How to Collaborate Really Well with Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

We offer a meta-perspective on the collaboration between university academics and business practitioners. While academics often intuitively and implicitly take an inside perspective, namely a university perspective, in discussing collaborative research and the why, how, and what in collaborating with practitioners, we bring to the fore an outside perspective, namely a business perspective, on the same collaboration, which then typically is termed collaborative innovation. Doing this gives us the opportunity to mirror the two perspectives against each other and to discuss the differences, difficulties, and learning opportunities in the relationship between universities and businesses. Ultimately, we offer a discussion of how academics can be inspired to engage better with practitioners.

Keywords: academics, businesses, collaboration, innovation, practitioners, research, societal impact, universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent editorial of *Industrial Marketing Management* (Lindgreen & Di Benedetto, 2018a) noted that too often an article's managerial implications consist of "a simple rewording of the results section and little else" (p. 2). We offer insights to the explicit collaboration between academics and practitioners from the outset of a research undertaking. That is, research that is of interest to academics, but also clearly has meaning and importance to the practitioners involved. This is the "rigor versus relevance" argument: rigorous articles that provide significant theoretical insight are influential and highly cited, but relevance means a real contribution to both academics and practitioners.

Inspired by Chesbrough's (2003) seminal work on open innovation, the principles of collaboration and the idea of working with many different partners and sources in order to innovate in a sustainable manner (Laursen & Saler, 2006) are prevalent in most organizations (Hernandez-Espallardo, Osorio-Tinoco, & Rodriguez-Orejuela, 2017). As no one organization is likely to possess all the resources needed to operate successfully and solve all problems it faces (Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016), collaboration is used as a means to solve complex and diverse problems among individuals, teams, and organizations.

The basic aim of collaboration is to pursue goals collaboratively that otherwise would be difficult to pursue. Collaboration is described as situations where individuals or teams work together and share learning across disciplinary or organizational boundaries (Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). The idea is that while individuals lack adequate experience, context, and expertise to solve complex and diverse problems, collaboration offers greater epistemic authority, as collaboration allows the organization to solve problems that require capabilities based on inputs from multiple specialties (Beaver, 2004).

Although research historically has revolved around innovation (Desai, 2018), debate currently focuses on why and how academics should engage in university-business collaboration (Clauss & Kesting, 2017). Although university-business collaborations have increased markedly in relevance over the past decade, little remains known about these collaborations (Perkman et al., 2013). For example, academics often intuitively and implicitly take an inside perspective (i.e., that of the university) when discussing “collaborative research,” but this is just one side of the coin in university-business collaborations. The outside perspective (i.e., that of the business) is the other side of the coin in university-business collaborations, which then typically are termed as “collaborative innovation” (e.g., Hernandez-Espallardo, Osorio-Tinoco, & Rodriguez-Orejuela, 2017; Lakemond et al. 2016; Najafi-Tavani et al. 2018). We contribute to literature by identifying the similarities between, and the differences in, these two types of university-business collaborations. To this end, we draw on past literatures including that on academic-practitioner collaboration (Bartunek, 2007), collaborative theorizing (Nenonen et al., 2017), critical engagement (Bridgman, 2007), engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), and impact scholarship (Antonacoupoulou, 2009).

The remaining parts are organized as follows. First, we describe how universities and businesses often have very different motivations for, and expectations to, engaging in university-business collaborations. Next, we outline typical challenges that each of the partners face when engaging in university-business collaborations. Finally, we suggest how insights and advice given to practitioners about how to engage in university-business collaborations could serve as an inspiration for academics aspiring to engage really well in such collaborations. A place to start is for academics to recognize that practitioners are not a homogeneous group, and that it is important to develop competencies that permit ongoing learning and continuous improvement in collaboration skills.

