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Researcher-practitioner collaboration during a PhD study: a single-case study

Abstract

The academic-practitioner relationship has been alleged to be subject to various tensions and dualities; the divide between academia and practice has even been characterized as unbridgeable. This paper presents a research case of a long-lasting, successful collaboration between a researcher and senior practitioners during a PhD research process. An intensive single-case study was conducted to describe the unique characteristics of this collaborative process and to analyse and discuss the factors which contributed to the success of the collaboration. The objectives, practices as well as benefits and drawbacks of the collaboration are also described and discussed. Several factors of success related to the team, processes, and environmental characteristics of the collaboration were identified as significant. The study contributes to the literature on researcher-practitioner collaboration in management studies, and specifically in board work and corporate governance research.

Key words: Research-practice collaboration; Researcher-practitioner relationship; Single-case study; Management studies; Board work and corporate governance studies

Introduction

The academic-practitioner relationship has been suggested to be subject to various tensions and dualities (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014), and the divide between academia and practice has even been characterized as unbridgeable (e.g. Kieser & Leiner, 2009). On the other hand, as Bartunek and Rynes (2014) suggest, if appreciated, the tensions might advance the generation of new research and practice. In management research, the potential benefits of effective academic-practitioner collaboration include framing meaningful research questions, designing data collection, enhancing access, interpreting results and applying them to practice (Amabile et al., 2001; Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001). There is also currently increasing pressure from academia's different stakeholders, such as funders and governments, to pay attention to the practical relevance and impact of academic research. In Finland, which is the context of this study, the Universities Act states that universities should interact with society and promote the social impact of their research findings. It has indeed been argued that rather than existing independently, relevant and useful knowledge emerges from collaborative relationships between research and practice (e.g. Mohrman et al., 2001; Knights & Scarbrough, 2010). However, despite the substantial number of articles published on academic-practice relationships in management studies, empirical studies on the topic are still relatively scarce (e.g. Bartunek & Rynes, 2014).

Aim of the study

This paper presents a research case of long-lasting, successful collaboration between a researcher (the author of the case) and a practitioner network, Boardman, during the writing of a doctoral dissertation. An intensive single-case study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) is conducted to describe the unique characteristics of this collaborative process and to analyse and discuss the factors which contributed to the success of the collaboration. In addition, the objectives, practices as well as benefits and drawbacks of the collaboration are described and discussed.

The study contributes to the literature by increasing our understanding of successful researcher-practitioner collaboration in management, and specifically in board work and corporate governance research. The literature on boards and corporate governance has particularly been criticized for a prevalent 'black box' approach: the studies have been said to remain too distant from the phenomena examined (e.g. Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Huse, 2007). Still, as interpersonal relationships and dynamics in and around the boardroom impact board performance and value creation, it is important

to look beyond mere structures when studying boards and corporate governance (e.g. Huse, 2007). Pettigrew (1992) suggested that access difficulties constrain this kind of study; this case presents one way of overcoming these difficulties.

Literature review

The gap between theory and practice can be viewed from several perspectives: as a problem of transferring knowledge generated in research to practice, or as a knowledge production problem (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Theory and practice can also be argued to represent distinct, and possibly complementary, kinds of knowledge (ibid.). It has been suggested that the tensions, dualities and difficulties in the academic-practitioner relationship include rigour and relevance, communication styles, attitudes to time, as well as conflicting logics, interests and incentives (e.g. Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Knights & Scarbrough, 2010; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). At an individual level, the tensions may result in identity conflicts and institutional pressures to clearly separate out the roles of academic and practitioner (e.g. Empson, 2013; Carton & Ungureanu, 2017). Another important issue concerns preserving researcher autonomy (Pettigrew, 2001; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

It has been suggested that the success of academic-practitioner collaboration is influenced by the characteristics of the collaborative team, such as project-relevant skill and knowledge, collaboration skills, attitudes and motivation (Amabile et al., 2001). Environmental aspects, such as organizational support for the collaborative partners from their own institutions, and collaboration processes, e.g. the effective use of members' skills and well-planned meetings, may also affect the success of the collaboration (ibid). Joint interpretative forums, in which researchers and practitioners interpret results together may enhance the perceived usefulness of research results to practitioners (Mohrman et al., 2001).

Method

An intensive single-case study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) was conducted focusing on the author's collaboration with Boardman during her PhD studies. In this approach, the primary aim is to describe the specific and unique characteristics of the case, rather than produce knowledge that can be generalized to other contexts (ibid.).

