RESEARCH DIRECTIONS, KNOWLEDGE MARKETS, AND INSTITUTIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS

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MAY 13, 2005

INFORMATION SYSTEMS WORKING PAPER 1-05
Information Systems Working Paper Series

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A Paper Presented at the
Gordon B. Davis Research Symposium
Minneapolis, May 13-14, 2005

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Abstract

How do the research agendas of the Information Systems field actually get decided? Here we consider the implications of the field’s embeddedness within its larger institutional milieu. We argue that the field’s research directions can be understood as responses to institutionally constituted market forces that arise both within academia and in the larger economy and society. Further, the academic discourse associated with any particular research stream is shaped by the workings of these forces, in ways we have yet to fully understand. We make four proposals for reflexive-type inquiries that might advance this understanding.
Introduction

Looking to the future, this symposium’s call asks, “What phenomena are likely to dominate the intellectual space of the IS (Information Systems) academic discipline?” For that matter (emphasis added), “What body of knowledge should the discipline continue to develop in order to strengthen and maintain its role as a business discipline?”¹

In our view, either accurately forecasting the field’s future or making practicable proposals for its re-direction demands a better understanding of how the field’s research agendas actually get decided. Here we call attention to Frank Land’s broadcast message (March 26, 2004) to ISWorld, in which he suggests that all is not well when it comes to how we, as a collective, set our research directions:

We note that the IS community is very good at scrambling aboard the latest bandwagon, as often engaging in the hype rather than being properly critical. The list of bandwagons which the IS community has adopted is long. Yesterday it was BPR, then Knowledge Management, ERP and perhaps the current fad is mobile computing. Each bandwagon spawns conferences [sic], journals and new texts. Much of the work is revealing and helps to broaden the understanding of students and practitioners. But too much is shallow and engages in rhetoric rather than analysis.

We believe that Land’s critique points most obviously to the need for identifying substantive IT research topics of enduring interest. It also suggests exploring ways to draw deeper and more lasting conclusions when we do, in fact, attend to the technological “current events” of the day. However, in this paper, we develop a third, less obvious implication. We argue here that, in addition to identifying worthwhile and enduring IT topics and research approaches, our community should also regard its own embeddedness within its larger institutional milieu as a subject matter crucial to the field’s “intellectual space” (as the call puts it). Hence, an important part of the “body of knowledge” that the discipline should develop is a reflexive understanding of the formative

¹ A good starting point for engaging these questions has been provided by Davis (2000), in whose honor this symposium has been named and organized.
connections between its research agendas and the larger economic and social context. This, we believe, is a prerequisite not merely for coming up with sound predictions about which way our field is likely to move. It is also a requirement for determining to what degree and in what ways it may actually be possible for IS community members to shape the direction of research in the field.

What we propose here, while in keeping with our field’s long tradition of self-reflection, is largely new. We are not offering commentary on the development of specific IT topics (e.g., Melville at al., 2004), nor a meta-analysis of broader currents (e.g., Banker and Kauffman, 2004). Instead, we call here for systematic investigation of the dynamic relationship between the community’s own discourses and larger discourses in the economy and society.

Accordingly, in this paper we sketch a program of self-reflective inquiry that the field might pursue in this area. The paper turns on two notions, which we develop in turn. First, we argue that our field’s research directions, both historical and current, can be understood as responses to institutionally constituted market forces that arise both within academia and in the larger economy and society. Second, we propose that the academic discourse associated with any particular research stream is shaped by the workings of these forces, in ways we have yet to fully understand. We make four proposals for doing research in this context, to advance such an understanding.

