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## **Developing Practice and Theory Together: Reflecting on a Tourism Development and Research Project in Finnish Lapland**

**José-Carlos García-Rosell and Minni Haanpää**

## **Abstract**

Networking and collaboration between academics and practitioners is becoming more intense as a response to the growing demand for tourism research to contribute to the growth and competitiveness of regional and national economies. While this development challenges the traditional role of academia, it also offers an opportunity for rethinking the relationship between practice and theory. The purpose of this study is to reflect on the experiences from a tourism development and research project conducted in Finnish Lapland between 2008 and 2011. In doing so, the study draws attention to the opportunities and challenges faced by academic and tourism workers when combining development and research objectives within a single project.

**Keywords:** Practice, Research, Academic-Practitioner Collaboration, Ethnography, Knowledge, Tourism

## Introduction

The relationship between practice and research is constantly emphasized in response to the growing demand for research that contributes to the competitiveness of regional and national economies (Ennals, 2004; Häyrynen-Alestalo and Peltola, 2006). In today's society, universities are not viewed anymore as higher forms of intellectual life rather as entities embedded within an innovation systems promoting economic growth. Companies, politicians, funding agencies and other public organizations expect institutions of higher education to produce knowledge for managing private and public organizations in a rapidly changing global market. Not surprisingly, academic workers are actively exploring ways to develop theoretical approaches and perspectives that address the needs of contemporary industries.

By adopting a market orientation contemporary universities are taking up the responsibility for economic development in addition to the traditional research and teaching responsibilities (Ennals, 2004; Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Häyrynen-Alestalo and Peltola, 2006; Mills and Ratcliffe, 2012). One unfortunate consequence of this development is that many academic workers are becoming overwhelmed by their multidimensional nature of their jobs. They are not only expected to teach and do research but also to play the role of consultants delivering solutions to practitioners. The traditional approach of doing research and theorizing seems to face challenges in developing theories with practical insights and relevance. This also concerns tourism, hospitality and leisure academic workers who are expected more than ever to conduct studies with managerial implications. As a result, there is an urgent need for new approaches that help combine and fulfill simultaneously the responsibilities of the academic worker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Whilst acknowledging the current pressure on the university research environment and tourism, hospitality and leisure studies in particular, we suggest that academic workers should also recognize the value of mutual knowledge building and tearing down the wall that keeps them apart from the work done by practitioners (see Amabile et al., 2001; Lewin, 1946; Kates and Robertson, 2004). In a time of market-oriented universities collaboration with practitioners in their working context represents an opportunity for the research community to look into the social phenomenon it seeks to understand. As Richard Ennals argues, universities should develop new roles as community of practice, integrated into the social and economic development, and operating beyond their physical premises (2004, p. 239). In this study, we use the term "academic worker" to refer to professors, lecturers, research assistants and other academic positions involved in research activities. Similarly, the term "tourism worker" includes entrepreneurs, owner-managers, front-desk employees, tour-guides and other professionals working in the tourism, hospitality, event management and leisure sector.

In line with Barbara Gray (1989), collaboration in this study refers to a process of joint decision making and organizational arrangements through which academic and tourism workers collectively cope with the complexity of their environment. This form of academic-practitioner collaboration not only adds value by promoting a richer understanding of tourism and hospitality as a research domain, but also can contribute to the development of more innovative business practices (see Bramwell and Sharman, 1999, p. 393). Yet collaboration is

not without challenges. Though collaboration may denote an equal partnership, it is often based on a set of unequal power relations in which the needs of one of the partners may be prioritized above the needs of another (Jamal and Stronza, 2009). From this perspective, academic-practitioner collaboration can be problematized within a market society. Indeed, the term market-oriented university implicitly, if not explicitly, presupposes not only that the needs of practitioner institutions have priority in society but also that the primary task of academic institutions is to serve those needs.

Drawing upon the idea of building theory from practice (Schultz and Hatch, 2005; Valtonen, 2010), this study reflects on the experiences from a development and research project aiming to use practice as a trigger for theoretical development. This approach implies that the relationship between tourism research and practice, as we know it, is turned upside down. As organization scholars Majken Schultz and Mary Jo Hatch suggest “instead of defining ourselves as researchers who translate our theoretically derived knowledge (e.g. consulting tools, new management practices), we advocate seeing ourselves as tapping into practical knowledge in order to produce better theories”. This implies, hence, that the practical knowledge of tourism workers is viewed as a valuable and relevant for the production of academic knowledge (Islam, 2014; Schultz and Hatch, 2005, p. 337; Valtonen, 2009, p. 131). This has been the case in Schultz and Hatch’s (2003) study of the LEGO Company in which both researchers were directly involved in the process of redefining the brand of the company. By engaging in a mutual knowledge-building process and ongoing dialogue with LEGO managers, they not only helped the company to formulate its new brand strategy, but also got the opportunity to look into the managerial complexity and organizational dynamics behind the development of a global brand. The LEGO case offered them an excellent opportunity for the theorizing of the creation and management of global brands, thus making a theoretical contribution to the field of corporate branding.

