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Mobilising and Nurturing Collaboration in Research – the Value of a Focused Imagination¹

Petter Ahlström, Fredrik Nilsson, Nils-Göran Olve

Establishing and nurturing contacts are important and time-consuming elements of interactive research. It is usually the researcher who has to establish and nurture collaboration with practitioners – a task that is not normally part of traditional research. A mutual interest in the subject of the research is a prerequisite for collaboration, but there are quite often other factors that explain why collaboration begins and endures. On the basis of the experience gained in a number of interactive research projects, we address the conditions required for an effective and lasting interplay between collaborating partners. Theoretical inspiration has been provided by studies of so-called imaginary organisations.

Key words: Interactive research, collaboration, imaginary organisations, strategy map

Introduction

Interactive research is characterised by close collaboration between researchers, funders and the subjects of the study concerned. The term

¹ This paper is based on a chapter that will be published in an anthology in Swedish in the series “Arbetsliv i Omvandling” (Working Life Transformation, our translation). The authors wish to thank the participants at a seminar on interactive research, arranged in connection with this book project and held at Sättra Brunn on 6-7 December 2006, for their valuable comments on a very early version of this paper. Very useful comments were also provided by the editor of *International Journal of Action Research*, Lennart Svensson and two anonymous reviewers.

embraces several different methodological approaches but also an attitude to what is positive and desirable research (cf. Svensson et al., in this volume). Instead of distance, the researchers strive to establish a close collaboration in which a common aim is to conduct practically oriented studies that have a high degree of extra-disciplinary relevance. A high degree of interactivity is also expected to improve the researchers' access to important sources of data.

In order to create interaction, researchers need to establish close co-operation with funders and the objects of the study (hereinafter referred to as practitioners). The focus of this paper is on how collaboration is mobilised and nurtured in individual research projects and programmes. Issues covered include how the interests of the researchers and the practitioners can be reconciled, and what the researchers can do to create reasonable expectations on the part of the practitioners and disseminate research results. The discussion is based on our experience from various research collaborations, and two cases in particular are used to illustrate what we perceive as typical challenges in this type of co-operation:

"The housing company": For more than a year, one of us together with a colleague worked together with a municipality-owned housing company to develop a model to assess whether supplementary services should be introduced for the tenants, and if so which. A long series of meetings with employees of the company and the municipality led to a written report and an article intended for an international journal. Factors such as an ageing population, the ambition to make living in rented accommodation more attractive and new market conditions in the future are making it interesting and possible to offer new services as a complement to only letting flats. The project was initiated by the university, but funding for this particular project was provided by the company.

"The construction company": Over several years, a leading construction company took part in a research project to study housing for senior citizens and the elderly in the future. At the time the project started, the company had set up a business unit with a focus on special forms of housing for the elderly. This unit was under development and the company was very interested in learning more about the market for such housing in Sweden with the aim of

developing its own business. The purpose of the project was, therefore, to investigate what engenders a strong position for a player on this market. Field visits to 11 leading players in the sector formed an important part of the project. These visits revealed that successful players had chosen to differentiate their offer to potential tenants – both in terms of the physical design of buildings and the services offered. The research was mainly conducted outside the construction company, but the company took the lead in applying for funding, contributed through its industry contacts, participated in reference groups, and took a keen interest in the results.

Both these projects were part of the research, development and knowledge dissemination programme “*Tredje Livet*” (The Third Life). The aim of this programme was to increase knowledge about alternative and flexible housing options for the elderly in the future. This is an extensive and complex area that covers several disciplines, including corporate and real-estate economics, informatics and health sciences. The demand for an interdisciplinary approach was met by developing the programme in collaboration between Linköping University, The Royal Institute of Technology, the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Valjevicens testanläggning (a test centre) and the company Seniorliv AB. Initially, the ambition was to co-ordinate the different sub-projects in the programme. In practice, however, they were run with a high degree of autonomy. Below, we will therefore focus on two sub-projects rather than on the overall programme.

We will also draw on our experience from other research projects. In order to provide a lucid structure for the following presentation, we use a schematic step model for the knowledge-development process in interactive research collaboration (Figure 1). Concrete examples and our experience are discussed by means of a comparison with studies of so-called imaginary organisations. These studies highlight the importance of an “imagination”, i.e. a communicable logic, to the functioning and benefit of collaboration. This logic must be so strong and convincing that it can act as the basis for collaboration that is not otherwise held together by traditional and formal organisational structures. A major challenge in loosely-connected networks of the type that a research project represents is to motivate and co-ordinate players from several different organisations. Many of the structures on offer

in a typical traditional organisation, for example a strong culture and a clear reward system, are not present here. In the following sections, we will therefore discuss how a strong imagination, as described by Hedberg et al. (1997), can help to mobilise and nurture collaboration in the type of network organisation that a research project usually represents.

Interactive research as joint knowledge development

The importance of good and long-term relations and mutual trust between researchers and practitioners cannot be exaggerated. The parties must expect their collaboration to lead to a win-win situation otherwise it will break down at an early stage. In our experience, joint learning as emphasised in Svensson et al.'s article in this volume is not always a conscious aim. Practitioners may expect to gain in other ways, or at least learn other things different from those that the researchers are interested in.