Markets for Research and their Institutional Contexts

Two Markets

It is a commonplace in discussions of research that scholars must “find a market” for the work they produce. This, of course, employs the term market rather broadly and, arguably, metaphorically. A research paper is not sold or transacted in the everyday sense, with its value literally settled by a price mechanism. Nevertheless, there is very much the idea, here, that the

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2 Another interesting area of inquiry, of course, is the effects of institutional forces on practitioners’ discourses (Swanson and Ramiller, 1997; forthcoming). This is beyond the scope of the present essay.
researcher’s production “pays off” for the researcher in more or less direct proportion to the value that others find in it. The researcher, then, may be rewarded with professional recognition and esteem, enhanced standing with colleagues at his/her home university, offers of more attractive jobs at other universities, a better shot at grants and chairs, new research opportunities, and so on. The fact that the rewards for research are rather diffuse, with links between specific research products and specific rewards usually difficult or impossible to pinpoint, still does not diminish the market character of the enterprise.

Consider, too, the market-like competition that exists among research products. There is, for example, clearly a jostling among the competitors in the marketplaces represented by our premier conferences and quality journals, with valuations set by peer-review and editorial-selection processes, and the payoff (in the near term) in the form of the granting of space for the presentation of one’s ideas.

For IS research, there are, broadly speaking, two categories of markets. *External markets*, involving businesses, government, and other interests in the general society, evaluate and utilize research products for their practical applicability. *Internal markets*, constituted of the research subcommunities within the discipline that “consume” research of a particular topical thrust (e.g., mobile computing, knowledge management, TAM, etc.), find value in the contribution upon which further research efforts can build. The interests of these two markets are not the same, especially in the short run, which leads to the situation where sometimes a research product may be highly valued by both markets, sometimes only by one, and sometimes (sadly) by neither. Being valued highly by one market does not necessarily imply being valued highly by the other.
Two Characteristic Problems

Having said this, Land’s remarks point to the fact that the two markets are not wholly independent of one another. In fact, his comments specifically evoke one aspect of the dependence that internal markets have on external markets. This is reflected in the pressure scholars in an applied field are under to be “current” and, hence, relevant. The phenomenon of bandwagons, then, points to the fact that what’s current is a perpetually moving target, which in turn hints at a degree of fickleness and irrationality on the part of external markets. When we academics follow industry down this primrose path, we too – despite our best “scientific intentions” – run the risk of being misled.

Many academics, of course, “produce” primarily for the internal market – at least relative to their research products. In that respect, for the individual researcher, meeting the perceived requirements of external markets is heavily mediated by how the internal market is responding to the external. Thus, for example, a doctoral student may perceive the need to do something involving “agility” or “mobility” in her work, if she hopes to fare well in a tight job market in which faculty on recruiting committees are all abuzz about industry’s current interest in these topics. External markets thus help to set important environmental context for internal markets. Scholars, nevertheless, respond primarily to the latter in their choice of research directions, because it is the latter that directly furnish most of the desired rewards – publication opportunities, recognition and reputation, and jobs, tenure and promotion.

Now, although internal markets are certainly subject to influence from the business community and the larger society, their on-going constitution also depends upon rules, structures, and political processes proper to academia itself. These institutional factors (Callon, 1998; Fligstein, 2001) are such that, notwithstanding the fact that ours is an applied discipline, path-dependent processes may
arise in which certain research streams emerge, evolve, and grow to consume resources in significant disregard for practical application. By resources, we refer to such things as researchers’ attention, project funding, space in top journals, and university appointments. Broadly, this is more of a good thing than a bad thing, as the academic community bears a responsibility to invest its resources for the long-term social good, more than for the immediate industrial payoff. Still, some research streams may persist even though they will eventually be judged by the community to be academic dead-ends not worth pursuing. Deficiency in practical or scholarly value notwithstanding, a research topic can prosper for an extended period of time where a subcommunity becomes established around it that can foster its development and perpetuation through sympathetic reviewing, preferential hiring, and the like. This points to a different kind of dysfunction than the fad-chasing Land remarks on, one that is abetted by a degree of dis-connection between internal and external markets, and the absence of selective pressure arising in the latter.

