Is there a divide between change management theory and practice?

Julien Pollack

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

This research examines the different emphases that academics and practitioners place on change management to understand whether there is a divide between change management theory and practice. Scientometric research techniques have been used to compare three corpora: one composed of relevant abstracts from the general management literature on change management; one composed of abstracts from the specialist change management literature; and one composed of transcripts of interviews with practitioners who are working in change management.

The general management literature on change management showed an emphasis on an abstract understanding of the learning organization and knowledge management, while the specialist change management literature placed greater emphasis on culture, value and social identity. In contrast, the practitioners focused at the individuals, team and project level, emphasising the need for change managers to be able to rapidly identify key drivers within a new context, and to be able to effectively use targeted communication to achieve change program objectives. Finding significant differences between these corpora, supports other researchers' assertions that there is a divide between change management theory and practice.

Introduction

Change management, both as a practical discipline and a field of academic research, focuses on understanding and managing the way that organizations change and adapt. It draws upon a diverse literature on communication, strategy and organizational development (Crawford & Nahmais, 2010), and has been influenced by a wide variety of works, such as Kotter (1996), Connor (1993), and Phillips (1983). The field is well served by dedicated academic journals, such as the *Journal of Change Management* and the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, and by industry associations, such as the *Change Management Institute* and the *Association of Change Management Professionals*.

There are many different techniques for managing change in organizations (Mento et al, 2002), with the discipline tending to focus at the project level on issues of user acceptance, uptake and the reduction of resistance, often in IT projects (Kramer & Magee, 1990; Legris et al, 2003) or changes in organizational process (Chesbrough, 2010; Grover et al, 1995), developing or changing organizational culture (Pless & Maak, 2004; Scott et al, 2003), or the impact of leadership on change initiatives (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Pearce, 2004). Readers are referred to Cao and McHugh's (2005) detailed analysis of the evolution of change management as a discipline for further information.

A significant number of researchers have identified that there is a divide between practitioners and academics regarding the nature of change management. Buchanan (1993: 684) noted in 1993 that there was a boundary between practitioners and theoreticians, and that change management is a discipline where "…theory and recipe are typically unrecognizable to each other, and where the contrasting contributors tend to be dismissive of each other's approach" (1993: 685). More recent publications have echoed this. For example, Saka (2003: 481)

noted that there is an "…apparent mismatch between exhortation and action", while Applebaum et al (2012: 764) have called for a reassessment of research into the field, "…in order to translate current research into a format usable by practitioners." This research tests previous researchers' claims of a significant divide between how change management is discussed in the academic literature and how professionals employed as change managers describe their discipline.

Procedures for collecting data

This research examines and compares key concepts in the change management literature with practitioners' perspectives on change management using scientometric research techniques; a group of techniques which have also been called domain mapping or knowledge domain visualisation (Hook & Börner, 2005). Scientometric techniques have also been referred to as part of the broader discipline of information visualisation (Hook, 2007: 442). Scientometric techniques are quantitative, and are typically used to examine scientific and academic publications, and have developed from earlier studies of the visualisation of domains based on citation rankings (Chen et al, 2011: 131). Research using scientometric techniques seeks to develop:

> "…the graphic rendering of bibliometric data designed to provide a global view of a particular domain, the structural details of a domain, the salient characteristics of a domain (its dynamics, most cited authors or papers, bursting concepts, etc.) or all three" (Hook & Börner, 2005: 201).

This research has followed the scientometric workflow design outlines by Börner (2010: 51):

1.   Data Acquisition and pre-processing
2.   Analysis and modelling
3.   Communication, visualisation and layout

Two types of data acquisition have been used in this research. Data representative of the general management literature on change management literature has been obtained from the ISI Web of Science and Scopus databases. Börner (2007: 814) has noted that it is "…hard if not impossible to identify and compare the entities (records and authors) from all contributing domains…" and some publications relevant to change management, particularly those published as books, will not have been included in the dataset. However, the cross-section of these two comprehensive sources has been considered to provide a sufficiently broad cross-section of change management publications.

The search term 'change management' was used in both of these databases to identify references that were potentially relevant to organizational change management. The results were then sorted by the number of times that individual records had been cited, and the top 200 most cited records were downloaded from each database. These records were then individually inspected to identify any duplicate records, any records that were not related to organizational change management, or did not include abstract data, leaving 105 relevant records published between 1979 and 2005. The majority of records that were deleted related to climate change; software and engineering configuration management; and changes in medical patient management. The abstracts for the remaining records formed the corpus representative of the general management literature on change management. A corpus representative of the specialist academic change management literature was developed by downloading the citation details for the 100 most cited articles from each of the *Journal of Change Management* and the *Journal of Organizational Change*. There were 189 records remaining after deleting records that did not include abstract data.