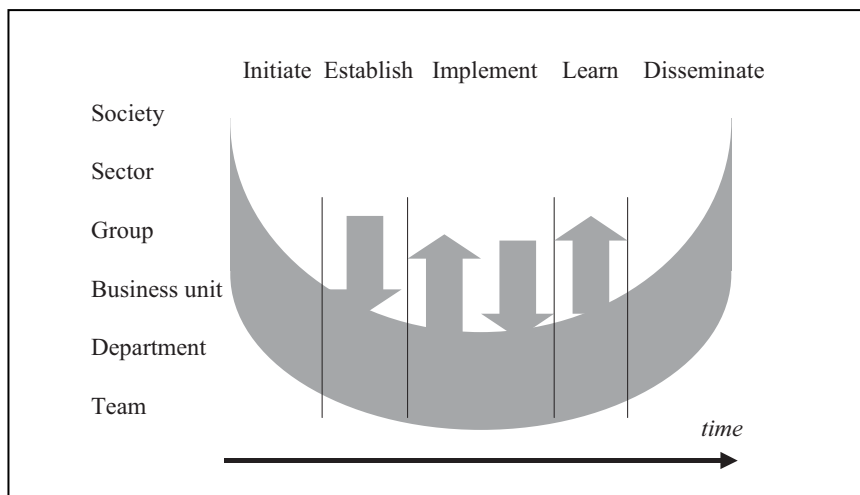
In the housing case, the company wanted a model for selecting candidate services to be included in the service package offered to customers – in particular elderly customers. It was also clear from the outset that such services might be offered as add-ons to individual tenants, and in some cases paid for by the municipality as part of its social services. The construction company expected to learn about business concepts for its planned expansion of housing for the elderly.

With hindsight, we might have been even more careful to articulate these aims of the project together with the practitioners. A shared, or at least a compatible, view of the aims of the research is required. Sometimes this may entail a form of “unholy alliance” in which the parties have different objectives but still see the research as a win-win project. In our two cases, the general object of study was clear enough, but not how far-reaching results could be expected. Our contacts in both companies expressed a general interest in making a contribution to society through supporting research, and the idea that it was good public relations within the company and in the industry to be associated with new ideas and research. But their main focus was on information for business decisions. As researchers, we oscillated between happiness and concern about this. Usefulness indicates relevance

and improves the chances for continued collaboration; but we did not want to be seen as a cheap alternative to consultants.

Concerning expected modes of operation for the collaboration, a common pattern in many of our projects has been as in Figure 1. To gain entrance, the researchers interact with higher-level officials in an organisation; during the project most contacts are with employees at more operative levels; and towards the end, joint learning is confirmed through renewed contacts with higher echelons. The process comprises the phases initiate, establish, implement, learn and disseminate. During the establishment, implementation and learning phases there are often sporadic “checkpoint” contacts between the researchers and senior managers.

Figure 1: The interactive research process. The grey sections in the figure indicate where in the studied hierarchy contacts primarily take place during the different phases.²



² In Figure 1 we have used a group (corporation) as an example, but the discussion is general and valid for other types of organisation too – for example a hospital. Please also note that the figure only shows one cycle. A successfully implemented research project hopefully leads to a continuation and extension of the collaboration.

The housing and construction cases did not involve intensive field studies in the two companies. In the housing company, meetings were mostly at the business unit level, with occasional interviews further down in the hierarchy. (The company is quite small.) In the construction case, most empirical work was done outside the company, collecting evidence to assess the general situation in the market segment of interest to the company and the researchers. It should be noted that in the discussion below the division into phases may seem more distinct than it actually was during the implementation of the research project.

Initiate

Contacts with both case companies came about as part of the earlier mentioned research programme where we had identified a need for additional empirical work and funding. Top management in the housing company had expressed a positive attitude to various types of research collaboration. Following an initial contact with the Managing Director, a very broad statement of possible deliverables was drawn up. These deliverables were so extensive that several of them would probably have required a sub-project of their own. As the initial contact went so well, we believed that it would be relatively easy to set the required priorities during the establishment phase. The fact that the objectives were not formulated more clearly was also because the company was not entirely clear in its view of what the collaboration should lead to in the long term. It is pointed out below that this initial lack of clarity meant that the discussions on the orientation of the research and how it should be conducted continued over a long period of time.

In the case of the initiating phase with the construction company, the focus of the sub-project was determined more quickly. This therefore provides an interesting contrast to our interaction with the housing company. In the early 2000s, when the overall research programme began to take shape, the construction company had set up a new business area with a special focus on sheltered accommodation, i.e. housing that is especially appropriate for the elderly. The initial discussions with the leader of the business unit

provided valuable insights concerning the knowledge the company was looking for – insights that could be matched with an academic interest. A discussion on how to fund the project also began at an early stage and we began to draw up a project application. This joint research application was sent to a research foundation linked to the industry. After the customary scientific review, the company was awarded a large grant as the organisation formally responsible for the project, while it was noted that the researchers would actually conduct the research.

