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## Researchers as boundary spanners

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**Abstract:** For universities to accomplish their ‘third mission’, researchers are supposed to engage themselves in problem solving processes with external actors, but to successfully cross organizational boundaries between the universities and the outside world is easier said than done. Rather than developing new collaborative approaches in dealing with practitioners, this paper applies action research as a dual process of participation that elaborates the knowledge exchange process of boundary spanning. Two comparative case studies have been selected because of their similarities in practice and their differences in outcome, making them suitable for studying a researcher performing boundary spanning activities. This study has shown that when contact, negotiation and knowledge exchange have been completed in an effort to advance the change process in the organization and certify preliminary findings in the research process, the researcher has succeeded as a boundary spanner. But to be involved in an organization’s change process and concurrently involve practitioners in the research process calls upon a certain degree of chaos, uncertainty and messiness. This is why boundary spanning activities, such as establishing contact, upholding contact, re-establishing contact, negotiating collaborative terms, and satisfying practitioners’ non-research related demands, take a great amount of time away from conducting research. Hence, this paper argues for the necessity of earmarking university resources to researchers that assume the role as boundary spanners.

**Key words:** entrepreneurial universities, action research, boundary spanner.

### 1. Introduction

The Stansted University-inspired concept ‘the Entrepreneurial University’ provides innovations and economic development as ‘third mission’ to universities’ traditional roles of education and research (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000). With the aim of strengthening the knowledge-based economy through universities’ collaborations with the surrounding society, the OECD, the EU and national governments have, since the beginning of the millennium, advocated for and stimulated an increasing inclusion of non-university stakeholders to ensure influx of knowledge and commercialization of research. For universities to support entrepreneurship and participate in innovation activities (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000), university departments expand and merge, focusing on setting up new administrative entities such as funding and matchmaking offices that operate to span boundaries between universities and outside organizations. However, serving a broader variety of purposes and stakeholders, these more omnipotent universities put pressures on researchers to partake in innovation processes outside the university and to generate knowledge believed to be of social and economic relevance to the surrounding society. Consequently, researchers who typically are measured, benchmarked and promoted according to performances on education and research are in need of methods capable of spanning the boundaries between university and organizations without jeopardizing their academic integrity and freedom. Here, researchers can look for inspiration within a long academic tradition of action research starting with the pioneering work of J.L. Moreno, who in 1913 coined an actionist view of research as action research. In the 1930s, this view was followed up on by Kurt Lewin, outlining action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, observation and the evaluation of the result of the action (McTaggart 1994: 316). Although it seems that for many years, action research has been neglected, marginalized and perceived as an obscure field of academia that conflicts with academic norms, it has earned recognition as a method of generating empirical data, which is exemplified in SAGE’s *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury 2001) published prior to Sage’s other two handbooks dealing

with methods, namely quantitative research (Kaplan 2004) and qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). According to Helskog, “action research has such an innovative perspective, and is today a flourishing research tradition within fields such as health, education and organizational development” (Helskog 2014: 4). Based on the above reasoning and my own experiences with action research as a method capable of spanning organizational boundaries, this paper elaborates on the researcher as a boundary spanner and why it is difficult for the researcher to successfully cross organizational boundaries between the universities and the outside world despite the fact that universities expect researchers to do so.

The paper is structured as follows: (1) action research in practice is presented outlining two processes of participation; (2) the concept of a boundary spanner is operationalized according to action research; (3) the methodology including research design, case selection and presentation of empirical data is presented; (4) a comparative analysis of two cases in which the researcher performs boundary spanning activities is presented; (5) the paper concludes by discussing the researcher as a boundary spanner.

## **2. Action research**

Huang characterizes research aiming at solving problems in the surrounding society as action research (2010: 97, 99). As such, action research begins with an imperfectly understood idea and a desire to confront a general problem in society or in organizations because some kind of improvement or change seems needed (McTaggart 1994: 316). Action research thus seeks to bring action and practice together with theory and reflection in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and their communities (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003: 10).

Understood as action accompanied by research (McTaggart 1994: 318), the main characteristic of action research is that it involves participation of both the researchers and the practitioners, which delineates it from e.g. ‘applied research’, which has no expectations of participation (McTaggart 1994: 314) and from uncritical consultancy work that leads to the reification of power relations in organizations and neglects academic contributions to theory and practice (Huang 2010: 97). Accordingly, action research is the way for researchers and practitioners, joined by a thematic concern, to organize the conditions under which they can learn from their own experiences, and make these experiences accessible to others, making it not merely about learning, but also about knowledge production (McTaggart 1994: 317). In the following, participation as a concept embedded in action research is elaborated through the dual process of participation; namely, how the researcher participates in the change process and how the practitioner participates in the research process.

