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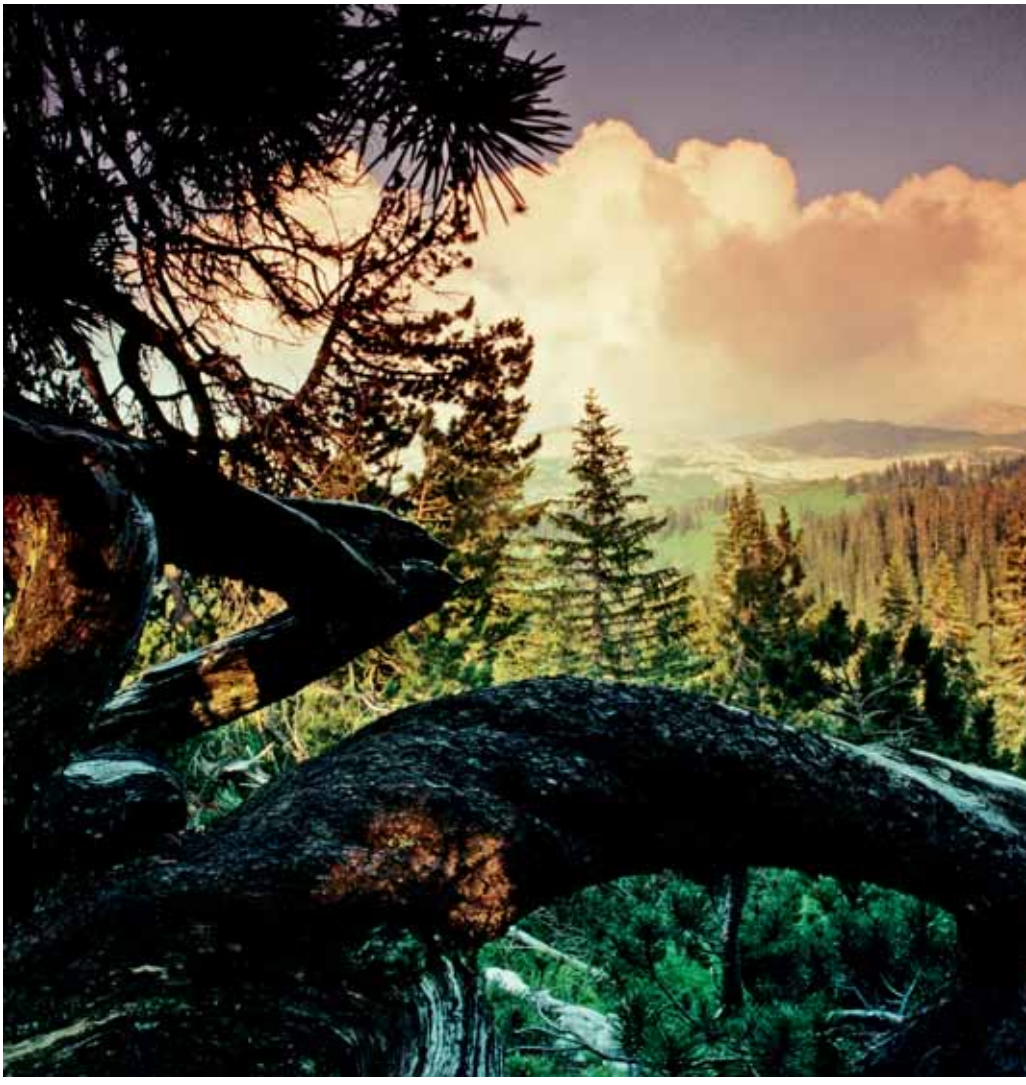

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From Project Management to Process Management

Effectively Organising Transdisciplinary Projects

In transdisciplinary projects, the roles of researchers change. In addition to being a source of knowledge, they are required to engage in knowledge exchange processes. This results in an alteration at project level: researchers need to creatively manage projects as group processes.

Heidrun Moschitz

From Project Management to Process Management. Effectively Organising Transdisciplinary Projects | *GAIA* 22/3 (2013): 211–213
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It is often stated that finding solutions to environmental problems requires projects that bridge the gap between science and practice, and which integrate the knowledge as well as the experience of all stakeholders. Many research projects thus aim at a transdisciplinary approach and incorporate practitioners. Nevertheless, it is often not clear how knowledge exchange in such projects can be supported and how all partners can be enabled to effectively engage in a science-practice dialogue. They need to see a reason for doing so, and the science-practice interactions have to be integrated into the research process. So the question is how to manage research projects that effectively support knowledge exchange.