2. MOTIVATIONS FOR, AND EXPECTATIONS TO, ENGAGING IN UNIVERSITY-BUSINESS COLLABORATIONS

2.1. Business perspective

From a business perspective, collaboration, involving a wide range of external partners and sources, has long been an important part of business *modus operandi*. The meeting of people with different logics, mindsets, skills, and ideas spurs innovative thinking and allows room for radically new ideas (Beaver, 2004). Studies find that organizations generally benefit from collaborating with other organizations (e.g., Cruz-González, López-Sáez, & Navas-López, 2015; Feller et al., 2013) and from involving external partners including suppliers, customers, and competitors (e.g., Najafi-Tavani et al., 2018). For example, collaborative innovations have been shown to expand the knowledge base and the innovation capability of an organization (Alexiev, Volberda, & Van den Bosch, 2016; Heirati et al., 2016).

Collaborative innovation, however, is characterized by being complex and risky and by involving highly unpredictable outcomes. Therefore, collaborative innovation comes with many potential sources of conflict (e.g., De Araújo Burcharth, Knudsen, & Søndergaard, 2014). As a result, collaborative innovation efforts often are described as "troublesome arrangements" (Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016: p. 26) and as "highly resource-consuming and often painful" processes (Huxham & Vangen, 2004: p. 200), with no clear criteria for a common approach. It is therefore not surprising that collaboration presents difficult problems that can lead to misunderstanding and ineffective learning (Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016: p. 26). Recent studies describe how collaboration can be inhibited by cognitive barriers (Skippari, Laukkanen, & Salo, 2017), problematic power dynamics (Chicksand, 2015), and differences in relational norms (Zhou et al., 2015), among others.

Universities present particular important collaborative partners for businesses (Etzkowitz, 2010; Perkmann & Walsh, 2007; Winkelbach & Walter, 2015) because universities spur and enable both technical development, as well as product and organizational development in businesses (Shaw & Allen, 2006). Universities promote real problem solving and continuous improvement (Pecas & Henriques, 2006) and act as co-producers of innovation (Muller & Doloreux, 2009). As research *per se* typically is not the goal of university-business collaborations when seen from a business perspective, businesses sometimes regard universities as advisors or consultants in the innovation processes. This perspective underscores a traditional assumption that businesses mostly are interested in finding quick and efficient solutions to their immediate problems (Pasmore et al., 2008, p.12) and in prescriptive knowledge immediately applicable in the organization.

Recent findings, however, that managerial interest in university-business collaborations is not limited to prescriptive knowledge, as managers equally are interested in using theoretical knowledge both conceptually and symbolically, challenge this traditional assumption (Åge, 2014). Following this perspective, businesses have ample reasons to engage with academic consultants rather than commercial or practice-based consultants. Academic consulting goes beyond the mapping stage (of benchmarking and comparative research); ideally, academic consulting challenges current practice and existing benchmarks (Docherty & Smith, 2007: pp. 277). Furthermore, in contrast to commercial or practice-based consultants, businesses perceive academic consultants to be neutral. Rather than concerning themselves with the issue of ‘repeat business’, academics are preoccupied with maintaining academic rigor while at the same time providing publicly accountable results (Docherty & Smith, 2007: pp. 278). Businesses therefore know that they receive honest and direct advice from their university partners.

2.2. University perspective

Most academics, basically, collaborate with practitioners in order to collect data that can give grounds for new academic knowledge. Academics ultimately are evaluated by their publication performance (Lindgreen et al., 2019). This is what grants academics legitimacy, and publishing in prestigious journals, therefore, is what typically drives academics. During the past decades, academia has witnessed an increasing heterogeneity in research designs. There is a tendency that academics within business and social science turn to more collaborative research designs through which they engage with external partners (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Godin & Gingras, 2000a Pettigrew, 2003). Questions have been raised about the role that universities play in society and the relevance, or the societal impact, that universities have (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). This issue has been described as the 'rigor-relevance gap' (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009) or the 'theory-practice gap' (Van de Ven, 2007).

University research typically is criticized for being too distant from practice to have a real meaning for society. A one-sided focus on academic impact, therefore, can threaten the legitimacy of academics (Aguinis et al., 2014). As a result, academics are expected to be more innovative and collaborative (Darabi & Clark, 2012) in the way they do research. There is increasing acknowledgment that research within business and social science—in order to stay relevant—requires that academics transcend boundaries between communities and perspectives, and that academics form productive collaborations with practitioners (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Therefore, academics achieve knowledge generation through collaboration, as mutual engagement is a necessary stepping-stone to, and the most important enabler of, societal impact (Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016). Societal impact is increasingly an important motivation for academics to engage in university-business research collaborations. There is a wealth of studies debating research relevance, using different concepts such as 'applicability' (Barge, 2001), 'usefulness' (Learmonth, Lockett, & Dowd, 2012), 'impact' (Leahrey, Beckman, & Stanko, 2017; Smith, 2018), and 'relevance' (Vicari, 2013). Research projects are designed with specific regard for the nature and objectives of coproduced knowledge and the different ways that different audiences consume it (Nenonen et al., 2017).

