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Researchers and Practitioners Learn Together in a Process of Joint Knowledge Creation

by

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Abstract

In 1997 a new university law imposed Swedish universities a third mission. In addition to research and teaching, universities now have to “collaborate with the surrounding society”.

This new law was quite indistinct which raises questions about how, how much and in what way the co-operation between university and society should be performed. What obstacles and possibilities are there for real deep cooperation between such different cultures as the academic sector, the commercial private sector and the political public sector?

In our paper we reflect upon the collaboration between research and practice from two different processes where we have been involved as action researchers. Both these processes were aimed to bridge the gap between the academic world and the industry and public sector. We reflect upon our role as researchers in relation to the role of the practitioners. What were our different incentives and expectations when entering a joint learning process? What did we learn and what different knowledge was there to serve our different needs?

We discuss the two cases by highlighting the research methods, where researchers and practitioners in joint action take part in development processes, and how these processes both contribute theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge to as well academy as working life. But we also discuss the difficulties in handling the role as action researcher and the problems faced when people from different cultures and with different expectations act together.

1. Introduction

Universities and other higher education institutions meet new challenges. The world “gets smaller”, new information technology bring people, countries and continents closer to each other and we face a global economy where dynamic competition demands new and fast knowledge production (Castells 1996). Gibbons, Nowotny and Scott (2001) state that the globalization is touching the nature of the university “at its heart”. Academy in its traditional way, what they call Mode 1, is disciplinary structured by ideas, methods, values and norms which has to be followed in order to fill criteria for what is “scientific“ and “good science”. The need for new flexible knowledge production demands another way of thinking and acting which is characterized by transdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, non hierarchy, social accountability, reflexivity, collaboratively and conceptuality . This new paradigm they call Mode 2.

In Sweden during the last decade there has been a debate about how to make education and research useful for a wider part of society. How can universities contribute to economical growth and a competitive society? How to get the most out of the public investments in the academic system?

This debate and the fact that new universities and higher education institutions have emerged and are wider spread in the country and expected to contribute to regional development and innovation processes, has led to that Swedish universities by legislation got a so called “third task” . A law, established in 1997, now demands from universities and higher education

institutions to collaborate with practitioners in the nearby community in order to support development processes. This third task was added to the traditional two, education and research. Higher education institutions are now requested in a higher degree to integrate research and development, to include practitioners an academic work and to transform research results into benefits for the society.

The law is formally there but as the government does not give any extra grants for this “third task” and there are no sanctions for breaking the law, it has been met by some skepticism from the academics and has been slow to implement. As Mode 1 is still the leading paradigm within the academic society and the basis for getting research funding and an academic career this third task can in some ways be seen as contradictory to this.

The two authors of this paper are however rooted in an action research tradition where collaboration with practitioners has been the natural way of developing new knowledge. We have both our background from the Centre for Working Life Research and Development (CAU), an R&D institute at Halmstad University that was established in 1988 (and dissolved in 2002). The development, research and education at CAU was based on ideas from the Scandinavian action research tradition in working life, which in Sweden was manifested in the national LOM program (1985-90) where the researchers from Halmstad and founders of CAU were active (Eriksson & Hansson 1998, Gustavsen 1992). One of the central parts in the context of CAU was a series of projects to support women in roles as entrepreneurs and managers (Fürst Hörte & Hansson 2006).

Our experience is that research collaboration processes with practitioners are not always easy to handle. Sometimes (often invisible) misunderstandings arise between the two cultures that can be difficult to solve. But in our way of looking at social science and how to understand the world and to get an inclusive and democratic development it is both possible and necessary to find ways to collaborate and to share knowledge and experiences.

We find that both academy and society are winners if this collaboration is organized in a learning process. The benefit for academy is that more relevant research questions can be developed if they are formulated together with practitioners involved. Results from research can also be more valid by the possibility of direct test and implementation in practice. Through cooperation and mutual learning between academics and practitioners we can get (a) more relevant research questions, (b) methods and results with higher validity and reliability and (c) conclusions that more easy can be implemented and tested in practice. In this paper we give two examples of cooperation between researchers and practitioners. We reflect upon our roles as researchers related to different incentives and expectations and on the obstacles and possibilities for cooperation between different organizational cultures.