As the cases illustrate, the focus in the initiating phase is on the benefit of the research to the organisation and its central players. Their participation is a prerequisite for getting a project off the ground. Funding and which researchers will be involved are sometimes settled at a later stage. The level of ambition is of fundamental importance already in the early contacts with the organisation. This is often a question of discussing the extent and duration of the collaboration. Especially in the housing case, the researchers were probably too reluctant to make this clear. We were eager to reach an agreement, and relations were somewhat strained due to the delayed start of the project.

In both the housing and construction cases, the initial contact was taken by the researchers. In our experience, it has been unusual for the organisation itself to initiate the first contact. It has, on the other hand, become increasingly common for funders to call for applications for funds for research with a particular focus.³ But usually the researchers take the initiative, and this is the starting point for the discussion in this paper and was the case with regard to the housing company and construction company projects. Especially the housing case shows that it can take a long time for the parties to agree on the purpose of a research project. During this initial

³ A Swedish example is MISTRA, a fairly new research fund. Mobjörk (2004) describes how they acted like a broker in laying the foundations for the desired research. When the applications submitted did not meet the criteria set by the fund, the administrators actively brought together elements of different proposals and insisted on collaboration between applicants. This unconventional approach led to irritation and transfers the burden of proof regarding what is or is not an appropriate research orientation.

period, the relationship is tested at the same time as the mutual benefit of participating in the project is analysed.

Establish

Once the collaboration has been accepted, the next step is to give the arrangement concrete form. This includes not only planning the research project itself but also the handling of ongoing contacts, how researchers and practitioners should interact and so on. Like other projects, and as mentioned in the introduction to the paper, a successful research project can be regarded as an imaginary or network organisation whose external processes (such as customer contacts and funding) and internal processes (such as administration and financial management) must be developed and nurtured. Above all, a lot of time is often devoted in this phase to jointly selling the project to those who will be affected by it: employees, customers, suppliers etc.

At the housing company, it took a long time to arrive at a shared view of what the researchers and the company could ask of each other. It even proved necessary to restart the project, following a delay of about half a year. The overall issues that had been identified turned out to be too many, and they covered too wide a field. The fact that an agreement was signed before the focus of the project was specified did not make the work easier. The company expected more direct benefits from the project, while the researchers saw the company's participation as a more general contribution to the understanding of its industry. In practice, we had to go back and clarify expectations in a way that was acceptable to both parties.

With hindsight, our eagerness to gain access to what seemed like an interesting case probably made us promise too much – or at least convey the impression that more would be possible during our limited intervention than was realistic. This experience demonstrates that successful collaboration is based on adopting the right expectations already during the initiation phase.

In contrast to this, our collaboration with the construction company was initiated with a joint research proposal to a third party. Soon after we were granted funds, a study trip was conducted to southern Sweden to visit a number of interesting housing facilities for senior citizens and the elderly.

This trip was arranged within the framework of the overall research programme and included participants from several different stakeholders. The visit provided good opportunities to discuss the aims and organisation of the overall research programme as well as specific projects. At that point in time, the construction company expressed a strong interest in taking part, but without presenting very specific demands on the orientation of the overall programme. The company's initial assessment was probably that the programme as a whole, rather than the individual projects, would help to develop its business.

After the study trip, considerable attention was devoted to explicating mutual expectations. The balance between intra-disciplinary and extra-disciplinary relevance, and the difference between a research project and a consulting assignment, were taken up. Negotiations began in which the company's influence on sub-projects and the programme was discussed. An agreement was signed following long discussions on how the work would be organised, how quality assurance of the project work would be conducted and when reports/results etc. should be delivered. One of the reasons that it took a long time to reach an agreement was the discussion about how closely deliverables should be linked to the payment of funds. In a research project in which a delivery consists of an academic thesis, it is only at a late stage that the results of the work become clear.

Consequently, a lot of time was spent on deciding how various deliveries should be specified and evaluated before the transfer of research funds from the construction company to the researchers could be approved. The company felt that a clear agreement on this was more or less a prerequisite for effective collaboration. Perhaps this was an expression of the project-oriented culture that characterises the construction industry, where this link between clear deliverables and the flow of payments between customers and suppliers is of central importance. Although these discussions were time-consuming they had a major advantage: we were able to reach an agreement at an early stage on what expectations it was reasonable for the company to have of the researchers and vice versa. As intimated above, however, it was no easy matter to determine the form and structure of the deliveries. Eventually, it

was decided that a number of scientific articles would be written and that their completion would lead to the transfer of research funds.

Concerning the research activities, the housing company project proceeded stepwise, and there were no firm dates etc. Rather, we agreed that frequent meetings with a group of managers would direct each step. In the construction company, there were more specific but still rather broad plans for research activities. The cases show how important it is to devote time, care and attention to this phase of the process, and especially to the need to document expectations. Sometimes it is tempting to postpone a discussion about issues like when and how results can be published, but our impression is that it is best to address them early on. In large organisations, management is usually aware of researchers' need to publish their results, preferably as openly and as quickly as possible. On the other hand, organisations may have unrealistic expectations concerning how soon results can be implemented in their processes.