A corpus representative of practitioners' views of change management was composed by interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who were employed in change management to gain an understanding of how practitioners of this discipline perceived it. The interviewer's prompting questions focused on asking the interviewees to describe change management and their experiences managing organizational change. The initial interviewees were selected from the author's personal contacts, based on their expertise and experience in the discipline. A snowball technique was used to source additional interviewees, asking interviewees to recommend potential future interview candidates. This technique was chosen as it facilitated contact with people who were considered to be experts in change management by their peers. Twelve interviews were conducted, ranging from 50 to 83minutes, with an average length of 65 minutes. These interviews will be referred to as the 'practitioner corpus'.

LexiMancer text analysis software was used to identify main themes and concepts within the three corpora. This software uses "…word occurrence and co-occurrence counts to extract major thematic and conceptual content…" (Angus et al, 2013: 263). Leximancer uses work co-occurrence to identify the significance of words based on the context in which they are found in a body of text, and facilitates research at the level of concepts and themes, instead of authors or publications, such as that conducted by Biesenthal and Wilden (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014: 1292) on themes in the literature on project management governance. Other comparable studies include those by Cummings and Daellenbach (2005), who used Leximancer to analyse changes in the strategy and planning literatures, and by Middleton et al (2011), who used the software to develop an understanding of how managers subjectively perceive time, based on their narratives.

Development of research results using LexiMancer involved an initial phase where the software identifies concepts and themes that are likely to be of significance in each corpus. After an initial concept map of each corpus was created, the research involved an iterative process of reviewing the textual context of individual keywords to understand their relevance and significance, followed by the repeated recreation of concept maps. Words that had been identified as representing key concepts, but were shown to play a structural role in a corpus, such as "interviewer" and "interviewee" were deleted from keyword lists. Keywords lists were reviewed with the intention of concatenating potential synonyms. It was found that this was most effectively done manually instead of using the synonym function in the program to preserve important words. For example, it was considered important to preserve the distinction between the terms "organization" and "organizational" on review of the contexts in which the terms were found. In other cases, concepts were joined based on their frequent co-occurrence, such as "change and management", "business and case" and "organizational and change".

Results

Concept maps were created for the three corpora (Figures 1, 2, 3). In each of these maps, the size of the circle denotes the relative significance of the concept. Concepts are placed so that concepts that co-occur more frequently are more likely to be placed close to each other. Concepts have also been grouped to denote clusters of concepts where there were particularly high levels of co-occurrence. The following seven concepts were found to be significant in all three corpora: 'change'; 'management'; 'change and management'; 'process'; 'business'; 'organization'; and 'time'. These are generally uncontentious and serve merely to provide some assurance that the corpora align with an natural understanding of the foci of the field.

Figure 1: Key concepts in the general management literature on change management

Differences between the academic and practitioner perspectives on change management become apparent when examining similarities between the general management (Figure 1) and specialist (Figure 2) maps, and how these compare with the practitioners' map (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, the academic corpora both demonstrate an emphasis on the theoretical, which is absent in the practitioners' corpus. Both academic corpora featured the keywords 'theory' and 'model'. 'Framework' was also identified as a key concept in the general management corpus, while 'empirical' was identified as a key concept in the specialist corpus. These four concepts identifying a focus on abstraction and the theoretical, were not identified as significant in the practitioners' corpora.