The saguf working group *Knowledge Exchange,* in which I participate, has developed five principles for successful knowledge exchange (Fry et al. 2008, AG Wissensaustausch 2012). *First:* Allowing sufficient time resources enables openness towards different ways of knowledge exchange and for building trust in the collaboration. *Second:* Awareness of embedded social relations that rely on (institutional) roles and functions can effectively shape knowledge sharing in such a way that power relations are not played out. *Third:* Communication competence is needed to relate to different stakeholders in a constructive way. This involves a flexible personal perspective, and it requires explicit expression of implicit knowledge about a topic (Zingerli et al. 2009). *Fourth:* Knowledge sharing requires openness towards possible end products of the process, including failure. *Fifth:* Vigilant facilitation helps managing knowledge interfaces that support participants in sharing knowledge across different contexts and cultures.

Along these lines, this essay argues for an alternative way of organising research projects that allows for creative process management. This means shifting from mere management of different tasks to management of a group process. The following challenges need to be addressed: How does one build up a collaborative group of researchers? How can project management shape a knowledge interface in which project partners meaningfully exchange their knowledge and experience? What role does facilitation play and how can a project leader influence the process?

Two recent research projects within the EU's *7th Framework Programme* (see boxes, p. 212) have provided the basis for the following reflections. I am involved in both, as a research partner in one, as the project coordinator in the other. Both projects consist of several interlinked work packages, with partners leading one work package and participating in others. The projects involved intensive knowledge exchange and reflection processes, which developed from being cumbersome in the beginning to being fruitful in the end. This paper is based on the successes and failures of these processes; it aims to inspire future project managers on how to account for group dynamics in research projects.

Process Management with a Group Dynamic Perspective

The management of a group process starts with taking individual people, who may or may not know each other, and building a group to which each person brings a different individual and cultural background. Trust and personal relations need to be es- >

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BOX 1: *FOODLINKS*

FOODLINKS (No. 265287) is a project that assembles eight academic institutions, four policy partners, and two civil society organisations from nine European countries. The objective is to develop and experiment with new ways of linking research to policy making in the field of sustainable food consumption and production. It established three *Communities of Practice (CoP)*. Reflections on this project relate to the functioning of the core *CoP* on *Urban Food Strategies* (consisting of seven partner institutions). The input to this paper is the evaluation of the two years of *CoP* collaboration, where *CoP* members reported on their experiences of group dynamics, roles of partners, leadership, and facilitation.

www.foodlinkscommunity.net

BOX 2: *SOLINSA*

SOLINSA (No. 266306) is a project aiming at finding effective and efficient ways to support *Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSA)*. The research consortium (eleven institutes from eight countries) is purely scientific. The researchers each collaborate with two *LINSA*, to co-create new knowledge on the best ways to support these networks. This process is accompanied by workshops for the researchers to reflect on their interactions with practice. This paper is based on the experiences of the researchers at the reflection workshops and project meetings, in particular on the question: "During the (...) project, what has changed in your relationship and action with project partners?".

www.solinsa.net

tablished between project partners before they can effectively share knowledge, and produce actual results. Good project management needs to balance individual and group interests while working on the project-related problem (Cohn 1975).

Building Trust and Establishing a Common Ground

Icebreakers are useful to build relationships between partners who might not know each other in the beginning. It is also important to clarify different expectations and goals of the project outcomes and processes held by individuals. Hidden expectations can create uncertainty in the group and hinder collaboration. Appropriate logistics, as a seating that allow the best possible interaction between the partners, supports a constructive working atmosphere, e. g., smaller tables with four to six people instead of one large conference table. In both projects, people noted a growing cohesion between partners that enhanced social relationships, increased confidence in and common vision of the project, and created a good working atmosphere.

Experience of a group feeling in a project can lead to shared responsibility for the project's performance. While the group building process takes time, in which not many tangible scientific outcomes are produced, the sense of shared responsibility helps to achieve the project's goals efficiently in the long run. Building trust is thus not only about agreeing on common goals but about working jointly towards them.

Shaping the Knowledge Interface to Empower Participants for Co-Creation

Common ground being established, the participants can meet, communicate and share knowledge in a knowledge interface. According to Roux et al. (2006), such an interface is a conceptual and physical space in which different types of knowledge can be exchanged: in our case, the knowledge of senior and junior researchers and non-academic partners. Establishing a knowledge interface is necessary to create processes that bridge the different knowledge cultures and experiences.

