Engaged scholarship in small firm and entrepreneurship research: Grappling with Van der Ven's diamond model in retrospect to inform future practice

Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of initiating and implementing an engaged scholarship approach by taking a current research project relating to small business development and employing Van de Ven's (2007) diamond model to frame a personal critical reflection of our research process. We explore the scholarly and practical debates implicit in Van de Ven's method of *Engaged Scholarship* before unpacking our research project to illustrate the challenges that scholars pursuing engaged forms of scholarship have no doubt faced, but journal article formats do not usually allow authors to explore, thereby providing lessons for scholars wanting to embark upon such projects. We make the argument that engaged scholarship and interactive research methods are well suited to the entrepreneurship and small firm field, but find that tensions are likely to be faced in respect of personal motivations and identities; gaining and maintaining stakeholder engagement; and balancing and managing relationships within diverse research teams.

Key words

Engaged Scholarship, Van de Ven, small firms, entrepreneurship, rigour-relevance gap, theory-practice divide.

Word Count

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Introduction

For a leading voice in the engaged scholarship movement, Andrew Van de Ven (2007), the central value of engaged forms of scholarship is the possibility of gaining a better understanding of complex social problems by obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders. Van de Ven argues that this approach, 'produces knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone' (2007: ix). Engaged scholarship is seen as a way of bridging the gulf between academic research and policy and practice, thereby rendering academic research relevant to practitioners and wider society. While engaged scholarship has its critics, it also has strong advocates, comprising researchers from many disciplines and countries, including: Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008) in education; Hammel et al (2015) in occupational health; Nilson et al (2014) in criminal justice; ter Bogt and van Helden (2014) in accounting; Voordijk and Adriaanse (2016) in construction management; and Voronov (2008) in critical management studies. Engaged scholarship represents an attempt to cut through the wider and longer-running rigour-relevance debate (Gulati, 2007) by doing away with competing values associated with practice-oriented *versus* theory-advancing research. In doing so, the notion of engaged scholarship questions deep-seated academic beliefs, identities and motivations.

The perceived need to bridge the gulf between theory and practice relates to fundamental questions about the purpose of the university (Delanty, 2001; Goddard, 2009; Habermas, 1987) and what it means to be a university scholar. Boyer's (1996) contribution is instructive here. Boyer talks of the 'scholarship of engagement', emphasising the historical contribution of university research to the common good and bemoaning the lack of commitment to 'service' displayed by today's higher education institutions. Pertaining to the business school context, within which we operate, there are vocal calls for research in professional schools to advance practice (Pettigrew, 2005; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006a).

Sustained contributions to this debate within the management field (Antonacopoulou, 2009; Aram and Salipante, 2003; Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2001; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Wensley, 2007) emphasising the value of knowledge co-produced by academic researchers and practitioner communities have served to further raise the profile of engaged forms of scholarship. This academic momentum runs in parallel with entreaties from government, certainly within the UK, to see universities intensify their collaboration with business (Wilson, 2012) and take an explicit responsibility for facilitating economic growth (Witty, 2013), in addition to increasing financial incentives through the Research Excellence Framework (HEFCE, 2011; HEFCE, 2017) for UK higher education institutions to promote and reward excellent research that has impact on the wider world outside academia.

So, what does this mean for scholars undertaking small firm research? Meyer (2009), adopting a self-styled 'aging curmudgeon' role in a highly entertaining essay, bemoans the attempted 'takeover' of the entrepreneurship discipline in the United States by the strategic management discipline with its normal science-logical positivist paradigm. While predicting that the 'takeover' would turn out to be overstated, Meyer (2009) prophesised that by 2039 this paradigm 'will prevail and entrepreneurship research will continue to be peripheral to actual entrepreneurs and small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners' (2009: 348). Frank and Landström (2016) make the point that the emergence of entrepreneurship as a research field was triggered by the needs of external stakeholders: policy makers and the media identifying entrepreneurship as a solution to a variety of societal challenges, and entrepreneurs seeking solutions to ensure the success of their new ventures. So why would we not, as scholars undertaking small firms' research, challenge the 'normal science' paradigm and seek to engage with our stakeholders to pursue scholarship that makes a difference to policy and practice?

We find that empirical studies acknowledging the explicit pursuit of engaged scholarship in the context of small firm studies are quite rare. Arguably the most significant body of work in this space is that which is concerned principally with ethnic minority owned businesses (Ram et al., 2007; Ram and Trehan, 2010; Ram et al., 2012; Ram et al., 2013; Ram et al., 2017), even if not all these studies are explicitly identified by the authors as 'engaged scholarship'. Located at the research-policy nexus, these studies entail deep and prolonged periods of scholarly engagement with policy stakeholders, as well as small firms, and lay emphasis on both policy *and* theory development, thereby encapsulating some of the key features of engaged scholarship. Their experience conveys the high degree of commitment required to make the researcher-practitioner relationship work; it demands 'sustained and involved' interaction characterised by 'continuous interaction with people with different views and approaches and an active interest in addressing practitioner issues as well as advancing academic knowledge' (Ram et al., 2013: 340).

We argue that more small firm scholars should consider going on that engaged scholarship journey but, if they do, it should be with eyes wide open to the debates regarding engaged scholarship, the practical challenges and what we conclude are inevitable tensions that lie along the route. Therefore, we begin this article by taking Andrew Van de Ven's Diamond Model of engaged scholarship to frame key debates in the literature regarding engaged scholarship: How far should we engage practitioners in formulating research problems? How far can we engage practitioners in theory-building? What methodological approaches are appropriate for engaged scholarship and how can we ensure they are rigorous? How should we communicate, interpret and negotiate our findings with stakeholders? By addressing these questions, we contribute to the debate addressed by this special issue noting that, according to Frank and Landström, 'the rigour–relevance gap has provoked a dynamic discussion in management research, but not in the field of entrepreneurship' (2016: 57). Following this, we provide a brief background to our experiences of initiating and implementing engaged scholarship and explore how our personal critical reflection adds to the debate, particularly by highlighting the potential for practice-based approaches to engaged scholarship. We then move on to a discussion of the tensions that our findings surface, arguing that these tensions must be acknowledged and accepted when conducting engaged scholarship. By undertaking this retrospective personal critical reflection of our project, this article makes a contribution to the underexplored area of the messy dynamics of implementing engaged scholarship in the context of small business research. In so doing, it also responds to Frank and Landström's (2016) call for more empirical evidence that will stimulate awareness of the rigour-relevance tensions in the entrepreneurship field.

