

45th Gabriel A. Bernardo Memorial Lecture

The Theory-Practice ~~Gap~~ Link: Changing the Narrative about Theory in Library and Information Science

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between theory and practice has long been a defining concern in library and information science (LIS). It is commonly framed in terms of division: a 'gap,' a 'gulf,' or a 'divide,' separating researchers from practitioners, and educators from students. This framing is deeply embedded in both scholarly discourse and professional conversation, shaping how the field understands itself.

It is particularly meaningful to revisit this issue in the context of the Gabriel Adriano Bernardo Memorial Lecture. Bernardo, often described as the doyen of Philippine librarianship, was known for his "burning passion for the ideals and accomplishments of scholarship" (Vallejo, 2007, p. 3). His career reflects a model of librarianship in which scholarship and practice are not opposing domains but mutually reinforcing pursuits. As both a librarian and a scholar, Bernardo exemplified a professional identity that complicates the very notion of a divide between theory and practice.

The title of this paper enacts that complication visually. By striking through the word "gap" and writing "link" in its place, it performs the very reframing the paper proposes, a deliberate act of revision in the language the field uses to describe itself. Crucially, the crossed-out word remains visible. The gap narrative is not erased so much as acknowledged and consciously displaced. This small typographic gesture captures the paper's central claim: that the relationship between theory and practice is not fixed by some inherent feature of LIS, but is constituted, sustained, and potentially transformed through the words the field chooses to describe itself.

Working from Bernardo's model of scholarship and practice as 'mutually reinforcing pursuits,' this paper asks whether the widely accepted narrative of a theory-practice gap accurately reflects the realities of LIS education and professional work, or whether it is, at least in part, sustained through the ways the field talks about itself. Drawing on two empirical studies focused on information behavior theory, the paper argues that the theory-practice gap is overstated and self-reinforcing. It proposes instead that 'gap' gives way to 'link': theory understood as a unifying concept that highlights connection, interaction, and shared purpose across the field.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP

The idea that theory and practice are divided has been extensively discussed in LIS literature. Crowley (1999, 2005) describes a "gulf" between faculty conceptions of useful research and practitioner perspectives, suggesting that practitioners often perceive scholarly literature as peripheral to their everyday work. Crowley (2005) attributes this divide to "divergent subcultures" across "a structural and contextual chasm" (p. 2).

These perceptions are not limited to the research-practice relationship; they are also reflected in LIS education. Instructors frequently report that students question the value of theory, viewing it as abstract and disconnected from professional practice (VanScoy et al., 2022b). The metaphor of teaching theory as "like putting broccoli in a quiche" (a particularly evocative quotation from one of our participants) captures this perception vividly, suggesting that theory must be

disguised within more appealing, skills-oriented content (VanScoy et al., 2022b, p.9).

Such characterizations contribute to a shared narrative in which theory is positioned as difficult, impractical, and undervalued. Over time, this narrative becomes normalized, shaping expectations among students, educators, and practitioners alike. As Lakoff and Johnson (2008) argue, metaphors are not merely descriptive; they are constitutive. They shape how people understand relationships and act within them. Repeated use of spatial metaphors such as ‘gap’ or ‘gulf’ reinforces the assumption that theory and practice are fundamentally separate. In doing so, it may obscure the ways in which they are already interconnected.

THEORY IN LIS EDUCATION: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES

Empirical evidence from LIS education complicates the dominant narrative of division. A series of studies examining the integration of information behavior theories, models, and concepts (referred to inclusively as “theory” in this paper) into foundational reference courses provides insight into how theory is actually taught and perceived. These studies included a syllabus analysis, instructor interviews, and a survey of instructors across LIS programs in the United States (VanScoy et al., 2022a, 2022b; VanScoy, Julien, et al., 2024).

The syllabus analysis revealed that nearly one-third of courses did not explicitly include information behavior theory. Many courses emphasized practical skills or attempted to balance conceptual and applied content. At first glance, this finding appears to support the notion of a theory-practice divide (VanScoy et al., 2022a). However, instructor perspectives, explored in a subsequent study, present a more complex picture. While some instructors reported that students initially resist theory, many also observed that students come to appreciate its value over time (VanScoy et al., 2022b). A follow-up survey revealed that a substantial proportion of instructors believe students either value theory from the outset or develop an appreciation for it as they progress through their studies (VanScoy, Julien, et al., 2024). Importantly, instructors themselves consistently emphasized the importance of theory. They viewed it as central to graduate-level education, providing a conceptual foundation that enables students to move beyond procedural knowledge. Theory was seen as supporting adaptability, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge across contexts (VanScoy et al., 2022b; VanScoy, Julien, et al., 2024).

At the same time, instructors often reproduced the narrative that students “do not like theory,” even when their own experiences suggested otherwise. This tension between experience and discourse is significant. It suggests that the theory-practice gap may be perpetuated not only by structural factors, but also by shared assumptions that persist despite contradictory evidence. In this sense, the gap may be less a reflection of actual disconnection and more a product of how the field collectively frames the relationship between theory and practice.

THEORY IN PRACTICE: LIBRARIAN PERSPECTIVES

A complementary line of research examined the relevance of information behavior theory in professional practice, focusing on public library reference work. Rather than assessing formal knowledge of theory, the study explored whether librarians recognized theoretical concepts in their own work. Participants were presented with plain-language descriptions of information behavior theories, models, and concepts (again, referred to here as “theories”) and asked to evaluate their relevance and provide examples from their professional experience. The findings demonstrate that all of the theories examined were considered relevant by at least some participants. Librarians were able to identify clear and compelling connections between theoretical constructs and their day-to-day work (VanScoy, Hands, et al., 2024).