Dividing the group into smaller units (two to three persons) and assigning clear tasks to each individual enables all members to take part in the discussions. This empowers all partners to participate in the process, regardless of their original role in the project, and avoids dominance by single project partners. A particularly strong approach is to change the format of the project meeting: from a classical meeting with presentations and discussions of the project parts to a workshop format with different partners as facilitators. This changes the power relations in the group and allows all partners to assume a meaningful role in the project.

Sharing responsibility for the success of a project meeting puts all partners in the position of thinking from the perspective of the whole group, as all are responsible for facilitating the group for part of the time. Their perspective changes from the individual, with responsibility for one part of the project, to the group level and back.

The Role of Facilitation

Shaping and guiding the group dynamics in research projects needs facilitation. It is worthwhile to arrange for facilitation within the project from the beginning, and to consider engaging a professional facilitator for at least parts of a meeting. Professional facilitation is particularly valuable for reflecting on the partners' experiences in science-practice interaction and collaboration in the consortium. Some partners might be critical of such reflections in the beginning, as those are not directly oriented to the content of the research. However, in both projects facilitation supported the development of a productive group. It enabled partners to transfer the experienced methods and improve their skills for use in the field work. Facilitated reflection leads to a better understanding of the project as a whole, strengthens the network between the partners, and enhances co-creation of knowledge.

Change is possible but requires re-thinking the roles and attitudes of project partners and leaders.

Facilitation needs to be learned and practised. Both *SOLINSA* and *FOODLINKS* provided opportunities for the partners to learn by sharing facilitation at the meetings. This is time consuming, and needs openness for different facilitation styles, but allows people to practice and build up experience.

The Role of Leadership

Facilitation is not necessarily a task for the project leader alone. Yet, he or she should be aware of the necessity of facilitation and plan for it. This became obvious in *FOODLINKS*, where the partners expected the group leader to motivate the group, provide guidance throughout the process, and set clear objectives for the overall group work. These expectations on leadership all referred to group building, but not to concrete (scientific) outputs, and conflict arose when these expectations were not met.

Project leaders are often designated on the basis of their expertise, and their focus is on the highest possible scientific impact. Such leaders are well-equipped for guiding researchers when the tasks are clear and limited. To drive a research project as an integrative process, however, a leader needs to guide group building and shape the knowledge interface. This includes having the courage to remain open towards (part of) the end products. He or she should provide the space for a group to decide on outputs so that everyone is motivated to engage constructively in producing them.

Similarly, for project meetings that are planned as workshops with different sessions facilitated by different partners, the role of leadership goes beyond assigning timeslots for each session topic. It involves intensive exchange with the partners who will facilitate a session: Which goals do they aim to achieve and which methods do they want to apply? Thus, the project leader can integrate the single contribution into the overall project workshop with its clear objective(s) and its own dynamic.

Conclusion

The changing role of researchers from being a source of knowledge to engaging in knowledge exchange processes requires a change at project level. Creative management of a research project as a group process is thus needed. This essay suggests some steps in this direction and shows that change is possible within given structures but requires re-thinking the roles and attitudes of project partners and leaders.

Process management conceives a project as a process in which a group of people sets out to reach a common goal. While individual goals remain valid, it is important to find group agreement on the overall objectives and the processes leading to them. Planning time in the beginning for trust building activities will create a good working atmosphere and strengthen identification with the project.

On the basis of mutual trust, responsibility and ownership is spread across the group, and results are produced collaboratively and efficiently. The role of a project leader is to clarify the corner stones. In consequence, classical roles are broken, such as with senior and junior researchers both playing a visible role during meetings: While the senior might provide substantial input, the junior can act as creative facilitator and find essential new elements for the co-creation of knowledge.

Process management requires careful facilitation. Engaging a professional facilitator can relieve the project leaders and enable them to actively engage in the group building processes. This improves project coordination, as content and process are both managed professionally.

Taking process management seriously has the potential to increase the overall satisfaction in the consortium, as all partners feel that they have contributed to the outputs. These outputs are far more than (scientific) publications at the end of the project, which continue to be relevant, but are also a growth of the partners' experience and knowledge of both content and process. The presented examples show that effectively and creatively organising research projects has positive implicit and explicit impacts.

Project partners of the *SOLINSA* project at a meeting, reflecting and developing new ideas in small groups, using various methods of visualisation and facilitation.

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