The Key Debates in Engaged Scholarship

Originating from the management discipline, Andrew Van de Ven and his co-author, Paul Johnson (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006a; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006b; Van de Ven, 2007) are leading voices in the engaged scholarship debate. They argue that 'scholars can significantly increase the likelihood of advancing knowledge for theory and practice when they interact with practitioners in undertaking four interrelated activities during the research process' (2006a: 810). These four activities are presented as a diamond model (Figure 1) in

Van de Ven's (2007) book, which he positions as a practical guide for those who want to utilise *Engaged Scholarship*.

[Figure 1 here]

However, Van de Ven and Johnson's contributions have come in for criticism from fellow management scholars, most vociferously (and provocatively) by McKelvey (2006) and Kieser and Leiner (2009). McKelvey (2006) acknowledges a knowledge failure problem, but proposes that Van de Ven and Johnson's (2006a) model of engaged scholarship would only work in 'dreamland' because, in reality, it is highly unlikely that pluralistic collectives of researchers and practitioners would be able to utilise engaged scholarship methods, deploying intellectual arbitrage and conflict resolution, over a sustained period of time. Kieser and Leiner's (2009) analysis of Van de Ven and Johnson's (2006a) approach is equally damning - 'researchers and practitioners cannot collaboratively produce research' (2009: 516). Their critique applies Luhmann's system theory and centres on the notion that the logic of management practice and that of management science are simply incommensurable. Scientists and management practitioners inhabit distinct 'systems' and accord to different institutional logics. Hence, Kieser and Leiner find the prospect of close engagement between these parties in a knowledge-generation capacity not only implausible, but fundamentally problematic and unhelpful: 'We are concerned that collaboration with members of 'alien' institutions with different interests, qualifications and thought worlds could detrimentally interfere with the processes of the primary institutions' (Kieser and Leiner, 2009: 518).

To unpack these debates, we use Van de Ven's (2007) diamond model as a useful frame to address themes in the engaged scholarship debate, particularly as they pertain to small firm research, and conclude that, despite theoretical and methodological challenges, engaged scholarship has a significant role to play in contemporary entrepreneurship and SME studies. For clarity in structuring this article, we will address the activities in the sequence laid out in Van de Ven's text.

The problem formulation debate

Van de Ven considers problem formulation as often the first and most important task for engaged scholars. From a practical perspective, Antonacopoulou (2009) argues that research questions must harness the interests and concerns of multiple stakeholders and capitalise on their capabilities, while Van de Ven and Johnson (2006a) argue that obtaining a deep understanding of a question in complex settings is facilitated by obtaining the divergent perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

Wolf and Rosenberg (2012) caution that practitioner involvement in defining research topics and questions in management research is controversial, highlighting the practical caveats of operationally focussed goals and practitioners' inability to formulate research questions sufficiently precisely due to a lack of knowledge of academic concepts. That said, they caution against approaches at the other extreme, where only looking to the academic community 'might lead to only topics for which there is a theory in the scientific community being studied' (2012: 183).

Kieser and Leiner (2009), on the other hand, argue that research questions can *only* arise via criticisms of publications produced within the scientific system. Science is a 'closed system' which practises self-reference and self-reproduction and they argue that only research produced through the scientific system 'counts' as research. For Zahra and Wright (2011), studies that fill research gaps demonstrate the growing maturity of the entrepreneurship field and the move toward 'normal science'. However, they also argue that 'this replication and extension research fails to challenge … taken-for-granted assumptions about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs, making it difficult to engage in path-breaking (consensus-changing) research' (2011:68). Frank and Landström (2016) draw the distinction between 'robust' research 'reflected in the use of larger samples, pre-tested variables and sophisticated statistical analyses' (2016: 62), which creates generalisable, cumulative knowledge leading to stronger theories, and 'novel' research. Like Zahra and Wright (2011), they do not dispute that robust studies are important and a signifier of the institutionalisation and maturity of entrepreneurship research, but they argue these studies do not take the interests of external audiences of entrepreneurship research (e.g. entrepreneurs, policy-makers) into consideration.

Engaged scholars in small firm research can access those divergent perspectives and address the 'problem formulation gap' because many such scholars are engaging with *multiple* small firms and, in many cases, also engaging with policy makers at *multiple* scales, enabling research problems and topics of interest to both scholars and *multiple* practitioners to emerge from that engagement, with less risk that the research agenda is dominated and distorted by the ' particularistic, specific, time-dated interests and proprietary concerns' of individual firms that McKelvey (2008: 825) cautions against. However, the debate around problem formulation goes much deeper than that and calls back into question the purpose of research. For Frank and Landström, '[entrepreneurship] research has become more and more devoted to solving an academic puzzle and has relinquished its quest to address problems at societal, firm and individual levels' (2016: 66). Engaged scholarship is an appropriate method for ensuring research questions with relevance to stakeholders *and* scholars are addressed.

The theory building debate

The next 'base' in the diamond model is theory building. Kieser and Leiner (2009) argue that only the scientific system can generate theories and therefore comment that they find it remarkable that Van de Ven and Johnson (2006a) seem to imply that engaged scholarship collaborations will engage practitioners in theorising. Van de Ven (2007) does argue that the close interplay between theory and reality is a central theme of engaged scholarship. However, he does not call, as Kieser and Leiner (2009) imply, for engaged scholars to jointly theorise with the stakeholders with whom they engage. His assertion is rather that 'the more we engage and the better we know the perspectives and assumptions of key stakeholders, the better we can select and frame conjectures that are plausible to the intended audience of a study' (2007: 140). This concurs with the view of Zahra and Wright (2011), who argue that as 'the researcher becomes engaged in the setting, theoretical explanations become better grounded in the qualities of the context, providing richer and more accurate insights' (2011: 73).