Implement

When consensus was reached with the housing company, a further 3 to 4 people from the company took part in many meetings for more than a year. The researchers had expected to proceed more quickly towards the stated aim of creating a company-adapted model for the analysis of supplementary services, by conducting interviews with employees at the operational level in the firm (cf. Figure 1) and possibly customers. However, it turned out that the Marketing Director took a strong personal interest in the project, contributing to the model and preferring to meet repeatedly to discuss the results from the interviews and other results from the researchers, suggesting additional interviews and contacts.

Towards the end of this period, the aim still seemed too general and the researchers became concerned how they could detach themselves from the project before the amount of work became unreasonable given the financial resources available and the expected scientific benefit of the project. There were certainly similar concerns in the company about just how concrete advice they could hope for from the researchers. Rather than attempting a

renewed discussion about the aims, the researchers then suggested a one-day seminar to test the ideas developed so far on staff from the municipality's social services department, including the head of the department and its IT manager. These were knowledgeable about the needs and desires of the target group that the project primarily related to, the elderly. Many of the housing company's customers were already clients of the social services department in that they receive home-help services. Furthermore, some of the future services that were considered in the project would probably be paid by the department, as it is responsible for the needs of the municipality's elderly. Both parties seemed to appreciate the fact that the researchers initiated closer contacts between them. A by-product of the project thus became that the parties were given occasion to discuss issues of common interest, and they agreed to continue meeting. For the researchers and the Marketing Director, the seminar provided an opportunity to further develop the results. Both the researchers and the practitioners now had proof of what had been achieved, and an external check on its validity.

In this project, the company was both the funder and the object of the study. As mentioned earlier, it took a long time to agree on the final orientation of the project – to develop a customised model for the strategic analysis of various supplementary services. Postdoctoral researchers carried out the final phases of project, in which extensive discussions with personnel within and outside the company formed an important element of the work. As the project developed, the similarities with a more traditional consulting assignment became increasingly apparent.

The situation was different in the construction company project. The construction company participated in the project as one of many objects of study. As it was conducted in the form of general field visits, the involvement of the company in its role as an object of study was limited. However, company officials were invited to take part in reference group meetings, a study visit and various conferences, and seminars. The project's reference group consisted of academics and practitioners from the construction company itself as well as from other companies and organisations. The question of to what extent the reference group actually shared the researchers' views on the collaboration never really came to a head. The

project manager in the construction company was, however, clear about the fact that he wanted very concrete advice on how the construction company should work to develop its business. He wanted to see how the overall business strategies that began to emerge could be broken down in detail, even down to the level of floor plans. It was, however, difficult to satisfy this desire within the framework of the agreed project.

The researchers gradually realised that a doctoral thesis based on a collection of previously published articles was probably not the best form for reporting on the project but that a monograph would be better. This change was made without any objections at all from the construction company, despite the fact that this, in practice, meant that the previously explicit link between deliveries and payments was broken. That this did not lead to a conflict was probably due to the mutual trust and respect that developed during the implementation phase. The frequent and intensive contacts between the construction company and the researchers played an important role here.

Both our cases show that handling of contacts at the senior levels of participating organisations is largely a question of keeping alive that which differentiates a research project from a consulting assignment. The more qualified the participating researchers are, the greater are the sometimes legitimate expectations that they should engage in consultation and meetings to a level over and above that required to conduct the research itself. This can be done in various ways. Experienced researchers sometimes act as advisers to consulting companies or perform consulting assignments for organisations where their doctoral students are conducting research. Consulting assignments can also open the door to research projects. This may raise ethical issues, but in principle it should be possible to keep these roles separate. It is also conceivable that researchers feel it is reasonable to purchase access to interesting objects of study by incorporating what is in reality “free consulting” into a research process. It is hard to draw the line between the transfer of experience to a third party, natural helpfulness and tactical ingratiation. We believe, however, that consulting work is more effective if it is identified as such and that research should be designed so that

it is of scientific interest as well as of value to the organisation where it is conducted.

A special case is when a researcher wishes to test new ideas more actively. Kaplan (1998) refers to “innovation action research”. Here, researchers have usually been given access specifically to test ideas that they have previously put forward in articles and lectures. In our two cases, it might have involved working with the companies when they implement new services for their customers, and observing whether the concepts that we developed aid in designing and selling such services. Kaplan is aware of the questions this raises regarding critical distance and independence, but he feels that such tensions, as he calls them, can be handled by applying academic requirements for open publishing:

“The publications must contain sufficient detail and precision so that others can independently develop and validate the ideas. Scholars who become compromised in this situation have failed to maintain their integrity in applying their concept. There is a profession where people are paid to do for others what the others specifically request. This is not, however, the profession that most scholars have chosen to join” (Kaplan 1998: 114).

The literature on interactive research devotes more attention to what we here call implementation than to the preceding and succeeding phases in Figure 1. Interacting with the employees who are often objects of research is obviously important, but has thus been discussed by others. Because of this, we here have focussed on the significance of the ongoing contacts with more senior organisational levels (depicted by arrows in Figure 1), and possibly also within the sector concerned. Our experience indicates that the form and extent of these contacts has a major impact on how the relations between researchers and practitioners are developed and strengthened.