The collaborative partners

The purpose of Boardman, established in 2002, is to create and share new knowledge in order to support Finnish company owners, board members and management in their co-operation and joint decision-making. The Boardman network is governed by a non-profit-sharing limited company (Boardman Oy) owned by 50 partners, all of whom are committed to actively contributing to Boardman's events and publications and to pursuing Boardman's values: Learn, Share, and Regenerate. Boardman operates as a platform for networking and the sharing of ideas, knowledge and experiences, and in addition to the partners, a wide network of board members, executives, entrepreneurs and business owners participate in the various events and forums organised by Boardman. (www.boardman.fi/en/)

The researcher and author of this case has been affiliated to the University of Jyväskylä School of Business and Economics as a PhD student. Her article-based dissertation focuses on the CEO-Chair relationship and CEO dismissal process in Finnish limited companies from the perspective of leadership. The dissertation adopts a qualitative approach and the empirical data consists of 42 interviews and the 15 focus group discussions conducted in the collaboration examined in this study, with interviews used as primary data.

It can be said that due to her 20+ years of experience in senior management positions, the identity and background of the author are relatively strongly that of a practitioner. In addition to being a full-time doctoral student for most of the time of the collaborative process examined here, she worked as a board member, gave presentations about board work to practitioner audiences, and actively took part in board member networks and training programmes. Before starting her PhD, the author had participated in several successful collaborative initiatives between academics and practitioners and had been seconded by her company to work as a research associate at the University of Oxford.

The forms of collaboration

The collaboration, which was based on the interest of both partners in the same topic rather than on formal agreements or money, comprised several distinctive elements. The decision to collaborate was made at a very early stage in the research process, in January 2013, in a short meeting between the Chair of Boardman, the author, and one of Boardman's partners. The meeting was initiated by the Boardman partner with whom the author had worked earlier in her career and discussed her PhD plans. It was agreed that as a first step of collaboration, the Chair of Boardman would invite a selected group of Boardman partners to discuss my study plan and to support the PhD project, and that the Boardman partner the author had worked with previously - an experienced board member, Chair and a well-known figure in Finnish business - would chair this group. This was the beginning of the

longest lasting and most important form of collaboration, a development forum called ‘The co-operation of the Chair of the Board and the CEO’ (henceforth ‘the group’). This forum was used as a focus group for the PhD study, understood here as a form of group interview that draws on communication between the group participants to generate empirical data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In total, 15 group discussions were held, involving 64 different persons, including the author, as participants. The participants were partners or other network members of Boardman: board members, Chairpersons, CEOs and other senior executives. The group included former academics, honorary doctors, and non-executive board members of Finnish academic institutions or foundations which fund academic research. 14 participants held a doctoral degree. Several group members had authored books on management and board work.

In addition to the group collaboration, the author was invited to participate in numerous seminars and a course on board work organized by Boardman, and she joined Boardman’s alumni network. The author was given many books and other materials on board work published by Boardman and received recommendations for her funding applications. In the early stages of the process she had the opportunity to present the research plan in Boardman’s board work seminar, and when necessary she was allowed to use Boardman premises for the interviews for the study. The author was encouraged to disseminate her research results to the network by writing blog posts to the Boardman website. As a future step of collaboration the collaborative partners have agreed to publish a practitioner book based on the research results and the collaboration.

Empirical data and analysis

The empirical materials of this study include:

- The researcher’s lived experience, research notes and monthly e-mails to the Chair of the focus group, 31.1.2013-28.2.2018
- Presentations, recordings and memos of the focus group meetings held 11.3.2013-28.2.2018
- Interviews with co-founder/Chair/Honorary Chair of the Board and Managing Director, Boardman Oy

Most of the empirical data were generated during the collaborative process as the events took place, although the interviews were conducted at the end of the process for the purposes of this case study. In monthly e-mails to the Chair of the group the author described her current ideas, feelings and thoughts about the PhD process as a whole, rather than only the Boardman collaboration, but the analysis was limited to the parts that are relevant for this case.