Therefore, the purpose of engaging with stakeholders in the process of theory building is not to co-produce theory with practitioners. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006a) recognise that practice based knowledge and scholarly (theoretical) knowledge are produced within different systems, but argue that these distinctive forms of knowledge can be complementary in understanding reality. In engaged scholarship, scholars acknowledge the value of practitioner knowledge and engage with stakeholders to leverage their knowledge to develop and refine theoretical propositions through dialectical processes and reflection on action over a *prolonged* period of time. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006a) implicitly recommend that engaged scholarship is practised by research teams and therefore the dialectical processes and reflection on action can involve multiple researchers as well as multiple stakeholders. There is, as McKelvey notes, 'the risk of decision by committees, power contests, and settling for the lowest common denominator' (2006: 825), but it can be argued that the benefits of the richer and more accurate insights, which Zahra and Wright (2011) suggest emerge from engaged scholarship, outweigh the risks.

The research design debate

Writing in 2001, Pettigrew asserted 'new opportunities for a contextualist and dynamic social science will offer management researchers a further attractive bridge to user communities' (2001: S66). More recently, calls for the need to adopt pluralistic and engaged research approaches, have extended into, and impacted upon, the entrepreneurship field (Meyer, 2009; Frank and Landström, 2016; van Burg and Romme, 2014; Zahra and Wright, 2011). While van Burg and Romme (2014) call for the field of entrepreneurship to build platforms for communication and collaboration across different paradigms (positivist, narrative and design) as well as across the academic-practice divide, Zahra and Wright (2011) note that an over-reliance on surveys, a lack of longitudinal data, limited use of field studies, and concern with generalisability of findings has led to context being over-looked in entrepreneurship research. They see engaged scholarship in the entrepreneurship field as allowing 'researchers to more carefully select research methods sensitive to context, making it possible to generate valid and insightful findings' (2011: 77).

Van de Ven (2007) identifies four different forms of engaged scholarship (Figure 2): informed basic research; collaborative basic research; design and evaluation research; and action/intervention research. Each form has engagement with stakeholders as a common denominator, but the nature of the engagement with stakeholders differs with each form.

[figure 2]

Much of the body of work that we have acknowledged as the most significant example of engaged scholarship in small firms' research takes an explicit 'action research' approach (Ram et al., 2007; Ram et al., 2013) and these studies, characterised by long periods of engagement by multiple scholars with multiple practitioners, are particularly suited to small firm engaged scholarship. Indeed, Schön (1995), reflecting on Boyer's notion of the scholarship of application, stated that 'If the new scholarship is to mean anything, it must imply a kind of action research with norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality' (1995: 27).

Frank and Landström (2016) identify that practice approaches to entrepreneurship studies are relatively rare and draw attention to 'enactive research' as an interactive method which could 'enable entrepreneurship researchers to create practice-driven knowledge that benefits practitioners who have a partner with theoretical reflection competence and at the same time the researcher connects with someone who has action competence' (2016: 70).

Kieser and Leiner (2009) argue that it is questionable whether methods deployed in engaged scholarship are more than intervention methods 'i.e. methods that support interventions in (in contrast to explanations of) existing organizations' (2009: 526). It can be argued, however, that interventions *can* constitute research. Tushman's contribution in Walsh et al. (2007) is instructive here. He argues that executive education in business schools that takes an action-learning approach is an under-leveraged method of co-producing research. While recognising the potential pitfalls of conducting research with a paying client, the potential distorting effects of faculty remuneration for executive education and the need for appropriate skills, he argues that 'those most productive relationships start with our adding value through researched-based insight (doing) and then moving to our research (knowing)' (2007: 135-136).

It can be argued that these types of practice based research methods are those most likely to reap the full benefits of engaged scholarship in the field of small firm research where a more qualitative and engaged approach to the field is necessarily required if we are to *understand* the complexities of the small firm owner manager's world. That is not to say that findings from survey data are not equally important, but it can be argued that engaged methods are necessary if scholars want to use that deep understanding to enable them to *make a difference* to small firms and the environment in which they operate. This leads us to the final base of the diamond model.

The problem solving debate

In Van de Ven's (2007) diamond model (Figure 1), the imperative of the fourth base, problem solving, is to communicate, interpret and negotiate findings with your intended audience(s). One of the acknowledged issues in engaged forms of scholarship is that practitioners cannot wait for the lengthy procedures of academic research and academic publishing; they demand immediate help to solve a problem (McKelvey, 2006).

Although there are examples of scholarly outputs genuinely co-authored by academics and practitioners (see Down and Hughes, 2009), we do not assume, like Kieser and Leiner (2009) appear to, that Van de Ven proposes that all outputs (academic and otherwise) must be co-authored in engaged scholarship. It is apparent that the outputs must be appropriate for the intended audience and developed by engaging with that audience. That said, we would not argue against Kieser and Leiner's (2009) conclusion that it is an implicit assumption in Van de Ven and Johnson's (2006a) model that knowledge produced though engagement has to be developed further before it can be considered as research. This accords with Greenwood (2002) who asserts that: 'conducting research means developing habits of counterintuitive thinking, questioning definitions and premises, linking findings and process analyses to other cases, and attempting to subject favorite interpretations to harsh collaborative critiques'. (2002: 131-132). Indeed, Van de Ven (2007) cautions that the activities or 'bases' that form the diamond are highly interdependent and that 'much back-tracking and jumping from one base to another is the typical process sequence' (2007: 24).

Challenges of initiating and implementing engaged scholarship: A critical reflection framed by Van de Ven's diamond model

Having examined key debates in the literature relevant to engaged scholarship through the frame of Van de Ven's diamond model, we now move on to using the same frame to analyse our specific research setting, thereby illuminating some of those debates through an empirical lens.