## **3. The dual process of action research**

In contrast to being a member of a social community or belonging to a societal group exemplified through Dwyer & Buckle’s three roles of membership; “peripheral member researchers”, “active member researchers”, and “complete member researchers” (Dwyer & Buckle 2009: 55), there is no in-between membership for researchers studying organizations. To own a membership of an organization, you are either paying a membership fee, putting in voluntary working hours, or getting imbursement for your time spent in terms of salary or compensation. Still, you are not considered to be an insider if you have not been an integral part of the organization for a longer period of time. As such, both the researcher’s participation in the change process and the practitioner’s participation in the research process vary according to whether the action researcher is an insider or the researcher needs an invitation to access the organization chosen as subject of research.

As an insider, the researcher negotiates with superiors, colleagues and partners in order to get access to documents, data, meetings, and people on lower, same and higher levels in the organization. Depending on the topic of research and ethical considerations, the researcher may operate covertly or semi-covertly to obtain empirical data on the change process as it evolves in the organization (inspired

by Brannick and Coghlan 2007: 70). Thus, the organizational membership enables rich insider accounts and valuable understanding of organizational practices, manager's role, and the internal dynamics of the organization (Brannick & Coghlan 2007: 65-66). However, these insights come with a cost because in "sustaining a full organizational membership role and the research perspective simultaneously, insiders are likely to encounter role conflicts and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioral claims, and identification dilemmas" (Brannick & Coghlan 2007: 70).

In the case of non-membership, the researcher needs to be invited inside an organization by proposing a value proposition to the organization in terms of contributing to solving a given problem, e.g. by playing an active role in a change process or providing knowledge for the organization to handle the complexity of a problem. This more restricted access to the organization increases the emphasis on the collaboration with the practitioners in order to harvest and generate empirical data and validate preliminary research. Although the research is conducted by the researcher, the dialogue with the practitioner prior to and during the research process provides the researcher with insights in the subject of research that contributes to outlining the research question and structuring the research project. With consideration to confidentiality, sensitivity to others, and organizational politics, the practitioner furthermore delivers access to the organization's documents, data, meetings, and people (Brannick & Coghlan 2007: 67-68). Finally, yet importantly, the researcher should avoid bias and fallacies by receiving feedback when disseminating the preliminary research results to the practitioner or preferably a cohort of practitioners (Huang 2010: 99).

Nonetheless, to engage a practitioner in a research process and concurrently secure the ability to have an impact on the organization's change process put severe demands on the researcher's abilities to live up to professional and cultural expectations of the 'local' community of practitioners and the 'cosmopolitan' community of scholars, respectively (Huang 2010: 99). In the action research literature, this dual process has been framed as crossing organizational boundaries, emphasizing the researcher's capability to shift between organizational settings (Liberati et al. 2016), which implicitly denotes action researchers as insiders of the organization they have chosen as subject of research. However, it is quite difficult for researchers to gain access to external organizations because organizations are not necessarily interested in letting researchers in, and they rarely have the resources to deal with research and the results of it. Hence, forms of collaboration where boundaries are kept intact are more realistic, thus making boundary spanning a kind of second-best option, when the possibility of transcending organizational boundaries is not possible due to lack of insider access.

#### **4. The researcher as a boundary spanner**

In literature, boundary spanners are defined as "human agents who cross and connect various organizations or units" (Vakkayil 2012: 210). The boundary spanner is considered to be an individual who has a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in a collaborative environment (Bordogna 2017: 4). The role may also be self-initiated and without self-interest (Schotter and Beamish 2011). Levina and Vaast distinguish between 'nominated boundary spanners' and 'boundary spanners-in-practice'; the difference lies in the fact that nominated boundary spanners neglect paving the way for collaboration because they are unable or unwilling to initiate genuine boundary spanning activities, whereas boundary spanners-in-practice engage in boundary spanning activities that lead to positive results for the organization (Levina and Vaast 2005: 340). For universities to be an integral part of the surrounding society and not least to attract external funding to maximise budgets, researchers are encouraged to engage themselves in problem solving processes with external actors. However, without organisational affiliation to the chosen subject of research, the researcher is unable to cross organizational boundaries. This situation leaves the researcher to facilitate the research process and the practitioner to be in charge of the change process, respectively, which demarcates boundary spanning as a continuous exchange between two entities separated by organizational boundaries. This

involves “relating practices in one field to practices in another by negotiating the meaning and terms of the relationship” (Levina & Vaast 2005: 339). However, in order to come as close to the ideals of action research as possible by assuming the role of a boundary spanner, the researcher - in addition to (A) establishing and upholding contact and (B) negotiating the rules of collaborating - has to apply the action research’s dual process of participation as part of (C) exchanging knowledge with the practitioners, as depicted in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The Researcher as a boundary spanner

