

Rethinking Cross-Sector Social Innovation

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Title: “Exploring the material dimension of cross-sector innovation and collaboration in a virtual organisation”

Across western welfare states, governments increasingly put faith in cross-sector collaboration to compensate for the consequences of welfare retrenchment and austerity measures (Hustinx 2010). In particular collaboration or “co-creation” across public and the third sector organisations is seen as an innovative way forward. When investigating the innovative potentials and organisational perils of these increasingly prevalent “hybrid organisations” (Skelcher & Smith 2015, Eliasoph 2011) several scholars have been guided by the neo-institutional approach. Combining elements from the institutional logics perspective and interactionist theory, scholars worldwide have demonstrated how actors navigate or manipulate the multiple institutional logics inherent to the hybrid settings they “inhabit” (Hallett & Ventresca 2006) through “selective coupling” (Pache & Santos 2013) or “institutional tinkering” (Eliasoph & Lo 2012). And yet, as pointed out by Jones, Boxenbaum and Anthony (2013) the material dimension of the institutional logics remains underexplored –not least when addressing the institutional conditions that enable cross-sector innovation.

In continuation of this observation, we argue for the fruitfulness of studying the material (physical and virtual) aspects of the organisational contexts for cross-sector collaborations through a composite framework that combine insights from the institutional logics perspective with an interactionist appreciation of “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) and a “material phenomenological” lense that is sensitive to spatial formations and tangible elements of organisational practice. By material we thus mean the digital, virtual and physical spaces. As we will argue, including the material dimension will allow researchers, policymakers and practitioners to gain a more accurate picture of the factors that produce certain intra-organisational dynamics and enable the cross-sector organisations to navigate the institutional context with agility (or difficulty).

To sustain this theoretical argument, the paper present material from a long-term ethnographic study of a cross-sector online tutoring service, termed “Project Virtual Tutoring” (PVT). PVT is a publicly based, short term-funded voluntary online tutoring service where student volunteers and corporate volunteers provide online tutoring for disadvantaged pupils. From the outset, the organisational setup resembles that of other hybrid forms such as “programme based volunteering” (Meijs & Hoogstad 2001) or “empowerment projects” (Eliasoph 2009, 2011). But while such hybrid organisational forms have been criticized for privileging the needs and demands of volunteers and stakeholders over beneficiaries in their effort to please “distant hurried audiences” (Eliasoph 2011), the study of PVT revealed that the material context sustained a form of volunteering that we term “volunteering on demand” because the integration of ICT across

organisational settings made the organisation highly attuned to the needs of both volunteers, institutional surroundings *and* beneficiaries. At the inter-organisational level, collaboration between the public organisation and its private partners was enabled by various digital platforms, which sustained an ongoing coordination and managing of the tutoring across actors situated in different geographical locations and different sectors. At the interpersonal level, the virtual platform for the online encounter between the voluntary tutors and pupils, enabled a form of interaction characterized by a high level of flexibility in terms of accessibility and planning. Furthermore, the digital platforms used for coordinating and practicing the voluntary work and the dominant (entrepreneurial) institutional logic, co-produced a form of volunteering characterised by a high level of practice-focus and service-mindedness. All three forms of flexibility and adaptability was enabled by ICT and by the organisational management that pursued several logics at once of which the entrepreneurial one was the most prominent.

Based on these findings we suggest that it is time to develop an empirical and theoretical understanding of the role played by materiality when studying the structures that enable (or constrain) cross-sector innovation.

589 words

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