**Toward an Ecology of Markets**

Both of the problems we have noted here – setting research directions in headlong pursuit of industry fashions, and building insular research programs of questionable larger value – have to do with the nature of the relationships that hold between internal and external markets. We offer Figure 1 as a simple aid in visualizing the possibilities. It depicts the situation as a case of two partially overlapping discourses, one practiced by academics and the other by members of industry. The area of overlap, then, represents where the discourses interpenetrate and affect one another.

We will propose that investigations of research directions in our field proceed from what we will call an ecology of markets perspective. With a particular research stream taken as a point of departure – GDSS, technology acceptance, knowledge management, e-commerce, service-oriented
computing, and so on – we recommend that reflexive inquiry trace the stream’s development as a knowledge market, the constitution of which has been subject to shaping by institutional forces. As noted, in many cases these institutional forces include ones both external to our academic community (business, government, educational systems, and society more generally) and internal to the community (i.e., the rules, structures, and political processes proper to IS academia itself).

These forces engage each other within the area of overlap in Figure 1, where the research stream seeks to be exoteric, communicable to a broader audience, rather than esoteric, a subject of academic discourse only (represented by the region to the left in Figure 1). Using examples to make things a bit more tangible, we would locate among the group of discourses historically falling heavily into this zone of overlap, or ecotone, the academic discourses on CASE, knowledge management, and ERP.\(^3\) In the ecotone, both the interdependencies and the contradictions among external and internal forces will be crucial elements in the kind of inquiry we have in mind. A given topic in this zone, while nominally shared, is nonetheless enacted and interpreted differently.

\(^3\) An ecotone is a transitional zone between two ecological communities. We note that certain styles of research, such as case research (Lee, 1989) and action research (Baskerville and Myers, 2004) are typically committed to being carried out and having their findings communicated in the ecotone defined here.
(Weick, 1995) in the academic and industrial discourses, according to the values, goals, incentives, and schemas that each community brings to the issue.

Figure 1 also identifies a third region, industry discourses on topics that essentially enjoy no scholarly research attention. This is represented by the right-hand area in the figure. As Land’s comments suggest, many topics in the ecotone actually originate in this area and, in effect, migrate into the zone of overlap as academics begin to pay attention to topics that excite the interest of industry. On the other hand, cases where the academy persists in ignoring practitioners’ interest in a topic may help give rise to the familiar complaint that the academy is unresponsive to industry needs and priorities. Even beyond recognized needs and priorities, researchers may be blind to important problems in industry deserving of their attention. To summarize, each of the three regions in Figure 1 may be said to be associated with characteristic research agenda problems.4

Competition among research products, as we remarked earlier, is indicative of the market character of our scholarly enterprise. However, care is needed to avoid falling into the kind of simplistic conceptualization of the market favored in classical economics. Success in research is more than a matter of producing a competitive product to satisfy a pre-existing need. Taking a sociologically more sophisticated view (Callon, 1998; Fligstein, 2001; Granovetter, 1985), we need to recognize that the fate of research products within a particular stream often depends heavily on champions’ on-going efforts to reshape the institutional context (e.g., journals, conferences, IS departments) in a way that will help to create and sustain the market for that research stream. Thus, research communities, like organizations more broadly (Astley, 1985: 235), “do not… fortuitously

4 And so the academy can also suffer from a “damned if we do, damned if we don’t” problem. In addition to the error of omission just noted, we can also be tagged as unresponsive based on claims that we are too preoccupied with the purely academic and “irrelevant” research that we do, in effect, in the left-hand portion of Figure 1. And we can be faulted for the manner in which we formulate, carry out, and report our research in the ecotone. Hence, we can be – and sometimes are – found wanting across the entire “topical space” represented by Figure 1.
fit into predefined sets of niche constraints; rather, they opportunistically enact their own operating domains.”