A)	Establishing and upholding contact
B)	Negotiating the rules of collaborating
C)	Exchanging knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Practitioner’s participation in the research process</li> <li>b. Researcher’s participation in the change process</li> </ul>

(Authors own creation)

In the following, the methodology is presented, after which the two cases are analysed according to the conditions for the researcher as a boundary spanner, as outlined in Table 1 above.

**5. Methodology**

Two business development organizations, both governed by a board consisting of local and regional politicians, have been selected as cases; not because of their organizational similarities but because they in relation to the researcher’s attempt at performing boundary spanning activities turned out quite similar in practice but different in outcome. In terms of practice, the researcher was granted access to both organizations but in terms of outcome, the researcher only succeeded in having an impact on the change process in one of the cases, which makes the two cases suitable for comparing aspects that constraint and enable the researcher in taking on the role as a boundary spanner. As such, this paper applies a comparative most-similar-but-with-different-outcome case study design, providing the researcher with real-life situations and information to understand the underlying aspects of an issue (Flyvbjerg 2016). In addition to the recollection of the researcher’s own experience with taking on the role as a boundary spanner in the two cases, the empirical data consist of documents retrieved from each case: collaboration agreements, research group strategies, e-mails, notes and minutes from meetings, reports, power points, and development strategies on local and regional levels.

For reasons of privacy, the two business development organizations are kept anonymous because the involved practitioners work in politically driven organizations involving a plethora of public and non-public stakeholders. These privacy statements made in agreement with the organizations also concern the documents used in the analysis.

The involvement in the two research projects is motivated by the researcher being educated and employed at a self-styled ‘entrepreneurial university’ that, since its inception, has focused on a problem-oriented practice of involving practitioners to discuss and (re)shape research questions, in which the researcher has been accustomed to communicating with both the local community of practitioners and the international community of scholars.

**6. Analysis - Case I**

In May 2013, contact to the head of secretariat was made through an email proposing to arrange an employee seminar with the purpose of discussing and reflecting on the conditional growth underlying the practice of regional development. As proposed in the email, the researcher’s analysis of enabling

growth in two or more regional development projects would be presented at the seminar to facilitate two rounds of workshops. The head of secretariat replied by promising to present the proposal for the members of the joint secretariat on an upcoming meeting, but did not do so. Instead, a meeting with the head of secretariat was arranged in the beginning of July 2013 where the researcher was given the opportunity to interview project leaders from three regional development projects particularly selected because of their successful impact on implementing the regional development strategy. With input from the head of secretariat on matters such as case selections, the researcher prepared the research design and a description of a three-hour long employee seminar to be held by the end of September. In the beginning of August 2013, this was emailed to the head of secretariat who emailed a letter of consent to the three project leaders, advising them of what was on the way.

Along with the development strategy, the researcher received from the head of secretariat statutory external evaluation reports performed by consultants on the three regional development projects, which according to theoretical considerations were analyzed and operationalized into three interview guides. Based on the interviews with the three project leaders conducted during the last week of August 2013, a ten-page report outlining the research design, theoretical framework, analysis and conclusion was made and sent to the head of secretariat for approval. Based on the head of secretariat's feedback, the report was finalized and sent to the employees a few days before the seminar.

At the seminar held during the last week of September 2013, the research was disseminated to the employees, including those affiliated to the three regional development projects chosen as research cases. This was followed up by workshop sessions in which the employees discussed the presented results and how to convert this new knowledge into change of practice in terms of framing and facilitating growth in regional development projects. Another impact was that the presented knowledge at the seminar came to play a central role in formulating the impending development strategy, which was exemplified by having the headline of a central theme presented at the seminar reproduced in the name and mission of the strategy.

During the entire research process, the head of secretariat played a dynamic role in contributing to outlining the research design and providing the researcher with inside information and feedback on the preliminary results. At the seminar, the employees engaged in fruitful discussions on the presented key concepts and results, which provided the researcher with case-specific insights that further highlighted differences and similarities between the various regional development projects. Overall, knowledge was transferred between the researcher and the practitioners, thus contributing to the academic knowledge production.

