—the more the triangle becomes a hexagon, an octagon, or even a circle. Perhaps we could all get together for a little knotworking?

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