Intermezzo

Behind the Scenes

Intervention to improve Science-Practice collaboration in Flori-log Regie

Chapter 1 discusses that ILA-monitors assist innovation project participants by facilitating reflection. When reflection alone did not result in desired change of action ILA monitors initiated, when backed-up by project coordinators, a more elaborate intervention. Below I present an example of such an intervention in the innovation project Flori-log-regie. I will first introduce the aim and working approach of the project, next I will describe in a chronological way which tough issue hampered the project, and finally which intervention I took to assist in overcoming the tough issue.8

Innovation Project: Flori-log-regie

In Flori-log-regie managers and employees of the Dutch auctions and traders companies investigated new logistic models for the European potted plants sector. At the start of the project these chain partners had the ambition to change the current supply driven logistic structure into a more flexible and demand driven network. At the start of the project the concrete implication or value of this ‘demand driven logistic model’ was unclear. The assumption was that a demand driven logistic model was more sustainable then the current model, since it could decrease transportation burden and open up new market opportunities.

The construction of a new logistic model required a closer cooperation between the auctions and traders. Traditionally, the Dutch auctions and transporters did not collaborate since they considered each other competitors. Therefore, it was a major challenge for the Flori-log-regie to develop a closer relation between these chain partners.

For the development of new logistic models, Flori-log-regie initiated research on the following topics: (a) internationalisation; (b) orchestration models; and (c) network organisation. For the abovementioned topics, theoretical and case study research was executed. The case study researchers investigated the current international logistic streams of potted plants and explored expected future demands. The theoretical researchers

explored diverse organisation and network theories to provide insights into potential strategies to organise a demand driven network. In total, six companies, six research groups, two foundations and one trade association participated within Flori-log-regie.

I joined Flori-log-regie as monitor in the beginning of 2007. Since Flori-log-regie started in 2005, the project was already two years operational when I started my monitoring activities.

**Tough issue: science – practice collaboration**

During the first encounter with the project participants, I observed that employees and management of the auctions and traders (the practitioners) responded rather disinterested to the results of two theoretical studies. This observation was made during a meeting in which the insights of the completed theoretical studies were presented to twenty-four participants.

I addressed and investigated the issue of the disinterested reaction of practitioners to the theoretical studies by asking the project coordinator during an interview how the interaction between the researchers and practitioners was organised. From the answer it became clear that the interaction approach between the researchers and practitioners of the theoretical studies were completely different from the interaction approach of the case study research. For the case study research, researchers and practitioners formed a work group that met once every 6 weeks to collaborate and reflect on their research results. In contrast to this set-up, there had been little interaction between the theoretical study researchers and practitioners.

During the start-up of the theoretical studies, the theoretical researchers had three feedback meetings with the case study researchers. At the end of the theoretical studies (about a year later), the results were communicated to the practitioners through scientific papers that were presented during the meeting in 2007 (this was the same meeting in which I observed the tough issue).

The approach of limited interaction between the theoretical researchers and practitioners was in contrast to the project’s aim to conduct transdisciplinary applied driven research, as was stated in the initial projectplan (REF). The so called “theory-in-use” (what happened in practice) differed from the so-called “espoused theory” (the intended interactions) (Agryris and Schön, 1974).

Through telephone and regular interviews I reflected individually with eleven project participants on the executed research strategy of the project. The selected interviewees represented the diversity of the participating organisations; i.e. I spoke to researchers as well as to practitioners.
The practitioners indicated that they were unsatisfied with the outcome of the theoretical studies. One project participants articulated this rather strongly: "I think that the theoretical research was a waste of our project funds!". Another practitioner specified that the insights of the theoretical studies were not sufficiently embedded in the potted plant context. Therefore it was difficult for him to distinguish their value for the sector, or, as he stated: "The theoretical research resulted in scientific papers. I cannot translate those papers into insights that are relevant for my organisation." Another practitioner indicated that he wanted (and had to some degree expected) the researchers to simply provide advice on which actions the potted plant sector had to take.

The researchers expressed a totally different perspective. One researcher indicated that from the beginning of his study, he felt that the practitioners were not interested in it. He found this indifferent attitude very disappointing since he had seen this study as an opportunity to execute more societally relevant research. The rather vague research question of the practitioners and the minimal interest in his work motivated the researcher to write a paper that was primarily valuable in a scientific context.

When we examine the theory-in-use of the researchers, practitioners and project coordinator we notice that each group followed their deeply embedded routines. The theoretical study researchers wrote scientific papers, the practitioners waited for clear-cut recommendations on complex issues, and the project coordinator organised a rather straightforward meeting in which the researchers presented their results. This conventional approach appears insufficient to transcend inter-institutional boundaries.