Our personal reflection is based on a research project within the business school of a university in the north of England. The research project was funded as a pilot intervention by the Government-supported UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) under the fifth competition of their UK Futures programme, launched in March 2015 (UKCES 2015a). UKCES wished to address the question: 'How can anchor institutions support the development of small firms in their local economy?' and were looking for innovative and experimental responses to that question. The UK Futures programme took an explicitly co-production approach and from the outset UKCES were looking for project teams with a willingness to openly share their ideas, discuss their challenges, learn from others, and engage in continuous reflection (UKCES 2015b), features which clearly chime with the role of researchers in Van de Ven's model of engaged scholarship.

Following a competitive process, the principal investigator was commissioned to develop and run one of eight funded intervention projects and assembled a small team to design and deliver the intervention and simultaneously address the underpinning research questions that had informed the proposal. The proposed intervention was to recruit larger regional firms, who are not typically considered as 'anchor institutions' in academic literature, to volunteer their experienced managers to support small firm owners to develop leadership and management skills. The team of three who were to design, deliver and research the intervention included: the principal investigator, an economic geographer by background, with a research interest in universities' role in regional development and a track record of engaging with regional businesses in research council funded business engagement projects and more traditional 'third mission' activities (Laredo, 2007); the lead facilitator, a part-time pracademic (Posner, 2009) colleague, with nearly twenty years' experience of understanding and supporting enterprise development at a national and international level, who had co-developed the proposal; and the co-investigator, brought on board after the contract was awarded, with experience of more conventional practice-oriented research, who was less of a champion of direct, interventionist activity than the principal investigator and lead facilitator.

All participants were fully aware that this was, and still is, a research project, governed by our University's research protocols. However, we did not set out to follow a particular engaged scholarship model, whether that be 'interactive social science' (Caswill and Shove, 2000), 'community-engaged scholarship' (Nilson et al., 2014; Hammel et al., 2015) or Van de Ven's (2007) engaged scholarship. It was only as we (the principal investigator and the co-investigator) reflected on how the project was unfolding that we identified Van de Ven's diamond model as a frame to perform a personal critical reflection exercise. We recognised that, in sharing this reflection with other scholars grappling with similar issues, we could make a contribution to the understanding of the scholarly and practical challenges of initiating and implementing engaged scholarship, particularly in the context of small firm research.

The problem formulation challenge

The 'problem', in broad terms, was initially identified by a key stakeholder (the funder, a publicly funded, industry-led organisation that offered guidance on skills and employment issues in the UK), in the form of the competition brief (UKCES 2015a) to which we responded. UKCES were interested in exploring how 'anchor institutions' could do more to support small firm development by enhancing their management and leadership skills and this enabled us to craft a proposal emerging from current academic debates that would combine the research interests of the research team and the policy-oriented interests of the funder: How can anchor institutions be conceptualised, particularly in terms of their contribution to regional development? (Taylor and Luter, 2013; Goddard et al., 2014); How can anchor institutions contribute to the development of management and leadership skills in small firms? The latter question relates to academic debates on how small firms learn (Gibb, 1997; Jones and Macpherson, 2014; Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). To respond to these questions an engaged approach was deemed appropriate.

The funder was undoubtedly a significant stakeholder with whom we needed to engage at the initial problem formulation stage. The principal investigator discussed our proposal with a consultant employed by UKCES prior to submission and, accompanied by a business development colleague and the regional president of the Federation of Small Businesses, presented the proposal to commissioners from UKCES before the contract was awarded. Unusually for practitioners (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014), UKCES were themselves informed by an academic literature review (Smallbone et al., 2015) that they had commissioned regarding the role of anchor institutions in small firm development. Indeed, they were an atypical funder explicitly looking to take a co-creation role and ‘an R&D approach to skills development and application in the workplace’ (UKCES 2015c: 6).

This was an engaged approach to formulating a problem which sought to address the broad concern initially identified by UKCES, while allowing a diverse research team to pursue their scholarly interests. We can reflect that both the atypical nature of the funder and the convergence of policy driven practical concerns and scholarly debates meant that we experienced less of a 'problem formulation gap' (Frank and Landström, 2016: 56) than we might have, and that, like Ram et al. (2013), we were able to use individual knowledge and contacts to broaden our engagement. That said, we remained in the perilous territory of commissioned research, with the challenge of finding ways of working that would both increase the likelihood that the work would be useful to, and used by, commissioners and other stakeholders, while minimising threats to academic freedom and the integrity of the research process (Martin, 2010).

The theory building challenge

Van de Ven argues that the ‘first step in theory building is conceiving the germ of an idea that may become a theory. This idea may be a “half-baked” conjecture in response to an anomaly that violates our understanding of how things are expected to unfold’ (2007: 103). Our anomaly emerged from the principal investigator’s experience of a pilot programme run by a practitioner within our Business School where managers from large firms acted as a ‘guerilla management team’ for the owner-managers of two small firms. The germ of an idea was that managers from large firms who had undertaken formal leadership and management training could be a source of support for owners of small and micro businesses. This conjecture was quite counter-intuitive to themes within the literature which suggest very small firms prefer to rely on friends and family for advice (Johnson et al., 2007; Robson and Bennett, 2000).

In the first instance, UKCES were the most significant and powerful stakeholder with whom we engaged because our conjecture had to be plausible to them to be funded. However, we take theorising to be an ongoing and iterative process in engaged scholarship as emphasised by Zahra and Wright (2011). Mohrman et al. (2001) call for greater use of joint interpretative forums to bring together different types of stakeholders to jointly participate in reflecting on and interpreting the results of research. During the UKCES-funded element of the project, the key stakeholder with whom we were discussing our findings was UKCES. The principal investigator had a fortnightly telephone call with our UKCES project manager and submitted draft quarterly reports for discussion before they were signed off. These discussions challenged us to refine our theoretical understanding of our role as an 'anchor' and the way in which small firms were responding to our intervention. There were also ‘co-production labs’ which twice brought together representatives of all the UKCES projects funded under the fifth competition of the UKPF programme to present emergent findings around the role of anchor institutions in small firm development and to reflect on and interpret the results. Kieser and Leiner (2009), discussing Mohrman et al.s’ (2001) concept of joint interpretative forums from a systems theory perspective, argue that these are ‘contact systems’ where discourses develop that are separated from the discourses in the primary systems (e.g. in our case academia and policy). We would concur with this argument, but do not see this as a negative aspect because those discourses can strengthen theorising.