2. Cases

Our two cases were taking place in the region of Halland at the west coast of Sweden during 2003-05. They were results of long time contacts and relations between the university and practitioners from the region.

Lust H

Lust H was a project about regional health and growth through development and co-operation. Normally people from different organizations seldom meet, especially if they are coming from private and public organizations. Lust H was financed by nine public organizations and

had a budget around € 500 000. Several private companies were cooperative partners. The aim was to organize arenas for exchange of experiences, arrange contacts between private and public, big and small, organizations and support collective learning. It was organized like a huge learning network where people that worked with health questions in different organizations, met to learn and to build new knowledge on how to improve their health work. In 13 arranged meetings, around 50-80 people met each time and all together the project involved more than 400 participants. All the meetings were open to public. Each meeting had a theme connected to health like for example economy, culture and leadership. Different experts were invited to lecture about investigations in the field of the actual theme. The participants then, in relation to these speeches, discussed their experiences in order to find new ways and ideas on how to promote health and to tackle and prevent sickness leave at their workplaces. The meeting participants were then expected to spread and incorporate this knowledge into their own organizations and transform into new actions.

A communication officer, a project leader and an administrator constituted the project managing team, but already from start of the project Mats Holmquist from Halmstad University College (one author of this paper) was connected as an evaluator. My role was to follow the project process, collect data and participate in reflections with the project managing team about how to understand the results and improve the process. I used a formative evaluation method that emphasized on learning and development during the process more than on results and control after the project has ended (Guba & Lincoln 1989) and also involved the project management team in the research process by using interactive research methods including observations, surveys, interviews and reflections.

There were different needs articulated from the project participants that functioned as input to the project management team. The team sorted these needs into themes and organized meetings around them. During and after such a meeting I, as the evaluator, collected data from the participants that added new input to the process. On basis of this information the project management team discussed how to better meet the needs of the participants and decided the next step in the ongoing development process. This learning process could be illustrated in the following way:

**Participants Needs → Team Plan → Meeting → Evaluation → Reflection and
Collective learning → Re-design → New plan → Changed meeting → and so on**

Joint reflection is an important condition in for collective learning (Dixon 1999). In Lust H we met regularly and systematically to talk about different aspects of the process. The content for these meetings was jointly formed by the results from the evaluations together with weekly notes and reflections from the project management team. During these reflections we analyzed what had happened during the meetings, the effects of different actions and why some actions did not gave the results expected and the team created new plans that were tried out in the following Lust H meeting. This process of collective learning resulted in changes and development of the project. To organize these reflections in a systematic way was a strategy for productive learning and continuous improvement (Boud, Cressey & Docherty 2006). This is how the project leader of Lust H experienced the reflections (you = me as evaluator and researcher):

“The reflection meetings were very positive and made us come further in our thoughts. You brought us theoretical knowledge about project work and development processes that we did not have.”

Documentation and diffusion are important outcomes of research processes. Scientific articles and reports are necessary products in the traditional (Mode I) academy. But how to reach the practitioners involved in the research processes? In Lust H this was a matter of discussions between the evaluator and the team that led to alternative ways built on learning and development:

- Instead of a written part-time report we arranged a workshop for politicians, financiers and participants. We showed interesting results from the project process and organized discussions around some relevant questions that had arisen. In this way the workshop participants made an active contribution to the process of evaluation and development of the project.
- Instead of a written and printed final report we re-made the web site into a knowledge and experience bank filled with facts, models, results and reflections that was open to everyone interested in the project.

Another result of the interactive research and cooperation was that I (the evaluator) together with the project leader jointly wrote two conference papers that we together presented at scientific conferences, one in Sweden and the other in Poland. This joint writing was an interesting experience that stimulated the writing process and helped to improve the papers. The practitioner could question unclear parts and add new perspectives. The project leader appreciated this joint knowledge creation although it was more time consuming than she had expected:

“The possibility for us to develop our thoughts and to collaborate with the researcher in a new form of academic writing process was really stimulating. It was exiting, fun, developing and gave positive energy.”