It is also interesting to note that while 'organizational' and 'organizational and change' were identified as significant concepts in the academic corpora, they were not identified as significant in the practitioners' corpus. This suggests another broad division between academic and practitioner emphases in change management. In both Figures 1 and 2 'organizational' and 'organizational and change' are relatively high frequency concepts. Their placement near 'change and management' suggests that there are consistently high levels of co-occurrence between the terms, or that from an academic's perspective organizational change and change management are highly connected concepts. By contrast, 'organizational' and 'organizational and change' were not identified as significant concepts in the practitioners' corpus, suggesting that the practitioners did not regularly mention either of these concepts in their interviews. This is not to suggest that the practitioners did not focus on organizational issues in managing change, but rather that during the interviews, when discussing the act of change management they tended to not refer to the issues they faced as broader organizational properties. This suggests linguistic differences, which may hamper communication between academic and practitioner groups.
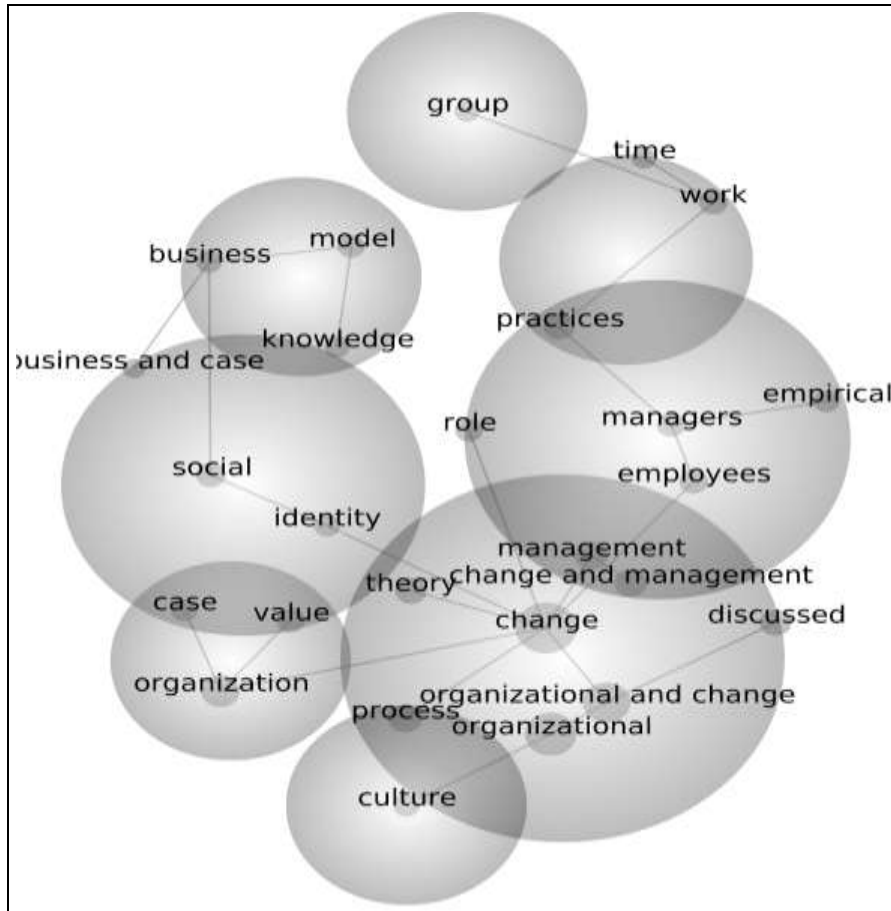
Figure 2: Key concepts in the specialist literature on change management

These results should also be understood in light of evidence from these corpora about how these groups engage with people and organization, and the level of abstraction at which change management is discussed. The general management corpus included the concepts of 'Managers', 'Customers', 'Firm', 'Strategy', 'Performance', 'Industry' and 'Environment' suggesting that this literature tends to discuss change management with regard to its impact on business performance (Cappelli & Neumark, 2001; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996), its role in strategy development and execution (Barr et al, 1992; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992), and the role that change management plays in the way that an organization responds to changes in the industry or environment (Levinthal, 1997). The change management specialist corpus included the concepts of 'Managers' and 'Employees', the former of which tends to be discussed in terms of advice for managers, and the impact of managers' ethics and ideologies. A body of research was also found enquiring into the role that middle managers play in the change process, particularly with regard to their participation in, and resistance to, organizational change (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; Ole, 2010). A distinction was commonly made between managers and employees, with employees often implied as being generic and potentially obstructive recipients of change (Bridwell-Mitchell & Mezias, 2012; Michel et al, 2010).
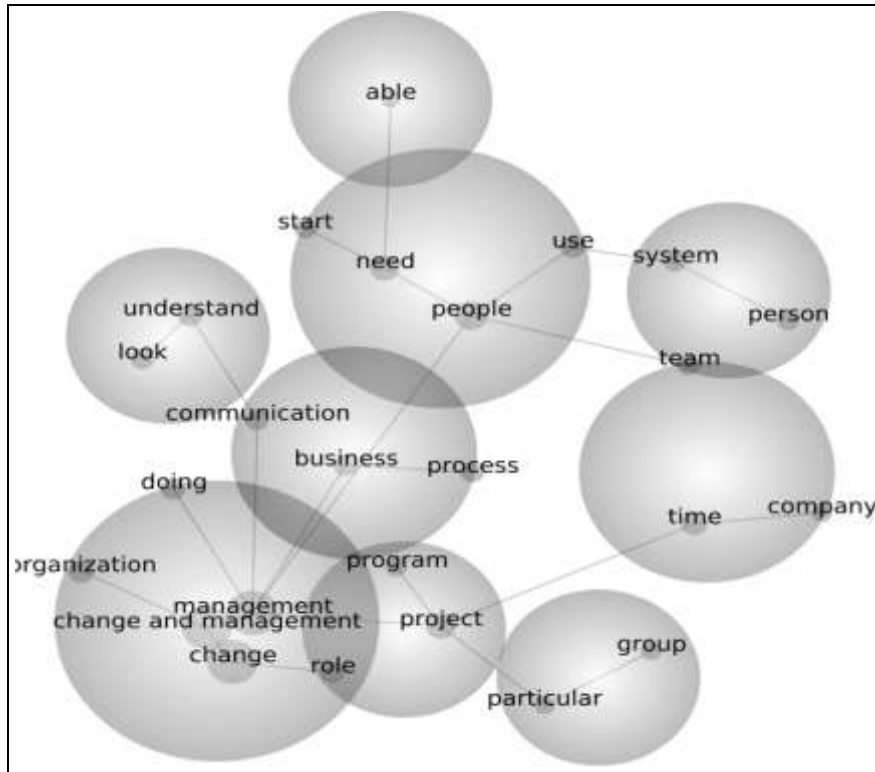
Figure 3: Key concepts from the practitioner interviews