Such institution-building work (Galaskiewicz, 1991), while directed at the definition and constitution of an internal academic market, may bring into its associated rhetoric arguments about current industry relevance. The larger cultural value which IS academia places on such relevance can unquestionably offer some leverage to a research community seeking to pry open some “environmental space” (Astley, 1985) to occupy. This, simultaneously, is one manner in which an ecotone may begin to be established for the research stream (refer again to Figure 1). Indeed, the stream’s champions may leverage topical fashionability (Wang and Ramiller, 2004) and industry hyperbole (Ramiller, 2001; Swanson, 2000) in the cause of opening up space for the market.

**Two Research Proposals**

When it comes to reflexive inquiries based on an “ecology of markets” perspective, we provisionally propose that our community undertake two different kinds of studies. To have some convenient labels, we will call the first of these types “institutional histories” and the second “interactional ethnographies.”

**Institutional histories.** What we have in mind under the category of institutional histories is the comprehensive historical study of the development and evolution of specific topically- and exoterically-focused research communities. The interest here is in taking both a broad and an extended view of such communities and their work, bringing into the account such phenomena as the progressive development of the substantive issues making up the topic, the spread of interest in it, its appearances and impacts in forums like conferences and journals, and the influences of outside interests (e.g., industry). We are interested to learn how such research communities grow and prosper or, when they fail to do so, why they do not. A study of this kind would look to a variety of
primary sources, including texts generated by the field (journal articles, conference proceedings, listserv archives, etc.), the business and trade press, and retrospective interviews with involved principals from the research community.

For example, in an historical study on Quality Circles (QC) Abrahamson and Fairchild (2001) address the evolution of the QC knowledge market. From various historical sources, the authors find that the QC idea was first introduced from the technical sector to QC adopters, and thence to the consulting industry, to the business-press industry, and, finally, to the academic community. Similarly, the academic community lagged behind other communities as publications on the topic grew and declined. Nevertheless, of the QC gurus identified by the authors, over half had completed a doctoral dissertation, a quarter are listed as members in the Academy of Management Membership Directory, and 22% are listed in the McGraw-Hill Directory of Management Faculty, indicating that the academic community occupied a significant share of the overall QC knowledge market. Inspiration for conducting this kind of study might also come from work in neo-institutionalism (see Powell and DiMaggio (1991) for several examples) and the “new economic sociology” (e.g., see Granovetter and McGuire’s study (1998) of the development of the American electricity industry).

In IS, we believe an interesting study of this type could be done at this point in time around the engagement of our academic community with the topic of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), which became highly fashionable in industry in the 1990s. Figure 2 shows the numbers of academic and non-academic articles on ERP in the ABI/Inform Global database. The academic

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5 Articles that include the term “enterprise resource planning” and its variants in their titles or abstracts were counted. Articles in peer-reviewed publications were counted as academic; others in publications not peer-reviewed were counted as non-academic. The article counts were further adjusted to factor out the variation in the total number of articles indexed by ABI/Inform each year. The same method was employed for all other article counts in this paper.
discourse on ERP remains significantly smaller than the non-academic discourse and continues to
grow even as the non-academic discourse has declined significantly.

Another interesting history might be done on the research community devoted to work on
Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS), which received much of its initial impetus from
externally-funded academic research centers, where the earliest GDSS technology was built and
later transferred to industry and government (Briggs and de Vreede, 1997). Our examination of
GDSS reveals that its discourse in ABI/Inform has been mainly an academic phenomenon (Figure
3). The academic discourse on GDSS took off in 1986 and peaked in 1990, demonstrating a
lifecycle unrelated to that of the tiny non-academic discourse on GDSS. As Figures 2 and 3
suggest, the academic and practitioner discourses on ERP and GDSS have very different histories.
Interactional ethnographies. Where this first type of study is intentionally broad in its historical sweep, we believe that useful inquiry can also be done at a micro-historical level, in great part via ethnographic methods. Here what we are visualizing is research “on the ground” at the interface where academics and industry representatives come together. Of prime interest are phases in the history of a topic, or even specific occasions, when interactions are especially rich and momentous, and the parties involved are in a position potentially to inform and shape one another’s views. The ethnographer will be particularly interested in observation within the physical and virtual forums where academics and practitioners meet, including on-site research projects, joint academic-industry conferences and expositions, and universities’ executive education programs. Asynchronous
communications (broadcast, multi-cast, and dyadic) crossing the boundary of academia and industry will also be of interest, as will be interviews with those involved on both sides of this divide.