The result from Lust H was that the participants were very satisfied. The network gave them inspiration, ideas, knowledge and contacts. The benefits were great on the individual level but rather small on the organizational level. It was difficult for the participants to transfer what they had learnt from the network meetings into actions in their organizations (Holmquist 2005, 2007).

KrAft

KrAft was a national program initiated by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation as an attempt to enhance cooperation between universities and small and medium sized companies (SME). The acronym krAft (which is Swedish for "power") should be decoded as "K" for competence/knowledge, "R" for reflection, "A" for business development and "T" for growth. The acronym mirrors the belief that business development in SME:s is not primarily about simple knowledge transfer but that knowledge develops in the minds of people when they reflect on their present situation. In all about 700 SME:s and public organizations participated in more than 100 krAft groups all over Sweden with the aim to develop their organization but also to open up links to universities in their region. Totally 19 universities and university colleges have been involved in the program (Stridh & Swärdh 2006, Norbäck et al 2006).

Agneta Hansson (one author of this paper) has during three years as project leader in partnership with another researcher at Halmstad University College and two consultants (project tutors), been running five krAft groups of female leaders from as well small and medium sized companies as the public sector, three groups in 2002-03 and another two in

2004-05. The krAft-project led by Halmstad University College, called KrAftverk Halland, has specially been focusing leadership from a gender perspective.

A krAft group consists of about 10-12 participants, in the KrAftverk Halland case women in leading positions who wanted to develop their leadership. In krAft it was important that the group members themselves were responsible for their learning and for the topics handled. The participants decided about the content in their krAft project and, in co-operation with the leadership team, suggested the topics for the different meetings, where university teachers and researchers were invited as lecturers or consultants.

The role of the researchers and krAft tutors was to facilitate the process and to contribute with the expertise demanded. Each group has met in dialogue based training in all about 12 days during a year. The krAft activities followed a pedagogical model based on dialogue and problem-based learning. The ultimate goal was not to make participants learn a lot of theory but to encourage them to develop and grow their businesses. Leading words were flexibility and customization. The program was based on an action-oriented approach and the process was characterized by mutual exchange between practitioner and researcher. KrAft was built upon the idea that if you can engage managers in working with their own business development they will also improve their managerial, leadership and teamwork skills.

The national krAft-program when we entered it had not succeeded in reaching female participants from enterprises and organizations. When we asked why? The answer was that women hadn't showed their interest and probably was not interested in developing their organizations. By entering the program we wanted to challenge this and assumed that even if the program supposed to be gender neutral there could be some sort of structural gender bias in the original krAft design, which made it difficult for women to enter the program. The results from our recruitment process was that we found inbuilt obstacles that prevented female leaders from entering, the costs for participation (1) and the idea of having two top leaders from each organization (2). We found that women led companies often were very small and couldn't both set time in form of working hours and a sum of 4000 Euros to participate in a krAft group. From the national management of the krAft-program we were allowed in the regional krAftverk Halland project to experiment with some deviation from the ordinary krAft model. The result from this was:

1. that the participants didn't have to pay the fee of 4000 Euros, as this amount could be contributed to the KrAftverk Halland project through the ESF program,
2. that we could abolish the demand for two participants from the same organisation
3. that (in the second part of the project) some women managers from the public sector were allowed to participate

The first part of the KrAftverk Halland project involved 30 female leaders from private SME:s who formed three krAft-groups, which each met regularly each month during 2002-2003. The theme that all the group choused was leadership with a special focus on women's leadership. The managers were interested in developing their competence on how to handle different critical situations and how to be more strategic in their leadership. But the overall interest of the project was the possibility of building a network with other managers in the same situation and with researchers from the university. The project evaluation also showed that the most appreciated benefit for the women participants, personally as well as professionally, was the strong networks that were built through the project.

In the first three krAft groups the question was raised on how leadership, staff problems etc, that is often encountered by managers in leading position, was handled in the public sector, where it is more common with female managers. This gave us the idea to start the second part of krAft with two new groups of 50/50 % participants from private and public sector, in order to change experiences from different cultures. In this second part of krAftverk Halland two groups of totally 20 female leaders representing private and public organizations formed two networks that met monthly during 2004-2005 with leadership as the theme for their meetings.