This study considers the experiences of a research group, of which the authors were members, during the planning, implementation and evaluation of a three-year EU-funded project pursuing research and development objectives. The project was implemented between the years 2008 and 2011. It was coordinated by University of Applied Sciences A (UASA) in close cooperation with the University B (UB) and development organization C (DOC). The empirical data used in this study was collected during the project by relying on an ethnographic approach. Interviews, participant and non-participant observation (both in physical and virtual spaces) were used as data collection methods. In this article, this data is complemented with project documents (e.g. reports, memos, meeting notes) and the final project evaluation report conducted by an independent evaluator after the project ended. By illustrating the experiences of the research group working in the project, this study offers insights into the opportunities of taking a mutual knowledge building approach in which academic and tourism workers work together for the sake of better understanding and improving tourism and hospitality theory and practice. In doing so, we also expose the tensions and dilemmas that researchers face when adopting such approach.

This article is structured as follows. First we introduce the project used in this study. Then we discuss the ethnographic methodology as a research strategy chosen for the

implementation of the project. Thirdly we move on to discuss the experiences on collaboration between tourism enterprises and researchers. Finally we reflect on the experiences gained and their implications for such collaborative endeavors.

### **Regional Tourism Research and Development Project as a Premise for Multidimensional Collaboration**

The case discussed herein is a development and research project ‘Tourism Product Development’ funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and implemented by UASA in collaboration with UB and DOC between the years 2008 and 2011. One of the aims of the Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences is to conduct applied research and development activities which serve the needs of industry and entire regions. On the other hand, the universities in Finland have scientific research and instruction as their main fields of responsibility. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). While Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences have different mission and profile, there is an increasing pressure on Finnish universities to deliver research that responds to the needs of the national market economy. DOC was a special state-funded cluster program on tourism that aimed to promote competitiveness, knowledge generation and research in Lapland.

These three tourism and hospitality educational, research and development organizations are viewed as key pillar for the future social and economic development of Lapland (see Regional Council of Lapland, 2011). By combining the expertise of these organizations, the project aimed to promote inter-organizational collaboration for working towards common research and development objectives connected to this Nordic region. Lapland is the northernmost province of Finland and the European Union. With 3.5% of Finland’s total population and about 30% of total area of Finland, Lapland is by far the least densely populated region in Finland and highly dependent on the income of rural industries. In particular, tourism companies have been recognized as an integral part of the local economy, a major source of employment and, consequently, one of the main drivers of economic and social development in this rural province (see Regional Council of Lapland, 2011). About a thousand SMEs make up the industry, from which only a few destination management companies (DMCs) can be regarded as medium-sized (see Regional Council of Lapland 2011).

As a response to the development needs of Lapland, A tourism research institute was established in 2009 by combining the tourism and hospitality education and research from three separate educational institutions: Tourism College, vocational secondary education; UASA, applied hospitality and tourism education at Bachelor and Master’s level; and UB, tourism degrees at Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels (Reference to be added later). The project discussed in this study took place during the establishment of the tourism research institute and it was a pilot experiment on research cooperation between UASA and UB. Furthermore, it was also viewed as an opportunity to develop alternative ways of conducting research in cooperation with the tourism and hospitality industry. Despite the emphasis on applied research in UASA the research undertaken there relied to a high extent on traditional

data collection methods of interviews and surveys. In the project planning and design the alternative, more recent ideas of conducting research in social sciences were introduced by UB researchers and the research design was strongly influenced by the idea of building theory from practice as discussed by Schultz and Hatch (2005).

The main purpose of the project was to engage a research group formed by researchers from UASA and UB in the development of a tourism product development approach with theoretical and managerial implications. The idea was to further develop the understanding on product development considering especially the operating environment of small tourism companies, as well as the competitiveness and organizational dynamics of the tourism sector in Lapland. Three main objectives were defined for the project: First, to conduct a literature review on tourism product development; second, to develop an alternative approach to tourism product development; and third, to create a handbook on tourism product development targeted at tourism practitioners. The research group consisted of five researchers under the supervision of a research leader. The researchers held different positions in the two organizations but were all PhD candidates at the time. The research group work was also supported by a representative from DOC and a representative from the unit of development services of UB. The authors of this article were members of the research group.