Aspects of Research Discourses

Reflection through Language

As Professor Land’s comments suggest, not all of our field’s research endeavors produce the same quality of knowledge outcomes, and many of our field’s “insights” have proven shallow and/or transitory. As we have elaborated the point here, this criticism applies both to practical impact and to theoretical contribution. We propose that getting insight into the value of a research stream can be aided by considering certain aspects of the stream’s discourse, particularly in relationship to discourses in external institutional spheres.

Figure 4 suggests some preliminary dimensions reflecting the relationship of the scholarly discourse on a subject to the associated discourse taking place in industry. Thus, the research discourse may lead or follow industry discourse (Barley et al., 1988). It may be largely mimetic, or indistinguishable, from industry discourse (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), or it may be distinctive and creative. And it may be relatively self-sustainable, with the capacity to outlast the expiration of industry’s attention, or subject to rapid exhaustion as industry’s attention to the topic wanes.6 (We address here only exoteric academic discourse. Esoteric academic discourse is not reflected in Figure 4.)

We note that there are some likely interdependencies among the positions on these dimensions; there may also be some null cells. For example, while it’s conceivable that the academy might follow industry and yet do so in a manner that’s marked by significant creativity and distinctiveness,

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6 The figure, which focuses specifically on the relationship of academic discourse to industry discourse, falls well short of fully characterizing academic discourse. A broader consideration of discourse qualities might include, for example, such aspects as coherence, volume, and audience size (or extent of dissemination).
it may be difficult if not impossible for the academy to lead while being mimetic. Still, in the realm of discourse, we should not underestimate a research sub-community’s ability to penetrate industry and secure resources through effective communication of whatever kind. One might also reason that creativity would likely need to be in effect for the academic discourse to be sustainable beyond the industry’s interest in the topic, hence, the mimetic/sustainable cell could well be empty. Still, given academic momentum and path dependencies already mentioned, might there be surprises here too? At the same time, we note that creativity will not ensure sustainability, as external forces constantly conspire to pull the attention of the academy off of current topics and on to newer ones.

Of course, Figure 4 over-simplifies; viewing each dimension as a continuum is more realistic. Moreover, when one begins to think about actual research communities, the simplicity of the figure becomes even more apparent: In particular, a given community will naturally have those who lead and those who follow, those who innovate and those who imitate, and those whose work extends beyond industry’s attention span and those whose work does not. As a consequence, the resulting academic discourse is a complex melange that may lead in some respects and follow in others; may ape industry discourse in some ways, but still have areas of distinctiveness; and, finally, may survive the expiration of industry discourse, even as it collapses in volume or retreats into niches.
In short, while the figure gives a basis for broad categorization, its main value probably lies in its very crudeness: It highlights the need for more nuanced and detailed attention to the complex patterning in the academic discourse. We should also note here that such patterning is a dynamic process. How a particular research stream leads and/or follows, innovates and/or imitates, and develops the capacity for self-sustaining discourse (or fails in this) will shift over time.

The formulation in Figure 4 raises the question of how a self-reflective inquiry, of the kind we’re advancing, might explore the status and development of a particular academic discourse along the given dimensions. We consider this issue next.

Two More Research Proposals

The first two research strategies we proposed above would use discourses – or, more specifically, their traces in texts of various kinds – as resources for producing “realist” depictions of the development of research communities and their associated research streams or topics. We will now propose that the discourses themselves be made the subjects of study, in two different ways.