Now we have been involved in our research setting for eighteen months and the funded element of the project has ceased, we do not have UKCES as a dominant stakeholder whose knowledge and views we might need to prioritise. Therefore, the dangers of commissioned research as highlighted by Martin (2010) no longer exist, but we have also lost their input into our theorising. We reflect that, without UKCES’s capability, capacity and drive to engage in those theoretical discussions, it now falls to the research team to create those ‘contact systems’ in which discourses can develop between the academic and non-academic stakeholders. Therefore, we have had to develop mechanisms whereby we can discuss with our remaining stakeholders the evidence that we are garnering through interacting with the multiple cohorts of firms participating in the programme.

Gulati (2007) notes that 'Theory forces one to examine phenomena from a novel or more integrated standpoint, whereas observable behavior or outcomes allow one to define, refine, or discard theory' (2007: 780). We will consider in the next section how the 'observable behaviour' and outcomes influenced our theory-building processes.

The research design challenge

We reflect that, if we had been guided more directly by Van de Ven's model from the outset, and been clearer within the research team about the quadrant in which we were operating, our pathway through the initial phase of the research project and the writing of this article might have been smoother. Van de Ven and Johnson acknowledge that 'creative conflict management is a central challenge of engaged scholarship research teams' (2006a: 809) and we take that to refer to management of conflict within the research team as well as with external stakeholders.

[Figure 2 here]

In hindsight, and understandably given their backgrounds outlined above, it is clear that the principal investigator and the pracademic/lead facilitator positioned themselves in quadrant four, as interventionist and practice-based researchers, while the co-investigator saw his role as a researcher-evaluator, straddling quadrants one and three. In the next sections, we examine the methodological implications of both approaches, the tensions that arose and how we sought to address them.

An Interventionist and Practice-Based Approach

We see our project as 'interactive' research, involving 'joint knowledge acquisition governed by curiosity and an eagerness to learn' (Svensson et al., 2007b: 241). Our project has similarities with Johannisson's 'enactive' research, whereby the 'field research must apply a methodology that invites the subjects in a knowledge-creating process where their experientially gained insights are fully appreciated' (2011: 137). In Johannisson's (2011) case, the research project aimed to stimulate regional development by bridging art and science with an art exhibition on that theme which lasted nine months. In our case, the knowledge-creation process initiated and enacted a business development programme for small firms which would, in the initial phase, engage six cohorts of between four and six owners of micro-businesses in a series of three workshops focusing on personal and business development. For the second and third workshops, the owner was paired with an experienced manager from a large regional firm. The first iteration of the programme saw 41 small firm owners and 38 managers from 18 large firms recruited to participate in the programme and entailed 30 workshops across six venues in six months (Mallett et al., 2016). Akin to Tushman's account in Walsh et al. 'of deliberately linking research (knowing) and practice (doing)' (2007: 132), the participants gain value through their experiential learning on our programme (doing) and these experiences are used to provide the empirical material that enables us to address our underpinning research questions (knowing).

This leads us to identify that one of Van de Ven's (2007) caveats of engaged scholarship may be especially apposite to researchers in the small firm field. This relates to the complication of negotiating relationships with stakeholders and ascertaining whether the research is 'for' them or 'with' them. While the research was 'for' UKCES, to the extent that they had commissioned us to deliver the project, we also needed stakeholders (small and large firms) to conduct the research 'with'. Svensson et al. (2007b) stress that the preconditions for interactive research must exist or be created in terms of participants' interest, time, resources and support from funders. We drew on the research team's existing contacts and on other university contacts, as well as those of members of our industry-led steering group, to recruit large firms who were willing to volunteer the time of their managers. Even after the large firms were 'recruited', which took longer than anticipated, we needed to recruit and brief individual managers from those firms. There were often personal, as well as organisational, motives for the decision makers within the larger firms to engage in the programme, and the same can be said of individuals within those larger firms who participated voluntarily. Due to UKCES funding, the programme was offered at no financial cost to participants, but to recruit small firm owners we had to craft a programme, and associated marketing message, that would appeal to small firms and develop relationships with intermediaries who would promote the programme to small firms on our behalf. Despite these numerous practical challenges in engaging participants, we have achieved a degree of access and engagement that Van de Ven notes few researchers have been able to develop (2007: 206).

A Researcher-Evaluator Approach

As Hart (2007) states, 'nobody would argue against the fact that engaging in evaluation is methodologically an extremely challenging task' (2007: 296). The use of logic models in evaluation is well documented (Lynch et al., 2009; Wren, 2007) and UKCES had mandated that we use a logic model to identify links between problems, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. However, this logic model was accompanied by a 'testing and shared learning plan' through which we would agree our data collection process, document our learning and share this with UKCES and representatives of the other funded projects. Once the project was commissioned the 'testing and shared learning plan' with its focus on learning was prioritised above the logic model. This approach is fundamentally different from many other funding sources that have typically funded business support programmes in business schools, e.g. European Structural Funds where the emphasis is purely on achievements of outputs as specified in the application. This atypical approach from UKCES enabled the co-investigator to combine UKCES's evaluation requirements with the role of more traditional social science researcher focused on knowledge generation. He could engage programme participants in considering their experience of the programme while also addressing the wider framing research questions concerning the role of anchor institutions in small firm development.