There were six companies involved in the project. While five companies operated in the tourism and hospitality industry (e.g. accommodation, restaurant business, heritage, adventure and nature-based safari tours), one company was a recruitment services provider for this sector. Five companies were situated in Lapland and one company was located in the province of Oulu. The size of the companies varied from 2 to 300 fulltime-employees. The largest number of employees was held by the recruitment services company operating in Finland and Estonia. The oldest company had been in the market for almost 40 years, while the newest was in its second year of operation. One of the main motives for all the companies to participate in the project was their desire to develop their organizational skills and practices in the field of tourism product development. In fact, all participants agreed that there was a lack of guidance and approaches for developing products and services in the tourism industry. In the next chapter, we move on to discuss how the collaborative ethnographic research approach was developed to address these concerns.

### **Ethnography as tool for developing theory and practice**

The method of ethnography has become very popular in marketing, management and organizational studies (e.g. Cayla and Arnould, 2013; Gellner and Hirsch, 2001; Islam, 2014; Mills and Ratcliffe, 2012; Naidoo, 2012). Global corporations such as Xerox, Intel, Procter & Gamble and Microsoft employ ethnographers to help them develop products or explore new market opportunities (Cayla and Arnould, 2013). There is also a growing number of consulting companies offering ethnography as a tool for gathering market knowledge and developing organizational practices (Mills and Ratcliffe, 2012). For example, Tekes – the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation (Suutari, 2013) has drawn attention to the value of ethnography in supporting research and development activities in a market context.

Ethnography has also been used widely in research and development projects (reference to be added later). For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization published a handbook for combining ethnography and action research in development projects (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn, 2003).

Ethnography has been recognized as methodological approach that offers access to a large variety of data that can be used to support both research and development goals (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). As a methodology, it has also gained ground in recent development oriented tourism and hospitality literature (e.g. Nogués Pedregal, 2007; Stickdorn, Frischhut and Schmid, 2014). Ethnography can be viewed as a response to the call for more holistic approaches to understand tourism and hospitality phenomena as social constructions which exist in lived, perceived and conceived as well as physical space (see Pritchard and Morgan, 2006). From this perspective, ethnography can be described as reflective learning processes of continuous assessment and action in collaboration with the individuals participating in the study (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Cayla and Arnould, 2013; Islam, 2014). By giving primacy to observing naturally occurring tourism product development practices and building interpretations of this phenomenon by including informants in the theorizing process (see Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Islam, 2014), ethnography was viewed as well suited approach to work towards the academic and development goals of the project.

While the research phenomenon was clearly defined before the start of the project, the research group found necessary to conduct a literature review to determine and analyze the state of knowledge of tourism product development. In addition, 50 thematic interviews focusing on how tourism practitioners understand and approach tourism product development in practice were conducted with representatives of tourism and hospitality companies located in the provinces of Lapland and Oulu. Interviews were carried out by students of UASA under supervision of a group of teachers led by one of the members of the research group. The literature review and the interviews took place during September 2008 and March 2009. All the interviews were appropriately recorded on audiotape and then transcribed. The outcomes of the literature review and interviews were presented in an international tourism and hospitality research conference.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE.

After identifying theoretical and practical information related to tourism product development, we shifted our attention to each of the six companies participating in the project. As mentioned before, the approach of the project was to build theory from practice (Schulz and Hatch, 2005). Such approach understands knowledge in organizations as produced and learned in everyday action. Knowing is inseparable from doing. (Gherardi, 2000, p. 214-215.) Tourism product development does not only happen in official workshops and managerial action, but takes place in different company practices: planning, training, guiding tours and so on. By reviewing these less obvious practices it is possible to identify them as well as understand what guides them (Laine, 2009, p. 198.) In line with this understanding, the ethnographic approach was chosen as a research strategy which would allow the researchers to immerse into daily practices and processes of the companies. The



ethnographic approach was designed as a collaborative process (e.g. Islam, 2014; Marcus, 2014). Based on the situation of each company and the theoretical and practical information we had about product development, we started planning the research process with each of the six companies. This was done in close collaboration with the company's representative(s). By helping each company to explore and identify its needs and challenges in relation to the development of tourism products, we were able to elucidate how research done in collaboration with the company could contribute to improving its current situation (see Kates and Robertson, 2004).