The analysis process began with reading/listening to the materials, making notes and organizing the data. First, a preliminary case description was made, then the research questions were specified. After this, the case description was developed further and finalized. In the analysis process there was constant intertwining of the empirical materials and prior studies and theoretical ideas on researcher-practice collaboration (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Results and discussion

Evolving objectives

The memos and recordings of the group discussions show that the objectives of the collaboration evolved and accumulated during the 5-year process: in the first meetings, the objective was simply described as being to support the PhD study, for example by commenting on the research plan and interview questions and discussing relevant topics. After the planning phase, when the preliminary results were discussed and found to be of interest for practice, the societal impact of the research and the possibility of producing a practice-oriented publication in addition to the academic dissertation were raised in the discussion. Towards the end of the process, the list of agreed objectives for the collaboration had become substantially longer, as was documented in a memo based on the Chairperson's opening words in the group: *The purpose of the group is to share knowledge and experience concerning co-operation between the CEO and Chair through presentations and discussion. The group supports a doctoral research project exploring this relationship, acts as a focus group and generates research data with the aim of producing new knowledge that will promote Finnish companies and develop their competitive advantage. The objective is also to produce a Finnish publication for practitioners to advance better board work. At the same time, we test and develop a model of collaboration that will enable academic research to benefit Finnish business rather than sit on a shelf gathering dust.*

Consistent, structured practices

Whereas the organization of the group meetings in terms of premises, refreshments and notifying participants was conducted by Boardman staff, the topics and invited speakers were mostly planned and agreed in co-operation between the researcher and the Chair of the group. The Chair started every meeting by describing the purpose, objectives and practices of the group and by announcing a two-hour time limit for the meeting. Participants were reminded that the meeting was being tape-recorded for research purposes, and the Chatham House rule was applied. At the end of the meeting, the Chair

drew some key conclusions from the discussion, and informed participants of what was planned for the next steps in the process.

In every meeting the author gave a presentation on the research and typically there was also a presentation by an invited speaker, both followed by group discussion. In the early stages of the process the research plan, sampling, and potential, more specific research topics were discussed, and basic knowledge about the main topic of the study, the CEO-Chair relationship, was generated. The invited presentations at this stage were held by Boardman partners, with topics including the roles, tasks, practices, power dynamics and decision-making in the CEO-Chair relationship. After this, the work-in-progress – and later on, more final - findings of the PhD study were presented, and the invited presentations and discussions focused on more specific themes such as trust, distrust and CEO dismissal, as well as on the impact of diverse contexts on the CEO-Chair relationship.

In addition to the Boardman network, the Chair's wide network was used when considering and contacting visiting speakers, which helped to attract senior, well-known professionals who were of interest to the group participants. Having visited, visiting speakers were invited to join forthcoming meetings of the group. All visiting speakers were practitioners apart from the author's PhD supervisor, who was invited to present her views on the academia-practitioner relationship in the group's final meeting.

Success factors in the collaboration

The collaboration was constructed as a success in the final discussions of the group, in the interviews made for this case study, and in other private and public comments. This success is also reflected in the growing list of objectives set for the collaboration as the process evolved, in the high number of volunteer group participants, and in Boardman's several new collaborative initiatives with researchers and academia. In what follows, the factors which contributed to collaboration success (Amabile et al., 2001) and to bridging the researcher-practitioner divide (e.g. Bartunek & Rynes, 2014) in this case are discussed.

Importantly, due to the qualitative approach and particularly the topics of the dissertation, namely the CEO-Chair relationship and CEO dismissal process, the study was of interest and very well aligned with Boardman's purpose (Gulati, 2007). As the purpose of Boardman is not to share profit but to generate new knowledge about board work and to develop the skills of its network members, the culture and values of Boardman were in line with and supported the collaboration, which contributed to the high commitment of the key partners to it. Moreover, as the aim of the collaboration was not to make an intervention, e.g. change organizational practices in a given organization, but to generate

new knowledge for the benefit of network members, the complexities of action research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) were not a factor in the current study. The study topic can be said to be timeless rather than very topical, which possibly helped practitioners to tolerate the slow pace of academic research (cf. Knights & Scarbrough, 2010).

In terms of the characteristics of the collaborative team (Amabile et al., 2001), as board members, Chairpersons, CEOs and other senior executives, the group participants can be characterized as very knowledgeable on the topics of the PhD study. In addition to knowing about the topic, they were skilled in group discussion and in presenting their views. They gave their time voluntarily and were interested and motivated to discuss the topics of the study. The fact that several members of the group had relationships with and prior knowledge of academia likely eased any tensions that might have resulted from, for example, the conflicting logics or styles of communication between research and practice (cf. Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). As regards the relevant aspects of the researcher's skills, her background in senior management and board work significantly helped in the collaboration as she was accustomed to working with senior executives (Gulati, 2007). The author was very motivated both to conduct her research and to collaborate with practitioners and Boardman, and her aim was to conduct practice-relevant research rather than publish in top-tier journals. Other participants' knowledge and the researcher's knowledge complemented each other well. Something that promoted the development of mutual trust was the fact that because of previously working together, trust between the author and the Chair of the group already existed before they began.