Another widespread motivation for academics to engage in university-business research collaborations is based on economic considerations. Internationally, there has been a continuous decline in public funding of research activities, which has led many universities to search for new ways of generating income and to commercialize their skills and research (Darabi & Clark, 2012; Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013). This development has spurred an increasing motivation for universities to engage with businesses and to create stable relationships with businesses. Furthermore, due to rapid changes in the general competition and speed of innovation, universities aim for stronger links with businesses (Plewa, Quester, & Baaken, 2005). Arguably, a paradigm shift is underway shifting the role of universities from primarily research and education towards also involving the role of “creating collaborative and innovative opportunities through engagement with industries” (Darabi & Clark, 2012: p. 478).

However, while establishing new funding streams is important for universities, few academics engage in collaboration with businesses only for financial gain. Academics assume, “or at least hope, that academia and practice are compatible” (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014: p. 1195). Walker (2010) questions the feasibility of close university-business collaborations, however, and points to problematic issues in the collaboration process such as: who owns the right to define the problems to be researched, ‘who has the knowledge to state the questions, and whose language and forms of expression dominate. The question, therefore, is whether academics should engage only in weak versions of collaborations, that is, little more than conversations between academics and practitioners (Walker, 2010: p. 206). Similarly, the scientific value of collaborative research sometimes has been questioned: while collaboration may be a sensible activity to undertake, it does not necessarily lead to improved research (Kieser and Leiner 2009: p. 528). Academics should hold their cognitive and emotional distance to their research object(s) in order to fulfill their genuine function of generating knowledge characterized by critical reflections on current practices (Kieser & Leiner, 2009).

2.3. Discussion

Searching for answers to the question of how academics can engage really well with practitioners, a first relevant issue to address would be the differing motivations and expectations between universities and businesses for entering university-business collaborations. Businesses typically collaborate with their surroundings to challenge their own existing practices, to expand innovative thinking, and to use the knowledge to come up with new perspectives and ideas that could spur product, technical, and organizational development.

Universities, in contrast, tend not to search for challenging unexpected input, but rather to look for answers to problems they often have specified in advance. Publishing is a clear priority on academics' agenda, and too much improvisation and creative changes of direction in the collaboration process often is hard for academics to handle. Therefore, academics need to acknowledge this gap of motives and expectations, ensuring that the university-business collaboration is useful and relevant for both parties. This means that academics should have in-depth knowledge about why their practitioner partners choose to collaborate with them, and what these practitioners expect to gain from the collaboration. It is important to consider the needs for, and commitments to, the collaboration from both parties. The academic collaboration leader should thus be able excel in management of expectations.

Practical relevance of university-business collaboration often is limited because much theory becomes 'lost in translation' (Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007: p. 249) due to the lack of coherence between the problems investigated by academics and the actual problems that practitioners face. Academics sometimes assume that a theory is "right," and needs to be properly disseminated to practitioners, for the theory to gain relevance. It may, however, be better to assume that the theory itself can be improved through interaction with the practitioner community (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer, 2010: p. 1193). Traditionally, only academics have taken the role of defining research questions, but many practitioners are very well educated, some have obtained Ph.D. degrees themselves, and therefore certainly are able to develop researchable research questions with meaningful theoretical contributions and managerial implications (Nenonen et al., 2017: p. 1136). For their part, academics increasingly are aware that they must engage in research that is useful to practitioners, as this will ensure trust between universities and businesses (Santini et al., 2016: p. 1841). The expectations from both parties about the outcomes of the collaboration, therefore, needs to be managed in order to build trust within the relationship (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

By continuously collaborating with practitioners within their research field, it becomes much easier for academics to engage and embed their research in ways that makes it relevant for both parties. This has led scholars to call for increased contact and interaction between universities and businesses (Bartunek, 2007; Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013). The role of the academic leading a university-business collaboration thus calls for a certain professional outlook. The academic needs to be in touch with, and to join the conversation of the practice field investigated. Through involvement in different collaborative research projects, academics build a common ground and a bridging position in the business environment, which then can serve as building blocks and antecedents to the larger research projects (Spekkink & Boons, 2016).