The problem-solving challenge

Differing timescales are regularly cited as problematic for engaged scholarship (McKelvey, 2006; Martin, 2010) and one of our biggest challenges was the short length of the first iteration of the project, originally intended to be twelve months, but shortened to nine-months when UK Government funding cuts heralded the demise of UKCES. Given that the funder was under pressure to deliver in terms of value for money and scrutiny of public expenditure, and at the same time required sufficient 'iterations' from which to learn, the team were pushed by UKCES to be ambitious about the number of cohorts of small firms the project would support within the timescale.

We were not solving an immediate problem for UKCES, nor were we expected to and we were not generating proprietary knowledge to which they would want to retain rights. Again, they were an atypical 'client' as we were implicitly required by them to develop 'applicative' and 'actionable' knowledge which they could disseminate to their own audiences who might in turn use that knowledge to refine their practice. This is more akin to Zundel and Kokkalis's (2010) acceptance that academic work can 'open up new ways of seeing, of creating vantage points and alternative perspectives for practitioners' (2010: 1221), or Kieser and Leiner's (2009) more grudging acknowledgement that 'the (sometimes) productive irritations, provocations, or inspirations' (2009: 529) brought about by collaboration may have some value to both parties. UKCES did disseminate findings from the overall competition (UKCES 2016d), but our ability to continue the conversation with them was curtailed by the UK government's decision to close them down.

One intended audience for our work is fellow scholars and it is clearly important to us that our peers see the findings from this project as significant research that is both rigorous and valid. Interviews are transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber before the data is analysed for patterns and themes relevant to our research questions. We recognise that, in keeping with the notion of 'recursive cycling' (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), we must continue to return to the academic literatures in the light of our ongoing findings to generate further outputs deemed worthy of publication by the wider academic community. We are engaging with another academic colleague in debating our empirical findings and stakeholder discourses and are presenting our work at conferences. We acknowledge Kieser and Leiner's (2009) argument that research outputs are not the direct result of the 'joint interpretative forums' with practitioners and accept their assertion that knowledge generated through engaged scholarship needs further work before it is deemed worthy of publication in peer-reviewed journals. We maintain that this is not a negative, but accept that engaged scholarship is both time-consuming and has to be conducted over an extended period of time.

Tensions within engaged scholarship in small firm research

We reflect that, although we did not set out to follow Van de Ven's diamond model of engaged scholarship, it has been a valuable exercise to use that model and associated debates to analyse our research process and thereby illuminate the challenges of conducting engaged scholarship. We recognise that ours is just one project and one which was initiated with a very atypical client funder, but we have evidenced, from practice, how we grappled with practical and scholarly challenges in all four of the research activities that comprise Van de Ven's model of engaged scholarship. We continue to run the programme beyond the initial funding, now mainly drawing on internal university funding, and therefore the reflection has been useful to us personally, but we believe our case study also provides insights for those conducting or considering engaged scholarship.

Through this critical reflection we have surfaced tensions that we believe should be acknowledged and accepted to deepen our understanding of what it means to conduct engaged scholarship, particularly in a business school context. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) call for us to reflect on the tensions we experience in conducting research with practitioners and 'consider what we need to do to "maintain the appropriate degree of tension" as opposed to trying (unsuccessfully) to resolve the gap' (2014: 1195). We now go on to discuss those tensions.

Stakeholder tensions

We acknowledge that external stakeholders do operate in different systems with different logics, priorities and motivations and that this leads to tensions, but argue that these tensions can be productive, or at the very least managed. We have always had multiple stakeholders, a feature which we believe may characterise many engaged scholarship projects in the small firm field. Scholars wanting to conduct qualitative research will always have to negotiate access to gather empirical data, but the level of engagement required is much higher in engaged scholarship where scholars are seeking to engage their participants in contributing to: problem formulation, theory development, and interpreting and negotiating findings. This requires researchers to have the necessary time and networks to build relationships with external stakeholders, but also the capability to develop those relationships to a level where all parties respect and acknowledge the contribution each brings.

Caswill and Shove (2000b) argue that there 'are no grounds for assuming that theory is irrelevant to non-academics' (2000b: 221) and found that their 'users' were more interested in new ideas and concepts than the empirical research material. Now that UKCES have left the stage we no longer have the tension of working to their timescales, but their exit deprived us of the stakeholder with whom we were most actively engaging in theory development, because they were well-versed in the literature. This leads us to reflect that having challenging stakeholders represents a valuable tension in engaged scholarship because it forces researchers to question their assumptions and that, where that challenge does not exist, engaged scholars have an obligation to engage their stakeholders in ideas and concepts from academic literature.

Due to our choice of an interactive, practice-based method, we had the added, but necessary, tension of balancing the delivery of value to our programme participants with the execution of our research design. In the first iteration of the programme, with associated time pressures imposed by UKCES, the reality was a messy compromise where the principal investigator immersed herself in ‘enacting’ the programme. This was probably an unavoidable and pragmatic course of action in the first iteration of the programme due to commitments to the funder to deliver six cohorts of the programme in an extremely tight time window. This led to tensions that arise from the ‘paradoxes of performing’ (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014) where our multiple stakeholder groups implicitly or explicitly had different aims for what we should be accomplishing. As we will discuss in the next section, the research team became fragmented as different members of the research team had to prioritise different aspects of the project.

Research team tensions

The multi-method data collection process, designed by the research team and agreed with UKCES, included the collection of baseline data for the small firms on the programme, extensive participant and non-participant observation of the workshop activities, and semi-structured interviews with small firm and large regional firm participants. Data collection later extended to include participant generated free-text data (via open response online forms). As noted above, the principal investigator immersed herself in ‘enacting’ the programme with the pracademic member of the research team during the UKCES funded element of the programme. Although it had been intended that all three members of the research team would conduct the semi-structured interviews with the participants, due to the commitments of the other members of the team, it was the co-investigator who conducted the eighteen interviews during the UKCES-funded phase with small firm owners and the managers from large, regional firms. During that phase there was little opportunity to engage in theorising with the co-investigator, who was in turn seeking to balance his programme 'evaluator' role with the role of ensuring overarching scholarly concerns regarding anchor institutions were addressed. On the one hand, this balancing act could be seen to have diluted the co-investigator's scholarly focus. On the other, it may represent a necessary tension within engaged scholarship to the extent that the co-investigator was occupied with both practice and academic concerns.