Learn

In the learning phase, research results begin to become available and can be disseminated and applied. In order to be worthy of its name, interactive research should mean more than organisations giving access to researchers in the hope that they themselves will benefit from the projects concerned. Our

interpretation of Svensson's et al. views on joint learning (see the introduction to this issue) is that researchers and practitioners should together reassess previous concepts and notions. This can apply, for example, to causal links and likely effects when operational changes are made. In other words, the practitioners should also participate in the discussion on how collected data and experience should be interpreted.

In the housing case, the Marketing Director and his colleagues took an active part during meetings in developing concepts and ideas which were then given form by the researchers. For the construction company, the reference group meetings provided an opportunity for learning and the exchange of experience. Current results from our studies of the senior housing market were discussed here. As the reference group had a broad make up, consisting of representatives from the company itself but also from other organisations, it was possible to discuss the potential consequences of the results from several different perspectives. This made it possible to test and analyse new ideas and preliminary results before they were published. The construction company also had great hopes that the overall research programme, of which the sub-project was a part, would offer good opportunities for learning and the exchange of experience with other researchers and organisations. This exchange was meant to be carried out using a website, internal seminars, ongoing reports, study visits, study trips etc. In practice, however, not all of these ideas were implemented, and the company was content to wait for the publication of the monograph, and occasionally meet with the researchers. Also, their interest in a mutual exchange of information with other programme participants declined when the group, shortly after the project began, toned down its interest in housing for the elderly. Obviously, there were high-level decision makers who felt that an investment in housing for the elderly would not meet the company's return requirements, at least not at this point in time. As a result, learning and the exchange of experience continued to mainly take place within the framework of the regular meetings held by the research project's reference group.

Based on our experience from these and other projects, both too much and too little interest in a project once it is underway may spell problems for the researchers:

- Practitioners are often content to listen to the researcher’s interpretation and accept or reject it on the basis of their own experience. If the research confirms their ideas, they find it hard to understand if the researcher wants to search for additional evidence.
- If, on the other hand, the findings are not intuitively perceived to be reasonable and useful, practitioners often feel that they have played their part by supporting the research, rather than actively engaging in a discussion of the conclusions. Sometimes, this is because they no longer attach the same importance to the issues concerned – often one or two years have passed since they were first formulated.
- When practitioners feel that the findings are directly applicable and new, other tensions may arise. The researchers will want to formulate the conclusions carefully and slowly so that they will be able to publish the results in recognised scientific journals, while the practitioners will want to quickly convert the results into concrete action.

Disseminate

The objectives for the project with the housing company did not include a plan for the dissemination of results. The presentation at the seminar (cf. above) was written up as a report to be used by the company, and the Marketing Director decided that one of the researchers should present it at a well-attended internal management meeting. It was then further distributed throughout the company. The university later published the report. The researchers also wrote an article based on the case, and at the same time it was submitted to a scientific journal it was also sent to the contact at the company.

At the construction company, there were general notes on how to disseminate the results – not any formal plan in the correct sense of the term. On the other hand, the construction company wanted to be the organisation

that was first informed of any interesting findings. When the project ended, the final report was in the form of an academic thesis. In addition, the research foundation received a brief report in accordance with the established routines. The construction company was also given the opportunity to arrange an internal seminar for its employees. Finally, a popular-scientific article was written for a leading industrial journal.

The dissemination of the results from these two projects thus had a very traditional focus. In practice, dissemination took the form of academic papers aimed at small groups of stakeholders. These choices can justifiably be criticised, not least given the projects' high degree of extra-disciplinary relevance. Had we been invited by the companies to collaborate more closely in disseminating our findings, we would of course have done so. We could also have been much more active, and above all more innovative, in our discussions with the case companies on how to disseminate the results. The question is, however, whether further efforts in this respect would really have led to another result – probably not.

Our experience is namely that organisations, irrespective of whether they fund the research or are the object of the research, are seldom interested in how the results are disseminated. There is rather a tendency for them to delay dissemination. This is not really surprising as they may already have learnt about the most interesting results in earlier phases of the knowledge-development process. Dissemination of the results may contribute positively to the prestige and reputation of the participating funders and organisations – for instance, the Marketing Director in the housing company said he appreciated the journal article because it was in English and he could show it in meetings with foreign colleagues. But it is probably rare that publications have any decisive impact on the development of future relations between the researchers and the organisations. For future relations, it is much more important that representatives of the organisations can say that the collaboration led to explicit results that had a clearly positive impact on the operations concerned.

Perhaps the interest of the case companies in participating in a more extensive dissemination of the results would have been greater if the intentions of the overall research programme had been realised. In practice,

the various sub-projects were in fact run as entirely independent research assignments with little or very limited co-ordination. One of the reasons for this was that the programme was not successful in attracting sufficient external funds to finance the administrative superstructure required for effective co-ordination. The plans to set up a special website, produce a series of reports and arrange regular conferences for the exchange of experience therefore came to nothing.

It is also interesting to note in this context that the research foundation that funded the project together with the construction company was satisfied with a traditional reporting of our results. This foundation is probably not unique in this respect, and this raises the question of why research funders do not normally encourage the testing of other more innovative ways of conveying results to a wider audience. Perhaps it is simply that they feel that this is a natural part of the researcher's task and not something that should be or needs to be governed by research funders.