## **7. Analysis - Case II**

In early spring 2015 at a strategy presentation held by a central municipality of the region, the researcher and the head of secretariat briefly met to discuss the idea of collaborating on producing knowledge on the newly established business development organization. Followed up by a formal meeting at the head of secretariat's office, the idea was sketched and a presentation hereof was put on the agenda for the upcoming joint secretariat meeting at the end of April 2015. The researcher's research group was briefed about the potential collaboration and they quickly formulated several topics that could be of both academic and practical interest, which were synthesized and presented to the joint secretariat who responded by appointing two members to explore this possibility of collaboration in terms of sharpening the topics and bringing in topics to be researched. In May 2015, the researcher met with the two appointed members of the joint secretariat to discuss these matters, and a first meeting with the research group was planned to take place in mid-September 2015, thus giving the research group time to narrow down the many potential research topics to common research questions. At the meeting between the two representatives from the joint secretariat and the research

group, the expectations to the collaboration were framed according to mutual learning, shared knowledge and knowledge production. A longitudinal research study involving two rounds of interviews was chosen and a cover letter and a list of respondents were produced and sent to the head of secretariat's office. The office promised to schedule interviews with political and administrative representatives of the organization that were to take place in November and December 2015. However, the interviewing request was delayed in being processed and granted by the executive body of the business development organization because the head of secretariat was on leave. Consequently, the first round of interviews was postponed until February and March 2016.

With the first interview round completed in March 2016, a thematic review of the 26 interviews was presented for the joint secretariat whose members displayed a keen interest in gaining information about political and geographical divides that could restrain the further development of the business development organization.

Meanwhile, the position as head of secretariat had become vacant, which derailed the initial plan of presenting the preliminary research to the joint secretariat in the beginning of August 2016 followed up by presentations to the executive body and the political board both to take place in November 2016. With the aim of resuming the collaboration process, a meeting took place in December 2016 with the newly appointed head of secretariat who invited the researcher to present the preliminary research on a joint secretariat meeting concerning the future of the organization to be held in January 2017. This presentation resulted in fruitful discussions among the practitioners who provided the researcher with feedback on the preliminary research. However, as a closing remark, the practitioners explicitly called for a written report outlining the overall themes of the interviews, indicating that they had expected such report from the researchers.

Consequently, a meeting between the head of secretariat, representatives from the joint secretariat and the research group was held in March 2017 to discuss future activities that could express the spirit of mutual learning, shared knowledge and knowledge production as explicated in the collaboration agreement. This discussion resulted in an afternoon workshop held in May 2017, where the research group and the head of secretariat's office shared knowledge in an attempt to come up with suggestions on how the administrative employees could further contribute to anchoring the business development organization on local level through communicational means and assisting the executive body and the board in succeeding in placing regional issues on top of the national government's agenda.

In September 2017, the thematic interview report requested by the joint secretariat was emailed to the head of secretariat's office, which once more had a vacant position as head of secretariat. However, in late October, a meeting between the research group and the then newly appointed head of secretariat was held, discussing the topics and recommendations of the report. On that meeting, it was decided that the researcher should attend the upcoming meetings of the joint secretariat, the executive body and the board, respectively, with the purpose of presenting topics and recommendations selected from the thematic interview report that could facilitate discussions of restructuring the organizational set-up of the organization.

In November 2017, the researcher presented the chosen topics and recommendations from the thematic interview report to the joint secretariat, resulting in discussions among the members about restructuring the organization. Due to political concerns, however, the head of secretariat had not in advance distributed the report to the members of the joint secretariat as the predecessor had promised at their January meeting. The head of secretariat, who was held accountable for this decision, indicated that the report was based on speculations and thus academically doubtful, which left the members and especially the researcher bewildered about the assisting role of the researcher in the occurring restructuring process. Consequently, the researcher's standing invitation to contribute with knowledge-based input to the further decision process in the executive body and the political board was withdrawn by the head of secretariat. Hence, the business development organization disregarded

the report and its recommendations by continuing more or less with status quo, indicating that the researcher had close to no impact on the restructuring process of the organization. Nonetheless, the researcher and the head of secretariat met at an externally held conference on regional development in the beginning of June 2018, and with reference to the collaboration agreement between the research group and the organization, the collaboration was resumed through the planning of a second interview round scheduled for the first half of 2019.

## **8. Comparative analysis**

In terms of establishing and upholding contact (A), in Case 1, the head of secretariat was contacted to improve the framing and facilitation of growth in regional development projects, which made the value proposition quite clear from the beginning, as they wanted to maintain legitimacy as a growth enabler. In Case 2, the researcher's value proposition was multi-purposed to begin with, but became centered around improvements on the organizational setting. However, because the position as head of secretariat became vacant twice, resulting in two periods without an appointed head of secretariat, the researcher had to invest time away from research to uphold contact with the head of secretariat's office in an effort to secure ongoing support to the researcher's participation in the change process despite the changing heads of secretariat.