Comparative discourse analysis. First of all, we believe that close comparative study should be conducted of the tandem development, over time, of academic and industry discourses around various IT phenomenon. We will label this approach “comparative discourse analysis.” For a given topic that has been of interest to IT researchers (e.g., ERP), comparative discourse analysis would examine in detail how language used in discussing the topic developed and changed in both academic and industry forums. Of particular concern would be the identification of markers that could help unveil leadership and flows of influence in the emergence, evolution, and extinction of

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7 In the ‘post-modern’ spirit, we construe ‘text’ broadly to include not only written texts but also less durable expressions reflecting upon meanings, intentions, and constraints. Thus, in this sense conversations and even actions (Ricouer, 1981) observed in the course of ethnographic study would also constitute texts.
themes within the topic over time. Patterns of these kinds, then, would speak to our interests – expressed in Figure 4 – in the potential interdependencies between academic discourse and industry discourse.

We believe that Barley et al. (1988) offers an exemplar for this kind of study. In an analysis of the evolving “pragmatics” of academic and industry language associated with the topic of organizational culture, Barley and his associates established that the academic discourse converged over time with the industry discourse. In this case at least, science established (reflexively!) that the science followed the lead of industry, eventually conforming to it. The study, then, helped to undermine, or at least to qualify, the widely held yet naïve notion that “science discovers, and industry adopts.”

Extending such a Barley-esque analysis, further study might explore the social and institutional conditions that give rise in one phase to distinctive discursive formulations across academic and industry contexts, but then lead subsequently to their convergence and rhetorical closure (Pinch and Bijker, 1987). Such co-evolution and convergence may also lead to something like a symbiotic institutionalization of the focal concept, as may now be taking place with knowledge management, as shown in Figure 5. At this point, then, the comparative discourse analysis approach begins to merge with the strategy for inquiry we labeled institutional historical inquiry. Over time, we believe, such complementary work across IT-related topics could begin to provide the basis for building process theory concerning how institutional conditions behind research streams lead to various patterns in precedence, creativity, and sustainability in academic IT discourses.

Deconstruction. Comparative discourse analysis calls for sampling texts generated by tandem and interrelated discourses over an extended period of time. In another kind of study, we visualize more narrowly focused inquiries that explore the institutional embeddedness of academic research
through the analysis of individual academic texts. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and deconstruction (Norris, 2002) are among the possible avenues for pursuing this kind of study. Our comments here focus primarily on deconstruction – although, as a practical matter, there are considerable similarities in the way each of these strategies approaches the analysis of text.

Deconstruction analyzes a text for its dependence "on taken-for-granted assumptions that may suppress, distort, marginalize, or exclude certain ways of thinking" (Beath and Orlikowski, 1994: 351). The basic strategy in deconstruction, then, is to show how a document's rhetorical tactics serve to undermine its own core premises (Arrington and Francis, 1989). The overall goal is to cast the text in such a light that it “no longer controls the reader’s response” and accomplishes “a shift in the way the reader responds to the language used” (Kilduff, 1993: 2). As a consequence, “the
reader gains a different understanding of the text in question and is able to draw conclusions that may be strikingly at variance with those typically imposed upon the text” (Kilduff, 1993: 3). Thus, deconstruction opens a text to multiple interpretations (Martin, 1990: 340).

Deconstruction may also probe how the text reflects upon the wider institutional context of its production (Beath and Orlikowski, 1994: 351-352):

While related to linguistic and hermeneutical interpretations…, a deconstructive analysis goes beyond the text itself in revealing how contradictions and distortions present in the text are reflections of conditions in the world… texts largely subsume assumptions, meanings, and expectations present in the contexts in which they are produced and consumed… the conditions of a text’s creation and appropriation shape its form, content, and interpretation.