We reflect that, had the co-investigator not focused on generating knowledge about the role of anchor institutions during the funded element of the project, we would have delivered the programme, but failed to satisfy UKCES's demand for knowledge that was 'applicative' (Frank and Landström, 2016) and 'actionable' (Antonacopoulou, 2009). Yet had the principal investigator and pracademic not immersed themselves in the practical concerns of delivering the programme, the whole project would have failed. It was the fragmentation of the team that enabled the team to deliver the project to the satisfaction of UKCES, but simultaneously gave rise to tensions and stresses for the team members because the balance in the first iteration was towards 'doing' at the expense of 'knowing' (Walsh et al. 2007).

In retrospect, and reflecting on the work of Johanisson (2011) who urges researchers conducting enactive and interactive research to remember that 'space for reflection on the raw, yet personal and genuine, experience must be created, as the course of events is also the outcome of one's own actions' (2011: 146), we recognise that the timescales imposed by UKCES on the initial project were far too short to reap the benefits of our engaged scholarship approach. As a result, we would recommend that engaged scholarship projects allocate sufficient time not only for creating 'joint interpretative forums' with participants (Mohrman et al. 2001), but also for the research team to regularly discuss the project and the next steps in some form of 'research sanctuary' (Spiller et al., 2015). In this way, there will be space to address practicalities and scholarly concerns, thereby ensuring that an appropriate tension is maintained between the 'doing' of the engagement and the 'knowing' of the research (Walsh et al. 2007).

Identity tensions

Empson (2013) writes of the intense identity conflict that an academic can experience as they seek to cross the research-practice divide. The principal investigator reflects that her identity has been shaped by nine years of working for a bank, often with small business customers, prior to entering academia. She has held formal and informal roles within our business school relating to business engagement and through these has developed connections with regional businesses and policy makers. Her motivations for engaging in this project were the same as those that brought her into academia - to contribute to regional development.

On the other hand, the co-investigator experienced a degree of personal conflict in relation to the idea that we might be actively supporting the activities of participating firms in a pseudo-consultant role. The nature of this personal conflict changed during the period of research. Because of repeated interaction with the same people (in this case, small firm owners and managers from larger firms), both authors developed a sense of regard and of personal empathy towards many of them. In the process of the programme, we witnessed the considerable warmth that characterised many of the trusting relationships developing between larger firm managers and small firm owners as they energetically pursued a common endeavour (principally the development of the small business owner). At the same time, small firm participants would often reveal personal, at times highly sensitive, details about their life histories as they articulated their experience of being a small business owner. While elements of this experience were familiar (having conducted in-depth qualitative research over many years), what was different for the co-investigator was that the boundary of his role as a somewhat 'detached researcher' was considerably less marked. At the same time, the principal investigator was forced to reflect that in this project she had never truly achieved that level of detachment, perhaps because in enactive research '[t]he boundary between the observing researcher and the acting subject that in traditional social-science research is heavily defended is […] boldly crossed' (Johannisson, 2011: 146).

The pros and cons of close engagement versus detached distance are played out in Walsh et al.'s (2007) debate regarding engagement with organisations. Kimberly argues in that article that: 'The craft of research heavily depends on the ability of the researcher to maintain a certain degree of cognitive and emotional distance from the phenomena being examined' (2007: 143), arguing that prolonged researcher-management engagement leads to the loss of control of research agendas and an inability or reluctance on the part of the researcher to question the status quo. While we did not experience such difficulties, partially because we were engaging with multiple stakeholders rather than a single organisation, we did, however, face a different tension in that we needed to keep challenging and being open to challenges about the form and value of our own intervention.

Career tensions

Notwithstanding the ongoing and heated rigour versus relevance debate, we maintain that business school scholars, especially those engaging in small firm and entrepreneurship research, should heed the vocal calls for research in professional schools to advance practice and demonstrate relevance and impact. In the UK, the significance of the relevance agenda for institutions is heightened by assessment of the impact of research on the wider world, partially judged by external stakeholders, through the Research Excellence Framework (HEFCE, 2011; HEFCE, 2017). This is a significant development and means that Kieser and Leiner's assumption that 'evidence in the form of successful implementations of the results [of research] in practice is not required' (2009: 522) no longer entirely holds.

Moving on from the institutional level, Learmonth et al. (2012) suggest we need to think through our individual motivations and interests in conducting research and to debate 'the kind of business schools we want to be part of – in terms of the values for which we stand and the interests that we serve' (2012: 42). Van de Ven (2007) acknowledges that his argument for engaged scholarship assumes 'that the primary motivation of engaged scholars for undertaking research is to understand this complex world, rather than to get published or promoted' (2007: 29). Ter Bogt and van Helden (2014) point out that the practice of engaged scholarship often implies uncertainty about the academic value of such engagement, certainly at the outset. This uncertainty may well be viewed by today's business school scholars as too risky in the context of prevailing performance measurement systems which reward publications in highly ranked journals which, in turn, may imply pursuing the type of research Kieser and Leiner (2009) advocate or accepting that conducting rigorous engaged scholarship will necessitate spending substantial time in longitudinal field work.

We reflect that individually we face tensions in conducting this piece of engaged scholarship. We need to continue to operate the programme to achieve the longitudinal time in the field that will produce rigorous research, but we receive no remuneration, financial or workload, to support us. We have had other external funding to cover the costs of running the programme, but that came with a more traditional focus on outputs achieved, rather than the learning that was prioritised by our original funder. We are fortunate that our institution covers the costs of running the programme enabling us to make the choice to continue to engage.

