

1 November 2001

Dear Editor of the APS Observer,

Thanks go to John Darley for pointing out the “limits of our archival stance” and for advocating the value of applied research (*Observer*, October 2001). In my field—the field of corporate learning and performance—the limits of our approaches are breathtakingly clear. While practitioners with minimal backgrounds in our empirical disciplines have brilliant insights in some areas of practice, in other areas they drift sanctimoniously from fad to fad because they lack a basic knowledge of human learning and behavior. Practitioners and researchers speak mutually indecipherable languages, neither able to share wisdom with the other. Although there is plenty of blame to go around, it appears that our institutional reward systems are largely responsible. Researchers are rewarded for good basic research. Practitioners are rewarded for keeping learners and their bosses happy. At the present time, they have no need for each other. Even when mutual benefits are recognized, the costs of learning the languages and customs of the other tribe are just too high. We can hope for these things to change, of course, or we can support an integrative third force.

In one of the worlds we live in, there are retailers and there are manufacturers. The retailers understand the customers and the manufacturers understand the means of production. Sometimes manufacturers and retailers speak the same language—but when they don’t, wholesalers bridge the communication gap between the two. Wholesalers spend time and money living and breathing in the worlds of both manufacturing and retail. They don’t understand the means of production as well as the manufacturers and they don’t understand the customers as well as the retailers, but they provide a critical value-added service that enables raw materials to be transformed into products that customers need and want.

This sort of commerce isn’t perfect. Products are created that customers don’t need, money is often wasted on advertising, the best products aren’t always the most popular. But the alternative is worse: Starving, unclothed, undereducated consumers.

In the corporate learning-and-performance field, the consumers are hungry and cold. I use my own field as an example, but it’s likely that there are many victims of the gap between psychological research and practice. We have three choices: (1) we can leave things as they are, (2) we can work to change the way researchers and practitioners do their work, or (3) we can encourage (or

participate in) the development of research wholesaling, providing integration and communication between the two.

I don't see the reward systems changing, nor do I believe that researchers and practitioners will spontaneously begin to communicate effectively. The only realistic option is the third one. Research wholesalers are needed.

The need may be clear, but the questions are many. Should our institutions take responsibility for becoming the integrative third force between researchers and practitioners? Can we rely on the market? In other words, can anybody make a living at this? Is anybody equipped to fill these roles? How can our graduate schools prepare students for these roles? And finally, and most importantly, any volunteers?

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