Different aspects of product development were emphasized in each company. For example, while one company decided to focus on the role of customer in product development, one company wanted to explore how product development can contribute to the responsible combination of local culture, traditional industries and tourism. After the planning phase, the researchers involved in the case collected empirical data via participant and non-participant observations. These data was documented with the help of field journals, camera, video camera and/or voice recorder. The intervention in the six companies produced 100 of pages of field notes, 60 hours of video material, 1000 pictures and 30 hours of audio material.

While the entire research process revolved around the notion of tourism product development, they were different in nature and scope. In one case the researchers designed workshops in which the recruitment service company meets with their customers to discuss possible solutions for meeting the human resources needs of the tourism and hospitality sectors. Another case was based on the monitoring and evaluation of tourism services offered by the companies. Especial attention was given to the practices of customers, employees and suppliers during the implementation of the tourism products. In one case, the researchers were following the implementation of a four-week training program for seasonal workers as part of the tourism product development activities of the company.

In the reflecting phase members of the research group meet with one or more representatives of the companies to discuss and reflect on the outcomes of the research actions. These meetings differed from company to company. In some cases, the meeting as a conversation between two or three persons, while in other case it was a seminar including 5 to 10 employees of the company. In some occasions a written report with observations conducted during the intervention was given to the company's previous to the meeting, while in other the outcomes were presented on site. The researchers also reflected on the field experiences and collected materials inside the research group. These collective reflexive practices were significant in creating shared meanings and understanding and also acted as a tool for ensuring the validity of the research (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 2005). The reflection phase was also used for planning the next research steps inside the company.

## Reflections on the Collaborative Development and Research Actions

### *Gaining access: overcoming obstacles and developing trust*

Here we move on to reflect on the actual collaboration between the different organizations involved. In gaining access to the field four different aspects were identified: institutional barriers, understanding of research practice, time as a resource and practices of trust building.

Before the beginning of the actual implementation of the project, the acknowledgement of project's research objectives faced *institutional barriers*. The research group in collaboration with other staff members of UASA and UB worked on the project proposal for over ten months. The proposal was almost ready and the funding agency had expressed positive views on the project idea. There were, however, two issues that were open to discussion: First, the acknowledgment of research objectives by the funding agency and second, the official confirmation of the companies participating in the project. Despite the pressure on Finnish universities to conduct research that is relevant for promoting the market economy, the view that development and research objectives cannot be included in the same project seems to prevail. There is still a silo approach on funding research and development initiatives. Projects funded by the European Union under programs such as European Regional Development Fund or European Social Fund clearly emphasized development goals. While in a project funded by these programs it is possible to carry out research to support the development task, they do not acknowledge theoretical development as a project objective. Several negotiations with the funding agency took place before reaching an agreement on the role of research in the project. The involvement of UB researchers and their essentiality for the successful implementation of the project demanded thorough explanation. Indeed, the whole project idea was to a certain extent born out of the work done by the researchers from the UB. As the approach taken in the project was based on the idea of developing theory from practice, the development aspect of the project was essential for the research goals and vice versa. This viewpoint helped to convince the funding agency and get their approval under certain conditions. However, it was stated that for the project to be funded the development objectives were to have priority over research objectives.

Since the project combined research and development objectives, it was decided that in addition the project manager also a research leader should be appointed. This is not a common management arrangement in development projects. A marketing professor experienced in the field of tourism and hospitality assumed the role of research leader. While the project manager took care of all administrative tasks, the research leader took responsibility for leading and supervising the work of the research group. The research leader played a very important role in defining the ethical research principles, giving feedback on research design, implementation and outcomes, promoting theoretical discussion and watching over the research goals of the project. This division of work helped to keep a balance between the development and research objectives set for the project.

Once the approval for doing academic research as part of a development project was granted, the participating companies needed to be officially confirmed. Indeed, one key requirement for such funding is that a certain number of companies are involved and

committed towards the objectives of the project. This was a very challenging task since the companies were signing a commitment to both development and research objectives. The *understanding of research practice* shared by the companies discouraged them to commit to the project. Research was seen as a less valuable part of the project and as something demanding unnecessary time and resources from the companies (see Ballantyne, 2004). For example, one of the entrepreneurs was concerned about researchers coming to the company with a survey or a battery of questions for conducting interviews with employees and/or customers. All companies were very skeptical about the idea of opening their doors to the researchers, mainly from the UB. Indeed, companies were more familiar with UASA as an institution implementing applied research tasks such as market or customer analysis or business plan development. The project manager had to become involved in the process by writing e-mails to as well as calling and meeting face-to-face with the representatives of the potential companies. She had to persuade them that the research and development approach adopted in the project was not the one companies were used to deal with. Although the project manager emphasized constantly, that the aim was to develop theory from practice, it was very difficult for the entrepreneurs to understand what was meant by this. Finally, after a long negotiation process, six companies confirmed their participation in the project by signing an official agreement.