In the krAft project the idea was to invite researchers from the university as specialists/experts on different aspects and subjects that the krAft groups wanted to enter deeper into. In krAftverk Halland we invited university professors to talk about and to train the participants in fields as for example rhetoric, how to give a talk and be listened to, working environment, psychological aspects on work and strategic management. The outcome and results of the krAftverk Halland project were:

- results that showed how national programs meant to support industry and regional growth may not reach women as a target group if the gender focus is not present from the beginning,
- results in form of how gender awareness can be generated through a democratic dialogue in a setting of confidence and mutual trust between actors,
- pedagogical results showing how difficult it can be for academic professors/researchers to step outside the university context and in a communicative mutual learning process with (women) managers from enterprises and public organizations,
- results about the networking process and how to make arenas for mutual learning,
- results for the participants in form of methods and examples on how to improve their leadership,
- results in form of practical interventions for the attending organizations as a result of organization specific projects targeted each organization.

3. Reflections

Our interactive research process can be described in the following way:

- 1 We brought our pre-understanding and our research questions into the process.
- 2 Together with practitioners we found important problems and new questions.
- 3 From the different actions performed we, together with the practitioners, collected data related to these questions.
- 4 Together with the practitioners we interpreted the data and reflected on them and on the process.
- 5 We finally related our reflections and learning to a more abstract level and tried to transform it into academic texts.
- 6 The practitioners transformed their learning into practical interventions.

A collective learning process

Collective learning takes place when different social actors meet and exchange experience and views. In the interaction there is a possibility for mutual learning that gives a result that add more than the parts together (Dixon 1999). In the collaboration processes where we took part, Lust H and krAft, we saw how the interaction among the actors involved created a situation that stimulated collective learning. The exchange of different experiences and perspectives gave opportunities to new thoughts and innovative ideas. A process of joint knowledge creation and innovative development can be supported by examining alternative

views of activity (Brown & Duguid 1991). The interactive relations unite the partners and open up possibilities that we don't have in isolation. Such a context of commitment and loose connected systems has a positive effect on learning as it stimulates dialog and reflection (Johannisson 1999). Our processes of cooperative learning involved different actors that jointly exchanged, combined and developed new knowledge. It was a kind of learning expedition (Södergren 2005). This presupposed a learning relation to collaboration and a capability to jointly learn from others. The participating actors got an awareness of learning as an integrated and continued part of the collaboration process.

The role as interactive researcher

Research that want to contribute to development of society has to be organized as a joint process where researchers and practitioners together interactively form new knowledge (Brulin 2000). The epistemological basis for such a process is described by van Beinum (1998) as the fundament of action research; "...in action research one recognizes and respects the other, the empirical object as subject; hence the relationship between researcher and 'researched' (the other) is seen as an inter-subjective, interactive and thus as a linguistic relationship, characterized by joint action, joint involvement and shared responsibility. One is jointly involved in discovering as well as in creation." van Beinum in his texts talk about shared roles and shared action between researcher and practitioner but he does not emphasize the complexity of the role of the researcher and the paradox different demands on researcher and practitioner from their different cultures.

Looking at research from a more traditional academic (Mode I) aspect, with a dividing line between researcher and the empirical object, there is a difficulty to combine participation and engagement with independence and critical thinking. Maxwell (1996) considers it a risk that you influence your own research data that can raise ethical problems and Ohlson (2002) talks about the researcher as a 'critical reflector' who keeps a distinction between knowledge building and development work.

The way we tried to handle our research role was to vary between being close and distanced, between details and the overall picture, between action and reflection. We so to speak moved both physically and mentally between different rooms of learning. We met the practitioners on an arena that can be seen as the "third room" where relations between theory and practice were handled and new knowledge was created. As researchers and practitioners coming from two different traditions we brought our experiences, questions and theories with us into this "third room" where we interacted in a joint learning process. Cooperating on equal conditions means that the attitude between all the involved actors has to be humble and free of prestige. As the project leader in Lust H expressed it:

"Cooperation demands that the researcher can talk in a way that I can understand and conduct things I do not know in a way that I can follow. You can be a very good researcher in the value system of the university but lack the capability to conduct it in a good way to the project. Then cooperation will not function."