As a final observation, through collaborations the involved parties get the opportunity to connect with previously unconnected partners and, along the way, trusting relationships between them may develop (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Academic research needs to return to pragmatism in the sense that not only should research produce relevant academic knowledge; there is also a need for research to be socialized (Fendt, Kaminska-Labbe, & Sachs, 2008). Practitioners should be included in research processes as active, reflective, and empowered participants. Similarly, criticizing that most discussions about including practitioners in research still revolves around an ‘if’ question, discussing whether or not it is possible to produce valuable research knowledge in collaboration with practitioners, it would be relevant to rather ask ‘how’ collaborative research can be managed in order to yield both theoretical and practical value (Nenonen et al., 2017).

3. CHALLENGES IN UNIVERSITY-BUSINESS COLLABORATONS

3.1. Business perspective

Questions remain whether collaborating with universities actually is an advantage for businesses in terms of innovation performance (Du, Leten, & Vanhaverbeke, 2014). For example, practitioners are not likely to turn to academic journals and seek out research studies on management strategy or practice, when making business decisions (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). Practitioners experience that collaborations often turn out as unsuitable outputs that do not meet the needs of their businesses (Pertuzé et al, 2010; Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, & Rivera-Torres, 2009). A literature review of university-business collaborations identifies that many businesses join collaborations with high expectations in terms of benefitting from these collaborations (Yassi et al., 2010). Yes, practitioners often are disappointed to find out that academics are most concerned about their own interests (obtaining data for publication purposes, obtaining research funding, or getting academic promotions), and not necessarily forcing on the practitioner’s needs (Yassi et al., 2010). Practitioners thus find the common university-business platform often utilized for the sole purpose of serving the academic’s interests.

From the outset of a business-university collaboration project, most businesses expect the collaboration to show feasibility and practical usefulness of the businesses’ innovative ideas. Characteristically of universities, however, is that they work at a slower pace, and one that businesses may not be able to influence the collaboration process (Lazzarotti et al, 2016).

Businesses, therefore, sometimes find it almost painful to work with universities that focus on long-term academic endeavors (Darabi & Clark, 2012). Businesses find the bureaucratic system and the slow-motion culture of universities stifling of any kind of innovative progress (Darabi & Clark, 2012). Furthermore, "peculiar features" characterize academics and challenge practitioners (Lazzarotti et al., 2016: p. 144): Academics, for example, operate with more autonomy and freedom than practitioners do. For academics, the potential societal or monetary benefits of a collaborative outcome are less interesting than their own scientific publications and reputation. In general, studies identify how cultural differences between academia and business can result in differing attitudes and objectives of collaborations (Arvanitis, Kubli, & Woerter, 2008; Ylijoki, 2003). Additionally, the lack of trust between academics and practitioners can be a barrier to collaboration. Practitioners may fear outsiders and be unwilling to provide information to academics who may share it with competitors (Darabi & Clark, 2012: p. 487). While businesses traditionally have opposed the sharing of innovations by claiming exclusiveness in non-disclosure agreements (Lee, 2000), collaborations call for careful alignment of joint development agreements (Mehlman et al., 2010).

3.2. University perspective

In academia, much debate is going on concerning what good research is and, ultimately, which approaches the academic society favors in terms of publishing. In focusing on how to theorize with managers, Nenonen et al. (2017) note that collaborative university-business research relies heavily on creative abductive approaches. Abduction may be defined as an approach where innovation and creativity play a role in the scientific method (Mingers 2014: p. 53). Using an abductive approach, however, may cause problems for the academic in the reviewing process, because most journal reviewers are more comfortable with deductive and inductive reasoning (Nenonen et al. 2017). Proponents of collaborative approaches such as action research would argue that abductive action research provides results that practitioners may need, but academics may not value (Gustavsen, 2003: p. 93). Such collaborative research often is deemed of minor, less valuable importance than other scientific approaches. Consequently, despite its potential, action research is still very much underrepresented, especially in the A-level journals (Kieser & Leiner, 2012).