Success factors concerning the process of collaboration (Amabile et al., 2001) can also be identified. One of them was consistency and structure in how the group meetings were conducted and chaired. Clear roles helped the collaboration run smoothly, and possible ambiguities in roles were addressed rapidly. For example, after the first group discussion, the author realised that she would not be able to incorporate in the study all the ideas that emerged in the group as important. She wrote about this to the Chair of the group, who then in the next meeting clarified roles and responsibilities, emphasizing that the group would not make any decisions but that the researcher was fully responsible for the research and would make all the decisions (Pettigrew, 2001). Inviting visiting speakers to the group not only brought participants new insights but also helped to maintain interest throughout the process. Also, the author's continuous participation in the Boardman network, for example by attending seminars and writing blogposts, increased closeness in the collaboration (Pettigrew, 2001).

As regards environmental characteristics and institutional support for the collaborative partners (Amabile et al., 2001), the collaboration received strong and visible support from several significant people of influence in the Boardman network right from the start. Specifically, the co-founder, who

at the time was the Chair of the Board of Boardman, personally invited the first participants to join the collaboration, and he participated in most meetings of the group. His successor as the Chair of Boardman also actively took part in the group, as did the Managing Director. In addition, several other senior, respected Boardman partners were active group members, and some of them gave talks in the group.

In contrast to prior studies on the experience of individual researchers in practitioner collaboration (e.g. Empson, 2013; Carton & Ungureanu, 2017), the author felt throughout the process that her collaboration with practitioners was both accepted and supported by the academic community and specifically by her PhD supervisor. Moreover, when she participated in the first tutorial of her PhD studies, the comments from professors and student colleagues were very supportive and positive: the plan was described as 'brave', rather than, for example, too practical or non-academic. So her approach was not seriously challenged, but received strong support from key individuals and institutions (Knights & Scarbrough, 2010; cf. Empson, 2013; cf. Carton & Ungureanu, 2017). In fact, the support and approval the author received slightly surprised her.

Benefits for both partners

Partly due to the access difficulties (Pettigrew, 1992) mentioned above, prior knowledge on the PhD study topics, namely the CEO-Chair relationship and CEO dismissal process, is relatively scarce. During the study process described here the problem of access did not arise. The access issue was discussed in the first group meetings, and the researcher was advised to strongly emphasize the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews when contacting potential interviewees. It is likely that access to some interview participants was enhanced by their knowledge of Boardman's support for the study (Amabile et al., 2001): in the e-mail sent to potential interviewees, Boardman collaboration was mentioned and the contact details of the Chair of the group were included. Moreover, the opportunity the author had had to present her research plan in a major annual seminar organized by Boardman meant the project was already familiar to some recipients of the e-mails, even if the interviewees were not limited to the Boardman network.

Due to the scarcity of prior research on the CEO-Chair relationship, the basic knowledge about the topic generated in the early stages of the process, before the study plan was finalized and the primary interviews were conducted was, in the author's view, very valuable (Mohrman et al., 2001). The discussions in the early phase gave insights into how to conduct the sampling and what kind of questions to ask, and they increased understanding of what issues might be particularly relevant (Amabile et al., 2001; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, Gulati, 2007). For example, in the second group

discussion the participants expressed very diverse views and experiences of dyadic practices between the CEO and Chair. This led to encourage the interviewees to describe them in some detail and, later, to choose dyadic practices as a key topic in the PhD. The topic of trust also emerged as pivotal in the discussions, which, in part, encouraged the researcher to focus the second article on dyadic trust. The group discussions also helped the author to clarify her thoughts and helped in the interpretation of the results (Mohrman et al., 2001). Participating in Boardman's various events additionally served to build both the researcher's knowledge on the topic and her personal network with practitioners, as well as provided her opportunities to very informally test emerging ideas with senior practitioners. The collaboration also strongly influenced the author's motivation and energy: as a former practitioner, it was important to her that the study was perceived as relevant and interesting by practitioners. Even if preparing for the group meetings took time and was sometimes difficult, she found the discussions very rewarding and enjoyable (Empson, 2013) and they gave her an extra boost to continue with the study.

For the practitioner participants, the discussions provided a forum in which to hear and discuss new research findings and to learn from them (Mohrman et al., 2001), to network with other professionals with similar interests, and to make a contribution to the study. For Boardman, the collaboration in the form of group discussions was well in line with its normal activities, with the study results and the visitor presentations adding new themes, knowledge and perspectives. In sum, the group discussions, presentations, blogposts and the forthcoming practice-oriented publication all fit very well in the activities Boardman organizes in order to fulfil its purpose. The experience and model of collaboration that were generated have also been used to start similar initiatives in other subject areas of interest to Boardman, such as ownership, and encouraged some other new initiatives in collaborating with academics.

