Revisiting the Research-Policy-Practice Nexus: Boundary Objects and Boundary Brokering

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Background

There has been a long-standing academic discussion of the research-policy-practice nexus in higher education research since the late of 1990's. A group of leading higher education scholars accentuated the research-policy-practice nexus in two classic collections edited by Professor Ulrich Teichler and his colleagues (Teichler and Sadlak, 2000; Schwarz and Teichler, 2000). The scholarly enquiry has been continued and extended in two edited books and one special issue of *European Journal of Higher Education* (Volume 3 Number 3) to celebrate 25 years of EAIR (Begg, 2003) and CHER (Kehm and Musselin, 2013), two prominent European higher education research communities. Evident as they are in the non-exhaustive publications, the enduring scholarly interests in the linkage between HER and its impact on policy and practice have implied that the issue has not been resolved and the gap remains although it may look different.

Moreover, the conceptualization and the theoretical development of the nexus have stagnated after El-Khawas (2000) and Scott (1999). Studies of the nexus in other geographical and cultural contexts like Latin America, Japan, China, Africa, South-East Europe (see Sadlak and Altbach, 1997; Teichler and Sadlak, 2000; Schwarz and Teichler, 2000; Zgaga, 2013) have rarely been used to interrogate the models for theory building.

The models of the research-policy-practice triangulation labelled by Scott (1999) as the 'European', the 'American' and the hybrid were articulated in the beginning of the 21st century when the two continents were leading the world higher education research. In the last decade, the landscape of higher education development has been changing with rise of non-Western peripheries (Teixeria, 2013) and new global phenomenon. New contexts pose challenges but demand a more sophisticated theoretical configuration with renewed explanatory power.

Theoretical Approach

This paper aims at exploring an alternative but systematic way to make sense of the research-policy-practice nexus in the real world context. Enlightened by rich theoretical sources from Wenger (1998; 2000), the triangulation model of the research-policy-practice nexus (El-Khawas, 2000) can be revised and revived to empower conceptual explanation of a new nexus.

Research, policy and practice as three distinctive types of social practice are

embedded in respective communities of practices which are separated by boundaries but connected by boundary objects and boundary brokering in the same domain of higher education. This conceptual articulation focuses on the actors, the institutional basis of the connections and learning mechanism, which were suggested by Tight (2004) and Clegg (2012) for further development of the conceptual application of communities of practice in higher education. It also renders conceptual support to elucidate the ambiguous overlapping, bridging and communication mechanism in El-Khawas's triangulation (2000).

Preliminary Arguments

Guided by Wenger's (1998; 2000) concepts of boundary objects and boundary brokering, this paper reframes the classical research-policy-practice nexus and applies the analytical tactics on accounting for the nexus in Chinese higher education. With available boundary objects and boundary brokering, the Chinese model of the research-policy-practice nexus demonstrates a close linkage of the three communities, and a strong practice orientation on the macro and meso level. The strong institutional basis provides a fertile land for boundary objects and boundary brokering which function together to make the Chinese model of research-policy-practice nexus possible.

   It is an ambition to generate a renewed perspective to study the research-policy-practice nexus from its empirical basis, which focuses on the underlying participation by actors and reification of the linkage.

   Boundary is ambiguous and various in forms. Boundary objects provide 'mediating tools for collaboration and knowledge exchange between communities of practice' (Wong and Edwards, 2009, 133), while boundary brokering by competent brokers connects communities, practices and perspectives in the intangible social process. However, boundary objects are only partially communicative and brokering is a mechanism and process. They can never fully displace deep understanding, communication and collaboration (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011).

   In the China case, the salient learning potential of boundaries has not demonstrated well. The research-policy-practice nexus needs explanation of the linkage as well as suggestion for improvement. Enlightened by Clegg (2012) and Akkerman and Bakker (2011), the tensions between communities can be generative for learning. Therefore the close linkage among the three will be achieved not only from connections by boundary objects and boundary brokering, but also from learning of differences and tensions on the various boundaries dividing the communities of practices in higher education research, policy and practice.

Implications

This research revisits the classical research-policy-practice nexus in higher education. The China case serves a contextual sensitive research to demonstrate the new theoretical lens from boundary objects and boundary brokering.

The boundaries and the disconnections within the research-policy-practice nexus may be transformed as learning zone to facilitate deep understanding and collaboration. [776 words]

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