Collaborative research typically is somewhat more time consuming than more classic approaches to research. For example, the effort of recruiting practitioners for collaboration is a lengthy process (Nenonen et al., 2017). Academics easily can end up in situations wondering whether engaging in a university-business collaboration is worth the effort. Well-publishing academics may feel that there is not much to gain by collaborating with practitioners (Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007). Yet, few studies have sought to measure the effect of collaborative research and whether this assumption is true. The studies available suggest that researchers undertaking collaborative research do not necessarily compromise their other academic objectives by doing so (Godin & Gingras, 2010b).

There also is the problem of objectivity. Collaborative, interventionist researchers do not simply observe and collect data, they also offer solutions to the organization's problems, and the fact that they are conducting their research within an organizational environment indeed alters that environment (Arnaboldi, 2013). Such an approach raises concerns about the quality of a study's theoretical contribution because researchers might be so absorbed in finding the optimal organizational solution that they do not sufficiently reflect on the theoretical implications of the findings (Arnaboldi, 2013).

Engaging in collaborative research and "socializing new knowledge" (Nenonen et al., 2017; p. 1146), comes with a cost because it challenges certain academic conventions. While the demands for more societal impact and relevance draws researchers towards more collaborative approaches, academics often are discouraged to follow such approaches because such efforts are often not adequately recognized by universities or included in their key metrics (Nenonen et al., 2017: p. 1146). Incentive systems currently dominating the universities result in scholarly work that may indeed be irrelevant, except to other academics (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014: p. 1187). The choice of whether and how to engage with businesses is often contingent on the particular management philosophy at the university. Local faculty attitudes are central in determining whether the university is willing to aim for impact beyond academia (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). If, from a faculty perspective, impact outside the realms of academia is of secondary concern, it could potentially widen the gap between academics' focus on publication and the expectation of outside stakeholders (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016: p. 659).

Academics engaging in collaborative research also have to be aware of how their work could serve certain business interests and influence current business practices. Clearly, relevant academic knowledge can strongly upset the organizational power balance (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer, 2010: p. 1193). Academics must therefore reflect on who the recipient of academic insight should be: the powerful businesses and practitioners, or more marginalized decision makers who lack power (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer, 2010: p. 1193). Although there is a strong argument that research should stay relevant to the externally-generated demands coming from the practitioner's world (Vicari, 2013: p. 173), this approach can result in ethical dilemmas. Yassi et al. (2010) suggest that while universities should engage in service learning and participatory action research, they should also protect the professional integrity of their faculty who are engaging in such research with their practitioner partners (Yassi et al. 2010: p. 485). The ethical dilemmas that academics face when engaging in university-business collaborations can be considerable when participating businesses have invested significant amounts of money in the collaborative research. Indeed, Nenonen et al. (2017) hold that university-business collaborations may face scrutiny for ethical misconduct, especially in the case where private-sector research funding is a significant component in the university's faculty metrics and incentives (p. 1147).

3.3. Discussion

In its essence, university-business collaboration represents a collision of logics and a clash of different perspectives and challenges. As very different actors, with very different agendas and dilemmas, participate equally to find answers to a shared problem, a great deal of epistemic reflexivity is called for from the academic collaboration leader, acknowledging that no one partner in the collaboration—not even the collaboration leader—has all the answers in advance. The involved partners collaborate to reach common reflection and cognition, not only in defining the research problem, but also throughout the research process. This means that the academic collaboration leader will need to approach the collaboration with an open mind and a willingness to learn. This is, however, a central challenge for many academics because this requires that they open the door to external constituencies and stakeholders and invite open discussion of their research purposes and objectives (Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013: p.137–138). Only a revolutionary change in mindset will enable academics to do this.