Theoretical perspective and discussion

We have used our experiences from mainly two research projects to raise some issues concerning the collaboration between researchers and practitioners, using the time frame of Figure 1 to structure our discussion. Emerging from our discussion are the following important aspects:

- Articulating the value creation from the collaboration: i.e. the need for joint learning, or at least a perceived win-win design.
- The selection of participants: the need to involve the “right” organisations and persons.
- A communicable logic for collaborating: the benefits from agreeing on and creating lasting enthusiasm for the aims of the interaction.
- Mechanisms that support collaboration.

Obviously, these are not unique for interactive research but can be compared to other types of joint but loosely-interlinked organisations. Any collaboration will benefit from a joint business idea that can be

communicated to the partners, convince them and remind them of its logic. Normann and Ramirez (1993) used the term “value constellations” to describe collaborations where value creation requires simultaneous contributions from several actors. Sometimes one of them will perceive the activities as an “imaginary organisation” (Hedberg et al. 1997): a lasting collaboration, sometimes without legal contracts, to achieve common or compatible aims where different actors have complementary abilities and benefit from each other. Hedberg et al. discussed the initiator’s logic for this as an “imagination”: someone’s idea of how skills and assets available in already existing organisations can be linked. The imagination describes the joint creation of value in a way that makes it credible.

Our experience is that an enduring and convincing picture of the motives for collaboration on a research project is of major importance. According to Hedberg et al., successful imaginary organisations usually require that the imagination is communicable: i.e. possible to logically explain and make credible. The terms network organisation and virtual organisation are closely related but emphasise somewhat different aspects: the links between the partners and the means of communication on which the collaboration rests, respectively. In interactive research, as in imaginary organisations, it is the ideas that are fundamental. In the following sections, we enrich our experiences of interactive research by comparing them to ideas from the work by Hedberg et al., focusing on the issues listed previously.

Imaginary organisations and the role of the initiator

A collaboration project is often driven by one of the parties involved. Hedberg et al. (1997) refer to a leader enterprise with an “imaginator” who brings together a cluster of companies on the basis of a notion of the collaboration (the so-called imagination). It then steers the imaginary organisation across legal and other borders, instead of having all the resources within its own enterprise. The imaginary organisation is a perspective rather than something concrete – a conceptual model that helps to form and manage an alternative to a traditional enterprise. Partners in an imaginary organisation usually have a longer time perspective than a normal

client-supplier relationship. Success requires the effective mobilisation and utilisation of the partners' resources. If the imagination can be articulated, it serves as a logical explanation why this particular collaboration is competitive. For example, the participants may gain the opportunity to develop their skills by applying them in new areas, and thus achieve economies of scope, and the combination of tasks may make it more attractive for more skilled employees to stay with the company.

The research collaborations discussed earlier obviously were based on a perceived "fit" between the needs of the researchers and the practitioners. Some examples: the fact that the researchers in the housing case had extensive experience as consultants made them welcome to what was probably partly seen as a consultancy assignment; when a shift of strategy made the elderly less interesting as a target group in the construction company, interest in the project declined.

Leadership in an imaginary organization is largely through convincing and achieving commitment, as formal power is lacking. In a similar way, the parties in interactive research may try to influence each other. It is unlikely that the two cases described would have gone beyond a first, polite talk if we had not had a fair idea of the perceived strengths and needs of the construction company, or engaged in a rather extensive investigation of them in the housing company.

Selection of participants

In the collaboration between enterprises, the imaginator (the leader enterprise) needs to offer something that is more attractive than what other alliances promise. Translated to interactive research, suitable participants are those who have already done some of the groundwork and bring complementary assets with them. These assets may take the form, for example, of a new but as yet undeveloped business concept, a valuable network of contacts, extensive knowledge of the sector or professional expertise. The research project will enable them to exploit the resources more effectively and also promote their own development.

This works both ways: alerted to the possibility of working with a university, a company may ask if the proposed collaboration is the best available, while the researchers have to consider which company to approach. Both the housing company and the construction company faced a strategic situation where the issues raised by the researchers fitted; and the researchers could “sell” the idea of collaborating by telling the companies about some of their background.

If the relationship is to endure, the participants in the collaboration must have sufficient hope that they have a future together. Mutual adaptation becomes a voluntary investment in continued relations. This was so in many of the cases described by Hedberg et al. (1997). In their contacts with the companies, the researchers may already have become familiar with the field concerned and they may therefore be seen as an outsourced development department regarding methods, products and expertise. The organisation in turn becomes an outsourced experimental laboratory for the university or college involved. In both cases reported here, there were expectations that contacts might continue after the completion of the projects. So far, they have done so only in one of our two cases. This is partly due to a change in direction in the university department, and illustrates the difficulties in transferring contacts to colleagues not directly involved in a project.

Highlighting and developing the collaboration's logic

Planning in an organisation mobilises the knowledge, assessments and views of many individuals (Olve 1977; Nilsson/Olve 2001). Different sets of knowledge are seldom explicit and can be difficult to pass on to someone else, and in practice only a small number of possibilities can be studied. An imaginary organisation normally lacks a hierarchy, routines and an established language for communicating on the subject of possible futures.