Drawbacks of the approach

The most obvious drawback of this kind of approach is the time (Knights & Scarbrough, 2010) and resources required. On the part of the author, this meant planning, preparing for, travelling to and attending the meetings, listening to the recordings, analysing data, as well as writing memos and blogposts. Even if the objectives and interests of the collaborating partners were well aligned, the results of the collaboration had to be presented in different ways (e.g. Gulati, 2007; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). In the context of this study, this meant differences in both the language and the style of writing: the PhD was written in a style suitable for academic journals and in English, whereas what was written for Boardman was in Finnish and in practitioner-style language. In fact, the group participants commented that in their opinion, academic journal articles were not at all useful from the

practitioners' perspective. The move from writing academic articles in English to writing presentations or blogposts for practitioners in Finnish was not always easy, and was time consuming. On the other hand, as a prior (and still part-time) practitioner, the author did not consider the time spent on collaborating and producing practice-oriented presentations and blogposts to be something extra, but rather an interesting, positive and satisfying part of doing a PhD (Empson, 2013).

Another possible drawback concerns the collaborative partner's expectations and excessive practitioner guidance and influence over academic research (Pettigrew, 2001; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In the author's view, this did not happen in the current study – at least, not seriously. In fact, she paid particular attention to the issues of influence and power partly due to a course on qualitative research methods she took during her first year of doctoral studies. The author discussed the Boardman collaboration plans in detail with the professor running the course, and in addition to being very supportive of the ideas she also said, 'Don't let them hijack you!' Still, the collaboration probably affected, for example, the amount of empirical data and the number of interviews conducted: the number of interviews was higher than originally planned because nearly all the participants who were asked to join accepted, and in part because the researcher wanted a comprehensive – and a practically relevant - sample. The challenge of accomplishing rigour and relevance in the same study (e.g. Kieser & Leiner, 2009) was to some extent eased in the current case by the fact that the aim of the author was not to publish the articles of the dissertation in top-tier journals but in other academic, peer-reviewed journals.

Contributions and conclusions

In the increasingly complex business environment of today, researcher-practitioner collaboration is essential in order to make any impact on practice (e.g. Amabile et al. 2001). By presenting an intensive single-case study focusing on a successful, long-lasting researcher-practitioner collaboration, this study contributes to the small body of empirical research on the topic. The collaborative process presented here included both research design and the production, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge (e.g. Amabile et al., 2001; Mohrman et al., 2001; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Several factors of success related to the team, processes and environmental characteristics of the collaboration (Amabile et al., 2001) were identified as significant in the case examined in this paper. In this case, academia and practitioners were not perfect strangers to each other, but instead, the collaborative partners had prior knowledge, interest and appreciation across the researcher-

practitioner divide (Gulati, 2007). Importantly, the collaborative partners genuinely pursued a common interest in generating new knowledge on the topic of research, and they strongly committed to the collaboration.

A major limitation of the study is that due to the approach chosen, the results cannot be generalized to other contexts. Studying similar collaboration in other kinds of context would be valuable to advance understanding of the relative significance of the success factors identified in this study. Also, it is obvious that the author's own key role and the close relationships built in the collaboration have impacted her perceptions and interpretations of the current case (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Still, the voices of both collaborative partners were included: two Boardman representatives were interviewed for the case, and the final case description was read and commented on by both the Chair of the group and the Managing Director of Boardman.

The research case presented above shows that successful researcher-practitioner collaboration can help both sides to accomplish their objectives. The case illustrates that for the researcher, collaboration with practitioners may improve access, generate rich and interesting data on topics with little prior literature, give additional insights when interpreting empirical data, provide new channels for the dissemination of results, and add extra enthusiasm and motivation. As for the personal case of the author, it is clear that without the collaboration presented here, both her PhD studies and the final thesis would have turned out very differently.

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Case study materials

- Focus group discussion materials, 2 hours each (11.3.2013-28.2.2018)
 - Recordings of 13 meetings
 - Memos of 15 meetings
 - Presentation materials: 15 researcher presentations & 14 invited/visitor presentations
- The author’s lived experience, research notes and monthly e-mails to the Chair of the focus group (31.1.2013-28.2.2018)
- Interviews:
 - Co-founder/Chair/Honorary Chair of the Board, Boardman Oy, 25.4.2018
 - Managing Director, Boardman Oy, 2.5.2018