Collaboration fosters opportunities for co-poiesis, which Bouncken (2008) defines as "the joint birth of knowledge" (p. 43). Distinguishing between knowledge combination, learning, and co-poiesis, Clauss and Kesting (2017) regard co-poiesis as a two-way phenomenon that leads to a synergetic combination of knowledge, which provides benefit for all participants in the collaboration (Clauss and Kesting, 2017: p. 188). By combining different perspectives on problem solving in intense interaction, co-poiesis have considerable potential for joint innovative generation of new insights.

In a similar vein, Hibbert, Siedlok, and Beech (2016) distinguish between two modes of engagement, namely instrumental collaborative exchange and curiosity-driven dialogue. While a rather limited approach in which knowledge is borrowed from partners for the purpose of a particular project characterizes the former mode of engagement, the latter mode of engagement enables a process of self-change and learning through engaging with others. In a curiosity-driven dialogue, people are reflectively aware of how disciplinary specialization is a constraint for learning. Therefore, the curiosity-driven dialogue is based on an acceptance of less certainty about the issue being studied, the outcomes that might emerge, and the costs and benefits that may be accrued (Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016: p. 38). Curiosity-driven dialogue opens the arena for new discussions and allows for deeper understanding of the knowledge and perspectives of others; there must exist a willingness to learn from those participants who may benefit from these discussions (Bartunek 2007: p. 1328). Such relational attitude serves as an alternative to the more traditional linear attitude, in which the researchers sometimes tend to bring not only the questions, but also the answers when interacting with practice.

Following this line of thought, the collaboration leaders must carefully evaluate their own practices and be aware of their own limitations and constraints. A single, specialized researcher will lack the required experience, context, or expertise to solve a sufficiently complex problem; collaboration allows the solution of complex problems, the solutions for which will not reside within the boundaries of any one academic specialty (Beaver, 2004: p. 403).

4. DISCUSSION: HOW TO ENGAGE REALLY WELL IN UNIVERSITY-BUSINESS COLLABORATIONS

While most articles would end up suggesting a number of managerial implications, we consider here the implications that the preceding discussions might have for academics or, to be more specific, academic collaboration leaders engaging in university-business collaborations. In searching for answers to the question of how academics engage really well with practitioners, we acknowledge that there are no simple or easy answers or quick-fix solutions.

A wealth of studies have focused on systemic issues such as the need for the academic system to expand a culture of relating to, and collaborating with, businesses and to recognize and support those individuals who excel at developing relationships with the practitioner community (Darabi & Clark, 2012: p. 490). It is important for the university system to learn from collaborating business partners, as these have shown an ability to engage with multiple stakeholders and to mobilize diverse knowledge sources in creating positive and practical results responding to complex problems (Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013). Although it would require tremendous changes in the university system to develop such collaborative capabilities, it is required in order to spur changes to current practice (Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013: p. 139). University faculties are central when it comes to setting a course of collaboration (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016) and, therefore, there is widespread demand for the scientific community to rethink the metrics used to evaluate scholarship such that academics are encouraged to attempt interdisciplinary research (Leahrey, Beckman, & Stanko, 2017: p. 132). Also at an individual level, there seems to be important issues that academics—with the ambition of engaging in collaboration with practitioners—could benefit from considering. In the following, we suggest three of such issues: conversation with practitioners, collaborative competences, and constant learning.

4.1. Conversation with practitioners

Most academics are busy with research, education, and funding applications. With a chronic lack of time, developing relationships with businesses risks becoming academics' lowest priority (Darabi & Clark, 2012). For some academics, relating to businesses is a rather exotic endeavor, which is much more challenging than the classical tasks of research, education, and funding applications. However, personal relationships and social networking are key requirements in collaborative relationships, and in order to generate that academic collaboration leaders need to join the conversation of the field of practice that they want to engage in (Darabi & Clark, 2012).

To 'socialize research' (Fendt, Kaminska-Labbe, & Sachs, 2008), academics need to engage in long-term relationship with practitioners. Successful collaboration typically is the culmination of a long-term relationship (Benneworth, 2001). Indeed, the real benefits of collaborations tend to arise in dealing with problems that arise during the collaboration process. That way, the collaboration impacts both the university and the business, possibly in unforeseeable ways, by affecting the social relationships that actually produce and use knowledge (Benneworth 2001: p. 226). This implies that building long-term relations, and following an open-minded approach to the collaboration, both are important.