Similarly, the knowledge of the partners in an interactive research project must be combined if the project is to utilise the full potential of the participants. When collaboration with the housing and construction companies started, neither they nor the university had an explicit logic for this research collaboration. To use a local university as a pool of talent, and maybe as a complement to in-house R&D, could be a natural part of a

strategy in a company; and, likewise, it would seem natural to clearly articulate intentions in a university to maintain and develop contacts with local industry.

Our own university, for example, has drawn up a so-called strategy map for which objectives should be given priority⁴ (cf. Olve et al. 2003; Kaplan/Norton 2004). In its present form, it does not explicitly mention co-operation with companies and other organisations outside the university, but this is an element of the strategies that lie behind the map. The university has also set up a special unit that works to strengthen relations with the community. Strategies and structures of this type have become increasingly important in the university's development work recently, although they did not affect our projects. Formulating strategies at the university level that can clearly be linked to individual research programmes and projects is undoubtedly fraught with difficulties. The activities concerned are far too diverse for this. The university can, however, establish strategies and structures for the encouragement and development of collaboration.

The universities, but also the research funders, have in other words an important role to play in the effort to clarify and communicate the logic underlying any collaboration. To what extent a potential collaboration can go from being an idea to a joint research programme or project is, however, largely determined by the researchers and practitioners concerned. As pointed out several times in this paper, it is therefore important that there is a clear picture of how all the participants can gain by co-operating with each other. Drawing up a joint strategy map can contribute to this process. It can be used in the various phases described above and be given concrete form in the shape of checkable objectives and targets. These objectives are not primarily intended to facilitate a future evaluation of the project. It is rather a question of documenting and providing exhorting reminders about what the participants have actually agreed on.

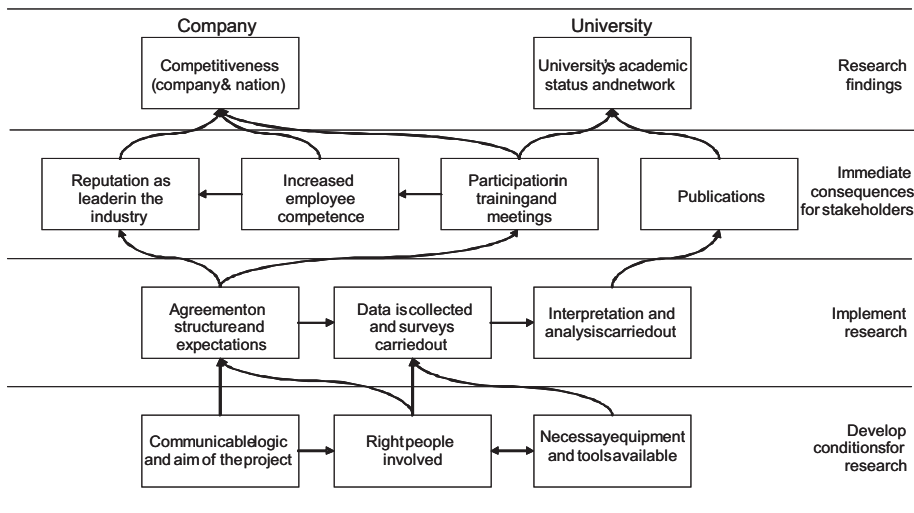
⁴ See www.liu.se/strategi – at present only available in Swedish. The vision is to be “A university with an international reputation that is a driving force in a cosmopolitan knowledge region”. The critical success factor that can most clearly be linked to encouraging and developing research collaboration with external players is that the university should “Contribute to growth and prosperity”.

If we had begun the projects discussed previously today, we would have tried to reach agreement on something like Figure 2. It presents a tentative strategy map showing possible areas where objectives can be set for a collaboration project, including ideas on causal links between the areas. For instance, Figure 2 assumes that the competitiveness of the participating organisations can be improved by an increase in the competence of its employees, and that this may come from employees participating in courses and meetings together with the researchers. It also illustrates how the development of skills and know-how may be affected by how the collaboration is initiated and how the research is implemented. Obviously, for each project, these generic ideas should be made specific and tangible.

Experience from other parts of society shows that this simple type of map can act as a starting point for reaching agreement on what factors are important but also for checking expectations – including expectations regarding how long it may take before the positive effects of the collaboration arise. If the strategy map is used to conduct feedback and follow-up sessions, for example at the meetings indicated by the vertical lines in Figure 1 above, then participants will be forced to decide whether they are satisfied with the way the project has gone or have learnt something that requires a change of course. Growing trust and confidence and the investment made in getting to know each other may encourage the participants to expand and intensify their collaboration, or they may agree that the collaboration as a temporary organisation has played out its role and that it is now time to cultivate other collaborations.

Maybe we should have been brave enough in the two cases discussed here to include specific targets not only for research publications, but also for the launch of new services by the companies involved, their continued participation in teaching at our university, and the recruitment of university alumni as employees!