After all the interviews with project participants, I discussed my findings with the project coordinator. The project coordinator wondered how he could have organised the communication between the theoretical researchers and practitioners more successfully. When the project started, the practitioners had not yet formulated a collective vision. This made it extremely difficult for the researchers to align (or contextualise) their research to the practice. Although the project coordinator was aware that the applied strategy of limited interaction was not in line with the transdisciplinary research approach within an emergent design context, he did not have an alternative strategy to effectively organise the theoretical studies.

I recognised the difficulty of contextualising research in practice. In fact, all monitored innovation projects struggled with this tough issue. Earlier analyses of innovation projects showed that for successful collaboration between researchers and practitioners, it is necessary to first initiate articulation within the practitioners and researchers group before fruitful interaction can occur (Hoes, Regeer, Bunders, 2008). I therefore reformulated the tough issue (it is difficult to contextualise research in practice) into the following question: How to contextualise the theoretical studies in such a way that it can contribute to the
sector’s transition towards a more demand driven sector?

Six months after the presentation of the theoretical papers, the practitioners had formulated a future vision to which all practitioners were committed. Encouraged by the abovementioned perspective, I was convinced that now was the moment to let the theoretical researchers and practitioners interact. It was essential that during this interaction, participants would not act according to their deeply embedded routines. A detailed strategy for this interaction intervention had to be planned.

**Monitor’s intervention**

The project coordinator embraced my suggestion to execute an intervention to contextualise the theoretical studies. I and the project coordinator had two brainstorm sessions in which we constructed the set-up of the intervention.

I put forward to switch the roles of the researchers and practitioners. The practitioners would first tell their story (future vision). The researchers would listen carefully and then pose questions, comments, and other relevant reflections. This way the theoretical insights could be embedded in the practical context. The project coordinator questioned if the researchers and practitioners would be fond of this set-up: "I think that the researchers and practitioners expect and want some sort of presentation of research results." However, I was convinced that it was essential that the researchers and practitioners did not follow their expected roles since it would trigger their deeply embedded routines.

For the preparation of the intervention, I aimed to manage the expectations of all project participants by clearly communicating the aim and the set-up of the meeting. I briefed the researchers and a few practitioners personally on the set up of and aims of the meeting and all participants received an informative email. In addition, I constructed a detailed scenario for the programme. The project coordinator and I also gave much attention to practical aspects of the intervention such as time, location, setting, etc.

I started the intervention with addressing the tough issue and making explicit the aim and approach of the meeting. I said: "This is a unique project in which researchers and practitioners collaborate. We experienced that applying such collaboration is difficult. We are searching for ways to successfully embed the obtained theoretical insights in practice. Today we try-out a new approach to embed the theoretical insights...". I instructed the researchers to first listen to the narratives and then to respond with theoretical reflections.

Next the project coordinator passionately told the story of the vision of the practitioners. The story was extended and specified by practical anecdotes and reflections by the practitioners. The researchers listened carefully to these narratives and responded by asking questions and giving theoretical reflections that were thoroughly explored in their papers.
Now that the practitioners had formulated their own story, they seemed to welcome these new outside perspectives.

After an extensive dialogue, I asked the project participants to formulate which actions they were going to execute after this meeting. This assignment assisted the project participants in taking the next steps in the action-learning cycle: from reflection to plan to action. It appeared that the reflections of the researchers motivated the practitioners to further specify their future vision and gave ideas for the actions needed for implementation.

At the end of the meeting the project participants evaluated the meeting: all participants indicated that they evaluated the meeting as valuable. The theoretical reflections were considered as refreshing and functional. Or as one practitioner put it: “I believe this was a successful meeting in which we were able to identify which next steps need to be taken.” Another practitioner proposed to organise such a meeting with theoretical researchers at least once every 6 months. A researcher said: “I experienced it as an open and delightful meeting in which there was little distance and reserve towards each other”. Another researcher said: “I am extremely content with this meeting. Looking back, I believe we should have interacted more with each other.” I made a creative report to embed the discussion of the meeting. The report concluded with an agenda that summed-up all the learning questions that were posed by the project participants and proposed strategies to address them.

In conclusion

With this example I have aimed to give more insight into the actual practice of a monitor in innovation projects. This methodological approach that I developed throughout my research, aimed to assist the participants of innovation projects in their efforts to contribute to a more sustainable agricultural sector. But at the same time it gave me in-depth insights into the challenges participants face and the strategies they have used to deal with these challenges. In the next chapter I will discuss my findings with respect to the challenges faced when implementing a novelty, particularly with respect to relating to the multitude of actors that become relevant to the project in this phase.

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9 From hereon additional text has been added to Hoes, Regeer and Bunders (2010) to relate this intermezzo to the other chapters in this thesis.