Academics, however, tend to be protective of their resources and traditions, having perhaps a perception that dealing with external parties such as practitioners can be unpleasant, time-consuming, and frustrating (Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013: p. 139). Recent studies speculate why collaborative approaches often are deprioritized. Power dynamics, a need for security, and egoistic individualism are some of the possible factors explaining why people avoid collaborations (Raelin, 2018). In a similar vein, decision makers in businesses tend to suppress their use of collaborative engagements with external stakeholders when their legitimacy is at risk, for example, when the business' actions are perceived to be controversial (Desai, 2018: p. 220). While these studies do not focus specifically at university-business collaborations, they might serve as inspiration here. For example, is the reason why academics refrain from university-business collaboration that they might find themselves challenged by lacking experience in leading such collaborations or that they experience little or no control of the collaborative research?

A collaboration leader needs to be appreciative that practitioners are far from being a homogeneous, uniform group of collaborative partners. Often, academics tend to treat practitioners as a kind of 'black-box group', for example by using the term 'business' when referring to any non-university organization (Clauss & Kesting, 2017: p. 186). By regarding and treating all practitioners as one, academics risk overlooking the specificities of the very diverse group of practitioners from various sectors, businesses, and professional environments, and how they might represent very different approaches to, and aspirations for, the collaboration with universities. Maybe more sensitivity and reflexivity in discussing specifically how particular businesses can benefit from collaborating with universities would be of value.

Clauss and Kesting (2017) argue that most university-business collaborations are driven by academics who only are decision-makers within the universities. Therefore, practitioners should know the particularities of working with academics and understand how they react. The question could be turned around: what should academics be aware of when collaborating with practitioners? A starting point would be to recognize that practitioners are not a homogeneous or uniform group of potential collaborative partners..

4.2. Collaborative competences

Academics who hope to improve practitioner collaboration need to develop a skill set, which will serve them effectively. Collaborative research leaders often take on a role as the challenger, a role that involves ”challenging, re-conceptualizing and generally thinking innovatively about practitioner agendas” (Pollitt, 2006: p. 261). The ability to challenge and question a business’s taken-for-granted assumptions is a key competence that academics must have, but it requires both comprehensive professional knowledge and professional authority to engage in such a way. Universities that incentivize an intellectual environment in which assumptions are questioned and challenged obtain a unique competitive advantage and can substantially and positively influence the practitioner community (Paton, Chia, & Burt, 2014: p. 269).

Indeed, the role of academics should not be to offer immediate solutions of practical problems. Rather, academics must be prepared to open up the field of possible actions, shedding light on the situation itself, as well as on the problems to be solved (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer, 2010). An important element of this academic role is the capability to ‘relevate’ (Paton et al., 2014), meaning to expand the range of issues under consideration, or to include issues previously thought irrelevant, into the decision process. Paton et al. (2014: p. 267) suggest that academics are, interestingly, in an ideal position to accomplish these changes, due to their ability to offer different and challenging viewpoints to practicing managers and decision makers. These authors note, however, that academics are more likely to contribute value to practitioners if they seek to challenge conventional wisdom and familiar decision-making mindsets, rather than simply focusing on decision makers' immediate concerns. It is the act of creating dissonance on the part of managers that leads to the consideration of new and previously ignored decision-making possibilities.

Taking part in and leading university-business collaborations call, however, for a careful awareness of a particular set of competences. Studies have stressed the importance of culture and competences among individual collaboration partners, as this determines the execution of the collaboration process (Del Giudice & Maggioni, 2014). While some academics might be naturals in leading collaborative processes, some would argue that "the pressures on universities around funding and near market commercial activities are such that many academics are being forced into such activities when they are perhaps not suited to the task" (Docherty & Smith, 2007: p. 275). Academics will need competences that stem from the fields of, for example, facilitation, consultancy, and project management, which are not part of the classic academic training (p. 275).