Figure 2: Draft of strategy map for interactive research collaboration



Mechanisms for collaboration

As we have reported, contacts between researchers and practitioners in the two cases were mainly through meetings and draft reports, with an early joint study tour as a part of the overall programme. Attempts to develop a web forum met with insufficient interest. There are of course other mechanisms for achieving trust and developing shared ideas. In the imaginary organisation described by Maravelias (2001), management aimed to create a “high trust culture” also through “white papers” that propagated the management’s view of the collaboration, and processes that were made more or less obligatory by the use of specific software. Shared notions about successful procedures were used by high-profile managers to strengthen the conviction of all those involved, while a common terminology, routines and technical aids proved that the collaboration really existed. Similarly, interactive research collaboration may require the deliberate dissemination of an official view of its logic. Maravelias says this can relate to:

- The co-ordination and joint utilisation of expertise and know-how, and learning about and from each other – first as a trial and then repeatedly and continuously.
- Cultivating acquaintances and trust and identifying shared interests within the circle of partners.
- Building a common identity in relation to external parties.
- Sharing infrastructure, i.e. creating concrete dependencies.
- Sharing financial resources, i.e. manifesting the relationship in terms of ownership.

The later forms of sharing may only be relevant to large-scale research collaborations, for instance between pharmaceutical companies and a university hospital. But for our cases too, we might have promoted the first and second kinds of sharing more than we did. A joint publication in a trade journal, and joint appearances as speakers at conferences for practitioners, are examples of the third point on the list, and have been tried quite often in other projects. By making the collaboration known and creating expectations, they serve to deepen relations and increase the odds of its continuation. At the same time, such expectations may sometimes be perceived as a burden, so these mechanisms must be used with care.

A deepening collaboration raises the issue of critical distance. As discussed by Svensson et al. in this volume, proximity may easily lead the researcher to become too accommodating regarding the wishes of the practitioners, or to choose an object for study where the practitioners already have values or assumptions that are easy to combine with the researcher's own view. Insisting on clarity regarding the value generated by the research – what we have referred to as a win-win collaboration – may be one way of handling this dilemma. Our contacts in the housing company were very aware of our need for what they saw as theoretical results, while we were genuinely interested in the collaboration leading to practical results.

Conclusions and final comments

How is collaboration mobilised and nurtured in research? An important conclusion is that the initial phases of the interactive research process have a major impact on the subsequent development of collaboration (cf. Figure 1). Our two cases illustrate how the creation of reasonable expectations regarding the benefits that interactive research collaboration can provide is a basic precondition for establishing successful and sustainable collaboration. Already when collaboration is initiated, irrespective of whether the initiative is taken by a researcher or a practitioner, it is a great advantage if there is an “imagination” for the collaboration. The imaginator, who is the leading player and usually the initiator of the collaboration, should be able to explain the logic on which the collaboration rests. It is a question of being able to demonstrate in a relatively concrete way what the potential participants will gain by collaborating.

During the establishment phase, a clear imagination may be of great help as the collaboration moves from the idea stage towards becoming an actual project. The cases illustrate the importance of devoting sufficient time and care to getting the expectations right and to planning the actual conduct of the research. A high degree of planning will of course affect the scope for a contextual dialogue between researchers and practitioners, and there may be fears that too much planning will reduce flexibility and creativity during the project’s implementation, learning and dissemination phases. In our experience, however, the opposite is the case. A clear plan in which the imagination for the collaboration is given concrete form rather creates stability and confidence in the fact that the collaboration will endure. The plan forces the researchers and practitioners to consider how the project may develop and thus to consider potential problems before they arise. The formal plan is not the most important result of this process; what is most important is rather that the discussion leads to a mutual understanding of each others’ interests and driving forces. Such an understanding will contribute to the flexibility that is required to handle ongoing changes and adjustments of the focus of the research project.

The conclusion that a clear imagination – given concrete form in relatively detailed plans – has a positive effect on how interactive research collaboration develops may seem surprising. Research is usually presented as a type of activity that is difficult to plan. It is probably a widely held view that creating flexibility so that the way research collaboration is run and the resources are utilised can quickly be changed is a critical success factor. We would therefore like to emphasise that the plan we refer to here is more of a shared view of how the collaboration creates value than an inflexible timetable. During the course of the project, its content should be subject to regular discussions between the researchers and practitioners involved. Of course the plan should also inspire new collaboration. Here, an understanding of the need for contacts at different levels in the organisation that is studied will be important (cf. Figure 1). The plan is, in other words, the interpretation of the imagination that prevails at the time. It thus sets out the external frameworks that indicate how collaboration will be conducted during the various phases of the interactive research process.

We conclude by commenting on the institutional context in which most interactive research programmes and projects are run. We believe that our reasoning is also applicable to how universities and research institutes choose to co-operate with the society around them. Our experience is that not all universities and institutes have a well-considered strategy for this. Sometimes they do not even have a good overview of the contacts taking place. Researchers may act as individual entrepreneurs who carefully monitor their contacts themselves. Until universities and institutes begin to manage their contacts better, this may be both an understandable and wise attitude. To change it, universities must convince researchers of the value of working jointly. In other words, many universities also need a strategy for the formation of networks and how this should be carried out. In fields where research results have commercial potential the universities have begun to show a more active interest in what their researchers produce. However, the increasing focus on the role of the universities in society and the major potential of interactive research in the effort to strengthen basic education and research should make this an area of priority at all universities.

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