Accordingly (Kilduff, 1993: 15),

The implications of a deconstructive reading are, therefore, not limited to the language of the text itself, but can be extended to the political and social context in which the text is placed. In this expansive aspect of deconstruction, which addresses a text’s relationship to ideological factors in its larger setting (Beath and Orlikowski, 1994; Fairclough, 1995), lies the potential for exploring how our research texts draw on, and depend upon, wider discourses within the field and in industry. However, the intent of deconstruction is not merely to debunk, as is sometimes supposed (Kilduff, 1993: 29). To the contrary, by liberating us from the enchantment that the rhetorical devices of the text cast over us, we arrive as readers on the threshold of more lucid re-constructions that draw on the suppressed and marginalized elements that deconstruction reveals (Boje, 2001, citing Derrida, 1999).

For inspiration we can consider Beath and Orlikowski’s (1994) analysis of James Martin’s book on information engineering. While their study does not address academic work as such, the care with which it was carried out recommends it as a point of departure for studies of the type we have in mind. In the meantime, studies by management scholars in other areas, such as Arrington
and Francis’ (1989) deconstruction of an article by Michael Jensen, and Kilduff’s (1993) deconstruction of March and Simon’s *Organizations*, can serve as exemplars of the application of this approach to scholarly output.

We point by way of example to the rich possibilities for deconstruction of recent academic texts in the e-commerce arena. We specifically recommend the selection of texts published in prominent scholarly outlets at or around the zenith of the dot com craze that reach conclusions appearing to echo the industry ‘optimism’ of the time. A deconstructive analysis of such a text, then, would explore how the text’s rhetorical machinery and theoretical assumptions led to its enrollment in the larger currents of belief cascading through society at that time. In this manner, deconstruction can point to situations where academic work, despite its aspirations to cool and impartial scientific reasoning, can become captive to larger ideological constructions.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In this essay we have pondered some problematic aspects of the manner in which our field chooses research issues and sets research directions. Of particular interest has been the influence of industrial discourse, often enough faddish and fickle, on our scholarly enterprise. We have also touched upon a contrary issue, the development of insular research streams that may consume resources out of proportion to their larger scholarly and/or practical value. Understanding these phenomena, we have argued here, calls both for an institutional perspective and for serious attention to the role of language in shaping academic and industrial practice and in mediating the interaction between them.

In this regard, we have proposed four types of reflexive inquiry that, we believe, can improve our understanding of the embeddedness of our research enterprise in larger institutional contexts. Specifically, we have called for institutional-historical study; ethnographic research in settings
where academics and industry representatives come together; comparative discourse analysis across paired academic and industrial discourses on shared areas of interest; and deconstruction of our field’s academic texts. These possibilities for reflexively studying the formulation, advancement, and fate of our research streams by no means exhaust the possibilities. Nevertheless, we think they provide a reasonable basis for further discussion.

When brought together, we observe that the proposed approaches vary along two dimensions, as suggested by Figure 7. Institutional histories and interactional ethnographies focus broadly on social action and its interpretation by participants and researchers alike, but divide in scope along macro/micro lines. Comparative discourse analysis and deconstruction focus more narrowly on the traces that social action leaves behind in the durable artifacts produced by discourse. This pair, too, splits between macro and micro levels.

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Figure 7. Suggested research approaches

We suggest that inquiry of these kinds can help to foster a kind of “consciousness-raising” that will better position us to command our own research agendas and evade the conventionalism and mania to which industry is often prone. Beyond reflective awareness, however, we would also argue that the members of our research community should cultivate the perspective that academic discourse is in its own right a form of social practice. As such, it represents an area in which we, the
members of our research community, should find ways to systematically improve our mastery. We are presently exploring how this might be done. Mastering our own discourse holds forth not only the prospect of mastering ourselves in the face of the winds and whims of fads and fashions, but of enhancing our helpfulness to our partners in industry, as they struggle with the realities and illusions of change.

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