The practitioners' corpus revealed a contracting emphasis on the local and particular, rather than the generic. Concepts such as 'People', 'Person', 'Team', 'Project', 'Group' and 'Program' all suggest that the interviewees' focus was less on broad organizational issues, than on a specific piece of work that they were engaged to deliver, and managing the individuals involved in that process. 'Particular' was also identified as a key concept, used in their discussion of the process of change to emphasise the uniqueness of each change effort, and how one piece of work was distinctly different from others on which they had been involved. 'Company' was also identified as a key concept, however its use in the text was substantially different to how 'Firm' and 'Organization' were used in the academic corpora. In the academic corpora these terms most commonly to referred to organizations in general, but the practitioners tended to instead refer to the particular history of a company, to provide an understanding of the context for an organizational change that they were describing.

Analysis of the concepts read in context revealed other broad differences in focus. The general management literature on change management tended to emphasise 'Information', 'Knowledge', and 'Learning', revealing a focus on the ways that organizations treat information and more abstract concepts such as the relationship between organizational change, knowledge management and organizational learning (Gavin, 1993. Although the specialist change management literature shared a focus on knowledge management, the concepts of 'Culture', 'Value', 'Social' and 'Identity' revealed a considerably different emphasis to that found in the general management literature (Dvir et al, 2004). Review of how these terms were used in the abstracts suggests a much stronger tendency towards sociological research in the *Journal of Change Management* and the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* than found in general management publications on change management (Iveroth, 2011).

The practitioners' corpus revealed different emphases, again. When read in context, concepts such as 'Understand', 'Need', 'Look', 'Able' and 'Doing' all spoke to the emphasis that interviewees placed on the need to come to a rapid understanding of stakeholders' influences and needs with respect to a particular change effort. Enquiry into the context-specific work practices and abilities of the individuals involved in a change program emerged as a strong theme, both in terms of what stakeholders were currently doing, and future capacities and limitations. Interviewees frequently commented on the need to quickly develop an understanding of the particular and unique context in which a change was occurring, before they could understand were influence could most effectively be applied in guiding the change effort. Along with the ability to quickly assess key contextual drivers and points of leverage, 'Communication' was identified as a key concept and core capability for change managers. The interviewees commonly identified the need for change managers to be able to use targeted communication to influence stakeholders and to achieve the objectives of the specific organizational change program on which they were working.

Conclusions

This research has examined the different emphases that academics and practitioners place on change management through examination of three corpora: one composed of relevant abstracts from the general management literature on change management; one composed of abstracts from the specialist change management literature; and one composed of transcripts of interviews with practitioners who are working in change management. Significant differences have been identified between the academic and practitioner corpora, supporting other researchers' assertions that there is a divide between change management theory and practice.

The academic corpora demonstrated an emphasis on theory and generalized models and frameworks which was not apparent in the practitioners' corpus. A difference in language use was also apparent, with the academic corpora making frequent reference to the concept of organizational change, which was predominantly absent in the practitioners' discussion of change management. The general management literature on change management showed an emphasis on an abstract understanding of the learning organization and knowledge management, while the specialist change management literature placed greater emphasis on a sociological understanding of culture, value and social identity. In contrast, the practitioners' corpus emphasised a focus on individuals, team and the specifics of delivering change programs. Other themes emerging from the interviews included the need for change managers to be able to rapidly identify key drivers within a new context, and to be able to effectively use targeted communication to achieve change program objectives. This suggests that although the literature on change management may be useful in providing models and frameworks for conceptualising the activity of change management, it does not appear to be speaking to the concerns of those engaged in the management and delivery of changes in organizations.

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