Conclusion

In this article, we have responded to the paucity of empirical studies of engaged scholarship in small firm research by providing an example of such practice-based research. In writing this article as a form of 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen, 1988), we have laid bare the challenges we faced in initiating and implementing our project, as others have in their own research contexts (e.g. Kevill et al., 2015 and Kumsa et al., 2015). This responds to the notion that unearthing the messiness and tensions inherent in engaged scholarship is valuable in deepening our understanding of what it might mean to 'do' engaged scholarship.

Our reflection on our own project leads us to argue that engaged scholarship has great promise in small firm research. We believe that entrepreneurship research should, as Frank and Landström (2016) argue, not only address academic puzzles, but seek to impact upon entrepreneurs and the environment in which they operate, including the policy environment.

Practice-based, interactive research methods, carefully implemented, can offer a way of conducting research sensitive to context, generating valid and insightful findings, as called for by Zahra and Wright (2011).

We dispute McKelvey's (2006) assertion that Van de Ven's implied conditions for engaged scholarship - i.e. a pluralistic collective of researchers and practitioners utilising engaged scholarship methods, deploying intellectual arbitrage and conflict resolution, over a sustained time - will never exist. This is not to deny, however, that engaged scholarship brings with it many challenges: the challenges of achieving engagement which, in small firm research, is likely to be with multiple small firms who are time-poor and for whom preconditions for participation in research may need to be created; that any form of engaged scholarship requires researcher reflexivity, and this becomes more challenging as the research methods become more interactive; and that engaged scholarship requires lengthy periods of intensive collaboration. Our experience so far in this project tells us that a protracted relationship offers up opportunities to build trusted relationships and to expose the members of the respective domains to the possibilities of creating new knowledge of value to both theory and practice.

We conclude that tensions with stakeholders, within research teams and for individual scholars cannot be ignored, have to be managed, and can in fact be productive. As Bartunek and Rynes conclude: 'academics who more fully engage the tensions of research and practice will increase the chances of finding something truly new and interesting' (2014: 1196).

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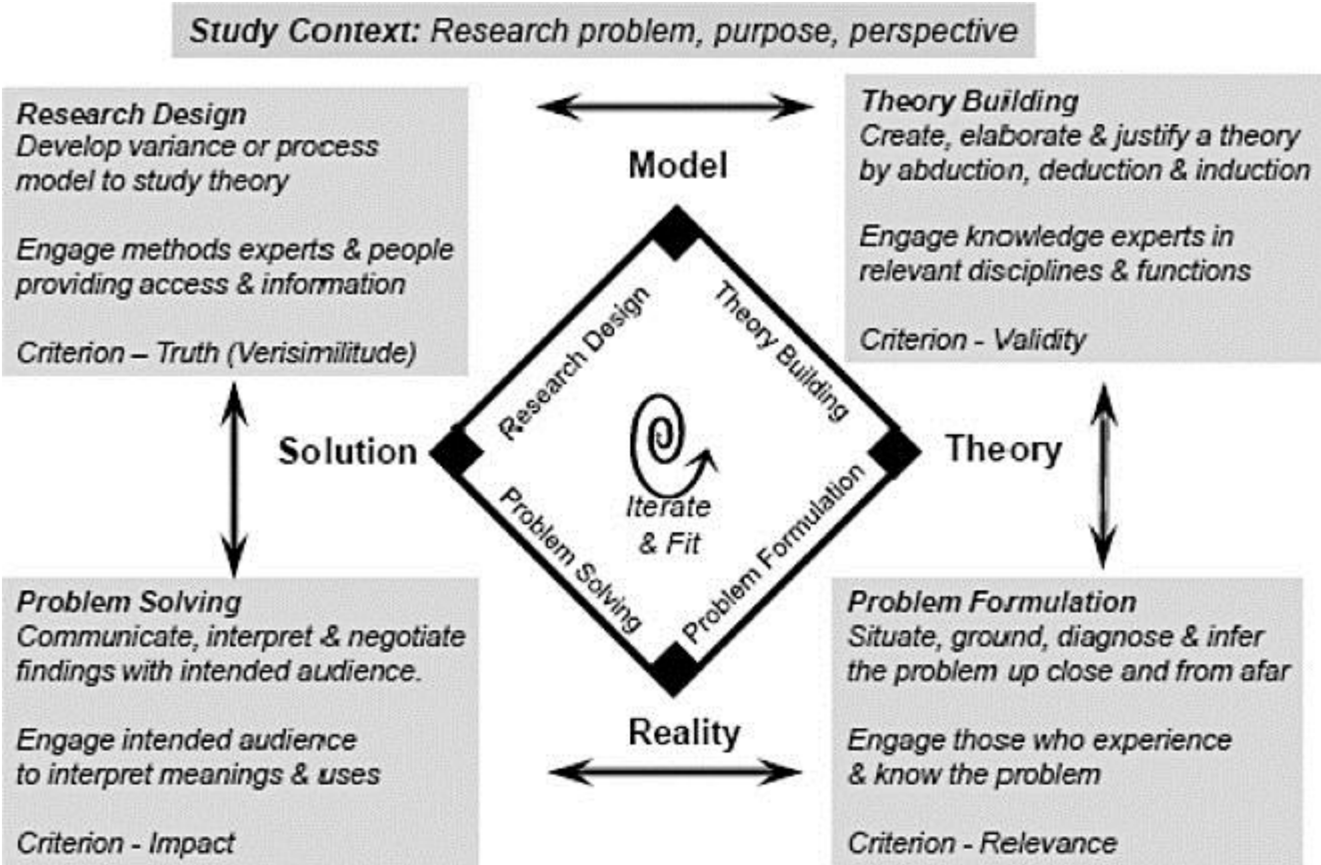

Figure 1: The engaged scholarship diamond model. Source: Van de Ven (2007: 10).

		Research question/purpose	
		To describe/explain	To design/control
Research Perspective	**Extension** detached outside	Basic science with stakeholder advice 1	3 Policy/design science evaluation research for professional practice
	Intension attached inside	2 Co-produce knowledge with collaborators	4 Action/intervention research for a client

Figure 2: Alternative forms of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven 2007)