For example, studies have shown that inter-organizational collaborations call for appropriate socio-psychological features and mindsets and a high propensity to interact and share knowledge (Jolink & Dankbaar, 2010; Lazzarotti et al., 2016). Bartunek (2007) points to the relational attitude of academics when arguing that "bringing one's whole self to an engagement with others, being genuinely interested in their experience, demonstrating trustworthiness, and seeking feedback from them represent crucial relational attitudes that create high-quality connections" (p. 1328).

In a similar vein, a genuine interest in the practitioners' life world is important. The concept of 'interactional expertise' is the competence that an academic can draw on when interacting with people whose practices and relationships the academic wants to study in a meaningful way (Collins, 2004). Interactional expertise involves the ability to understand and communicate about a domain that the academic does not practice. Academics who possess this interactional expertise have learned how to work with specialists, with their own particular knowledge and interests. That is, they encourage specialists to share this knowledge and discuss technical content and context. Thus, the academic not only accesses and becomes familiar with the specialist's knowledge, but develops a real appreciation for it (Langley et al. 2013: p. 6). Kieser and Leiner (2009) often are cited for their skepticism towards collaborative research yielding valuable academic output, but they address the value in academics facilitating collaboration where research is not the intended output. From that point of view, these authors point to the competences of being bilingual and bi-competent facilitators who are "able to speak the language of practice and science but also be able to transfer schemas between the two contexts" (p. 528).

4.3. Constant personal learning

To engage in fruitful collaborations with practitioners, academics must be willing to learn from their collaboration partners. There cannot be any collaborative research unless all participants share a fundamental interest in learning and in reflexively examining and questioning the shared work (Pasmore et al., 2008). In addition, academics should learn throughout the research process, through interaction with practice (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer (2010). Theories are approximations of the real world, and new information results in better understanding, better theory, and ultimately, frameworks, which are more useful for application in practical settings. Therefore, every time an academic is involved in a practical application of an organizational theory, it is an opportunity to improve or modify the theory

(Jarzabkowski et al., 2010: p. 1196).

While some studies on collaborative innovation highlight the concept of absorptive capacity when discussing “the ability of a firm to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: p. 128), these studies typically do so in evaluating the learning capacity of the practitioners (e.g., Najafi-Tavani et al., 2018; Wu, 2014). Following the idea that academics have to learn on equal terms as practitioners, it is relevant to discuss the concept of absorptive capacity on the academic side of the collaboration. As noted by Gioia (2013: p. 135), academics often call for organizational change and may sometimes complain that practitioners are slow to change their organizations; however, academics themselves may not “practice what they preach” in this regard.

Thus, instead of placing the locus of learning and change solely with the practitioners, as academics often do, the collaboration leaders might benefit from applying what has been called a practice orientation to research. According to this view, academics are seen as practitioners themselves, who collectively have accepted the implication that their own practice is incomplete and in a constant state of change (Antonacopoulou 2010: p. 221). Antonacopoulou points to the potentials in practice-relevant scholarship, which focuses critically on the research practice itself and calls for research practitioners to engage in ‘re-search’ and in “reflexive critique about the ways in which they perform their research practices” (p. 220). This highlights the idea that academics engaging in university-business collaboration have to be open minded, ready to learn, and willing to change the course of direction of the collaboration if new relevant discoveries appear along the way. In the end, that is what university-business collaboration is all about.

Overall, we argue that we need to look for learning potential in the way academics engage with their surroundings, and we call for greater sensitivity and reflexivity in the way academics collaborate with practitioners. Importantly, to improve collaboration, academics can themselves use some of the advice, which they dispense to management. The practitioner community is not homogeneous and time and effort must be taken to open the lines of communication and foster a collaborative environment. And despite the attractiveness of providing a “quick fix” to an imminent decision-maker’s problem, the greatest value (to academic and practitioner) occurs when the academic challenges conventional wisdom and traditional decision-making mindsets.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The piece is part in a series of the co-editors-in-chiefs’ reflections on important aspects of planning, undertaking, and publishing research in business-to-business marketing management, reflections that should help prospective researchers eventually to see their findings published in *Industrial Marketing Management* and other top journals (LaPlaca, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2018; LaPlaca et al., 2018; Lindgreen & Di Benedetto, 2018a, 2018b; Lindgreen et al., 2019; Lindgreen et al., 2019).

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