Regarding the negotiation of the rules of collaboration (B), in Case 1, the research topics were discussed and agreed upon with the head of secretariat, and, in Case 2, a cohort consisting of two representatives from the joint secretariat was appointed to discuss and qualify the research topics. The fact that Case 1, for more than 10 years, had experienced a steep learning curve of collaborating in terms of improving regional development downgraded the need to take into considerations any concerns of confidentiality, sensitivity to others, and organizational politics. This made it easier for the researcher to negotiate and get access to documents, project evaluations and people. In Case 2, which at the time was in a turbulent phase of constitution, any concerns over confidentiality, sensitivity to others, and organizational politics played a pivotal role in explaining why the researcher did not receive any undisclosed documents, but had to rely on documents found online. However, in both cases, the head of secretariat provided the researcher with a letter of consent that opened up doors to high level offices that would otherwise have been difficult to enter as a researcher not embedded in the change processes of these organizations.

In terms of the practitioner's participation in the research process (C-a), in Case 1, the provided documents were analyzed and three interviews with the project leaders were conducted. These laid the empirical foundations on which the research-based report was written. This preliminary research had been reported in advance to the head of secretariat, whose feedback was incorporated in the final report that the employees received prior to the seminar. At the seminar, which was run by the researcher, the practitioners provided feedback on the preliminary research, contributing to the further research process. In Case 2, the online documents were analyzed and 26 interviews conducted with political and executive decision makers, which laid the empirical foundation for the research. At the joint secretariat meeting concerning the future of the organization, the discussions of the practitioners provided the researcher with new insights and feedback on the presented preliminary research. In both cases, the practitioners involved were all academics who were able to discuss and scrutinize the researcher's presented preliminary research for flaws and thereby contribute to the research process.

As regards the researcher's participation in the change process (C-b), in Case 1, the practitioners gained knowledge on how to better frame and facilitate growth, and the presented report's framework of growth was later applied by the board in formulating an overall development strategy. In Case 2, the practitioners of the joint secretariat were presented to the researcher's preliminary research, but as a consequence of political controversial topics outlined in a later presented thematic interview report – specifically requested by the members of the joint secretariat and containing the various



research topics covered in the interviews - these research-based inputs and recommendations on organizational development were never presented as part of the executive body's and board's decision making process of improving the organizational setup. The researcher contributed to the change process in each of the two business development organizations in similar ways, but because former debatable topics had become politically controversial and thereby were threatening the political foundation of the Business Development Organization, the researcher's impact on the change process of Case 2 did not match the successful impact in Case 1. However, it could have been a more impactful outcome in Case 2 if the research process had been executed as initially planned. Instead, it was delayed several times due to the lack of continuity in the position as head of secretariat, and because all the organization's entities had to accept the researcher's access to the organization. Also, the research process could have been better facilitated by the researcher and the two representatives of the joint secretariat had they foreseen the practitioners' demand for a written report on topics uncovered during the interviews and incorporated this cultural-specific expectation in the then upcoming exchange process between the researcher and the practitioners.

The main difference between the two cases has been the fact that the researcher, in the first case, succeeded as a boundary spanner by contributing to the change process through the exchange of knowledge, which, in the second case, was hampered by political concerns.

## 9. Conclusion

For universities to accomplish their third mission, researchers are supposed to perform boundary spanning activities covering the three phases of contact (A), negotiating (B), and exchange (C-a)(C-b). By comparing two case studies of boundary spanning activities, this study has shown that the researcher as a boundary spanner first has to put together a value proposition that plays into the practitioners' *raison d'être* of their organization. When contact has been made and access to the organization has been granted, the researcher and the practitioners negotiate the rules of collaboration that frame the change process and the research process. Finally, the researcher and the practitioners exchange knowledge in an attempt to advance the change process in the organization and certify preliminary findings in the research process. However, to assume this role as a boundary spanner, the researcher must be able to handle a certain degree of chaos, uncertainty and messiness, which is difficult for those researchers who like to be in control of the research process.

This study has also shown that boundary spanning activities, such as establishing contact, upholding contact, re-establishing contact, negotiating collaborative terms, and fulfilling the practitioners' non-research related demands, take a great amount of time away from doing research. Hence, universities that, in their effort to accomplish their third mission, encourage researchers to engage with practitioners in solving the surrounding society's problems should organize competence development courses on boundary spanning while also earmarking additional hours for researchers who assume the role as a boundary spanner.

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