In the krAftverk Halland project we often realized that the "experts" we invited from the university to dialogues about different themes of interest for the women often were incapable to meet the group on their conditions. Either they formed their message as if they delivered a lecture to young (male) students or they covered their message in complex tables and statistics. It was quite clear that many academic teachers/researchers were inexperienced and

felt very uncomfortable in entering dialogues with practitioners from institutions and organizations outside the academic world.

Different Cultures

The university and the regional development processes are representing different cultures that now are expected to meet in a cooperative practice. We traditionally play on different half of the ground with different driving forces and expectations on us that make joint cooperation a difficult task. The project leader in Lust H interpreted her earlier experience of collaboration with the university in the following way:

“I experience that researchers from the university don’t understand the conditions and rules that are relevant for the organizations they cooperate with. They see us as a research objects on the basis of their one rules.” “The University seems to consist of a number of individualists, not members of an organization. Furthermore these individualists have their own agendas and their own research, that sometimes put strange rules into the game.”

This quotation illustrates that universities differ from other organizations that may cause misunderstandings in collaboration processes. The internal organizational structure and culture of universities are based on loyalty towards the academic staff and based on a high level of individual freedom. As individual researcher you are supposed to be independent and critical and cannot be commended in the same way as within other organizations. We cannot as individual researchers be forced to “collaborate with the surrounding society” and to fulfill the “third mission” even though it is a law. As long as the academic credit system rather rewards the amount of scientific publications within our special academic fields (Mode I) than capability to boundless cooperation in social development processes and good collaboration results (Mode II), the third mission will never reach the same attention and status among academic researchers. The Mode I paradigm is the fundament for the academic system and will always exist. It cannot and shall not be abolished. The big challenge for universities in Sweden as well as globally is however to find ways to combine Mode I and Mode II. We need tools and incentives to inspire researchers to take a step outside the academic sphere and to convince them (as well as practitioners) that cooperating and sharing experiences will lead to new learning of mutual benefit for both research and practice.

4. Conclusions

Co-operation and joint knowledge creation between researcher and practitioners have several advantages and give threefold result (Hansson 2003). From our cases, Lust H and krAft, where we as interactive action researchers intervening in the processes we got results that both contributed theoretical knowledge to academic society and practical knowledge to working life. We can notice three types of result as the outcome of our action research processes:

- 1) Results that contribute to production of theories and to accumulated academic knowledge, for example theories on gender and the bias on development processes when a gender perspective is missing. (Theoretical results)
- 2) Development of theoretical knowledge and practical competence related to the organisations involved as an effect of the dialogue-based interaction between researcher and practitioner, for example tools and methods for starting and running successful development processes. (Practical knowledge development)

- 3) Concrete, practical results from the development processes in form of interventions addressed to the organisations and actors involved, for example new routines, new websites, etc. (Practical intervention)

Co-operation is about mutual learning and knowledge building. Both parts in co-operation need to be humble, listening, and free of prestige and at the same time focus on the complexity of the process. To enter the research process as an interactive researcher demands ability to balance. On the one hand you need to have a genuine interest for collaboration and an ability to be accepted and respected from others. On the other hand you will still by the practitioners be considered as a researcher and expected to have all the answers. If you act too strongly you will risk to be ascribed an expert role and generate less collective learning. If you draw back too much there is a risk that you lose respect and that the practitioners don't see the idea of having a researcher involved in the process. Below we point out some preconditions for joint learning between researchers and practitioners:

- The researcher needs a cooperative attitude and capability. She needs to understand and respect the other and be able to interact on the conditions of the other. To reach a win-win relation both the researcher and the practitioner need to think and act free of prestige.
- In the academic tradition of scientific writing the results from the research processes don't reach the practitioners involved. An effective way to learn together is that researcher and practitioner write together in joint reflection.
- The university, through its position in society, gives status, credibility, trustworthiness, reliability and legitimacy which are important factors for co-operation with the surrounding society. But the university does not always use the learning possibility that comes from co-operation. Researchers' co-operation with practitioners needs higher attention and value in the university system.

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