In many cases, theory was used implicitly. Librarians described situations that aligned closely with established concepts—such as mediated information seeking or information poverty—without necessarily naming them as theoretical frameworks. At the same time, some participants reported using theoretical concepts explicitly, incorporating terms such as “berrypicking” or “satisficing” into their professional vocabulary (VanScoy, Hands, et al., 2024).

The findings from these studies suggest that theory functions as a conceptual framework that underpins practice, even when it is not consciously invoked. Rather than being absent, theory often operates as a “silent foundation,” shaping how practitioners interpret user needs, make decisions, and design services. This perspective challenges the assumption that practitioners are disengaged from theory. Instead, it points to a more integrated relationship, in which theoretical understanding informs practice in both explicit and implicit ways. Practitioners may not always describe their work in theoretical terms, but their actions often reflect theoretical insights.

FROM DIVIDE TO LINK

Taken together, these findings call into question the prevailing narrative of a theory-practice gap. Instructors value theory and observe that students can learn to appreciate it. Practitioners recognize theoretical concepts in their work and, in some cases, draw on them explicitly. The boundary between theory and practice appears far more permeable than the language of “gap” or “gulf” suggests. This raises the possibility that the divide is not only overstated but also perpetuated through discourse. By consistently framing theory and practice as separate, the field may inadvertently reinforce the very division it seeks to address.

Reframing the relationship as a theory-practice *link* offers a more productive alternative. The concept of a link emphasizes connection, interaction, and mutual reinforcement. It positions theory and practice as interdependent, rather than oppositional, and highlights their shared role in advancing the field. This shift in framing is not merely semantic. It has practical implications for how LIS education is structured, how research is conducted and communicated, and how practitioners engage with scholarly knowledge. It encourages a more integrated approach, in which theory and practice are understood as complementary dimensions of professional and scholarly work.

STRENGTHENING THE THEORY-PRACTICE LINK

If theory and practice are understood as linked rather than divided, then strengthening that link becomes a shared responsibility across the field.

In educational contexts, instructors can play a key role by making theory more accessible and explicitly connecting it to practice. This includes designing assignments that encourage students to apply theoretical concepts to real-world situations, as well as drawing on examples from professional contexts to illustrate abstract ideas. Helping students relate theory to their own experiences can further enhance engagement and understanding. Balance is also important. Students benefit from developing both practical skills and conceptual understanding, but these should not be treated as separate domains. Integrating theory and practice within courses can help students see how each informs the other.

For researchers, strengthening the link involves engaging more directly with practice. Crowley (1999) emphasizes the importance of studying practitioners' tacit knowledge, suggesting that useful theory emerges from

close attention to professional experience. Collaborative approaches to research can help ensure that theoretical developments are grounded in real-world contexts.

Communication is another critical factor. Differences in discourse between researchers and practitioners have been identified as a barrier to integration (Julien & Williamson, 2010; McKechnie et al., 2008). Researchers can contribute to bridging this divide by presenting findings in accessible ways and clearly articulating their relevance to practice.

Practitioners also have an important role to play. Engaging with theory—whether through reading, professional development, or collaboration—can enhance professional decision-making. As Kern (2014) argues, library work involves more than following established procedures; it requires navigating complex and evolving situations. Theory provides frameworks for thinking through these challenges, supporting more informed and adaptable practice.

Ultimately, strengthening the theory-practice link requires a shift away from a “we-they” mentality toward a more integrated understanding of the field. Educators, researchers, and practitioners are all engaged in a shared enterprise, and theory can serve as a common language that connects their work.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of a theory-practice gap has shaped LIS for decades, influencing how the field conceptualizes its structure and priorities. However, the evidence presented here suggests that this narrative is incomplete. Theory is not absent from practice, nor is it uniformly resisted in educational settings. Instead, it is often embedded, sometimes implicitly, in both domains.

Reframing the relationship as a theory-practice link offers a more accurate and constructive perspective. It highlights the connections that already exist and provides a foundation for strengthening them.

This perspective also resonates with the legacy of Gabriel Adriano Bernardo. As a librarian and a scholar, Bernardo's career exemplified the integration of theory and practice. His commitment to scholarship was not separate from his professional work, but central to it. In this sense, he represents a model for the kind of unified field that this paper advocates.

Recognizing theory as a unifying force does not eliminate the challenges associated with integrating research and practice. However, it shifts the focus from

division to connection, from barriers to possibilities. By changing how the field talks about theory, it becomes possible to change how theory functions within it. The title of this paper offers a small but deliberate illustration. Crossing out "gap" and writing "link" in its place does not pretend the older narrative never existed; the strikethrough leaves a trace, acknowledging decades of framing the field cannot simply wish away. But the visible substitution insists that the framing was always a choice, and that another choice is available. The gesture is modest, a single word revised in a title, yet it models in miniature what the paper argues at length: that narratives are not inherited conditions but practices the field can revise. Rather than viewing theory as something that divides LIS, it can be understood as something that brings it together—linking educators, researchers, and practitioners in a shared commitment to advancing knowledge and improving practice.

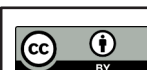
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