Concerning the understanding of research practice it became obvious that *time was considered a crucial resource* by the companies when deciding on whether to participate or not in the project. Previous experiences on research collaboration with UASA led some companies to assume that it would be time demanding. They have had for example bachelor thesis students conducting interviews and surveys in the premises of the company. While they seemed to appreciate the results from these studies, they showed also a concern over the time demand that such research collaboration put on the company's employees and customers. Because of these experiences some entrepreneurs viewed researchers as a disturbance for the company processes as well as distraction of human resources from where they are needed. Also, it needs to be noted that the field research conducted in the project was planned to be fully implemented toward the end of 2009 which represented the beginning of the winter season for most companies in Lapland. The companies were busy preparing themselves for the coming season. Hence, their willingness to participate was not only obstructed by assumptions about the role of the researchers in the companies but also by the timing of the field research. The development projects in general also had an image of being very demanding and time consuming. Since EU-funded development projects have become very common in a region like Finnish Lapland, most of the companies had previous experiences of project work and the time required by it. It demanded a lot of persuasion and negotiation to ensure the companies that their participation in the project will not put any pressure on their time and economic resources. For the sake of this project, it was critical to ensure that the universities, companies and funding agency involved are supportive of the academic-practitioner collaboration established within the project (see Amabile et al., 2001).

Once the companies opened their doors to the researchers, we needed to start working on *building trust* with the members of the company assigned to the project (Eriksson and

Kovalainen, 2008, p. 55). Nonetheless, before contacting the companies, the research group decided to allocate one specific researcher per company. This person was not only the link between the research group and the participating company but also responsible for planning, implementing and reporting the research done in that specific company. The first step was to organize a meeting with each company representative to discuss the project objectives and their connection to the company in question. While some companies were represented by the owner her/himself, others were represented by employees involved in the task of product development. The first meetings always began by explaining the research approach as well as the responsibilities of different parties. Clarifying commitments, roles, responsibilities and expectations were seen as preconditions for developing the kind of academic-practitioner collaboration needed to work towards the objectives of the project (Amabile et al., 2001). During this meeting, the company-specific aspects of product development to be focused on during the project were also determined. These became then the focus of the research conducted in the project. This dialogue-based process of data collection became a means to engage with and develop trust and credibility among the entrepreneurs and the tourism workers of the companies involved (see Dredge, Hales & Jamal 2013). Next we move on to consider how the collaborative ethnographic approach helped build new understandings on tourism product development.

### ***Dialogue as a Way of Improving Practices and Understandings of Product Development***

The research and development approach taken in the project granted access not only to the premises of the tourism companies but also to the practical knowledge of the tourism workers. This represented an opportunity to develop and rework the conceptual and theoretical understanding on tourism product development (see Valtonen, 2010). Indeed, by engaging with the practical knowledge of tourism workers, the researchers were able to formulate critical questions and give new meanings to the notion of product development within a tourism context. During the research process the research group members were able to challenge their initial assumption and understanding of product development in theory and practice. Working in the field in close collaboration with the tourism workers helped them to acknowledge other aspects of product development. For example, the way some tourism workers referred to product development as a means to preserve their cultural heritage and construct their identity drew their attention towards the social and cultural aspects of product development. It challenged the prevailing view of approaching product development as a managerial tool for achieving nothing else than economic objectives. Similarly, by taking part in the training program for seasonal tourism workers offered by one of the companies, the research group was able to pinpoint a relationship between the training program and product development. Usually staff training and product development are treated as two different business areas. While studies have emphasized the value of tourism workers' knowledge in product development (e.g. Valtonen, 2010), throughout the project we realized that workers are not only producers but also consumers of the products they helped to develop. Research collaboration also questioned the initial idea of creating a model for tourism product development. Working with the practitioners helped the research group understand that it is

almost impossible to develop such a model since product development is done in a continuous basis and highly overlapped with the different areas of a company.

The research group found the approach taken in this project rewarding because it contributed significantly to furthering their understanding about tourism product development in theory and practice. They were able to collect a large amount of empirical data and familiarize themselves with the academic literature related to tourism product development. As part of the project activities, the research group also took part in several benchmarking trips where they had the possibility to familiarize themselves with the discussions on product development taking place in other European countries. Their benchmarking experiences were fed back into their research and the creation of the 'Handbook for Tourism Product Developers'. The research group appreciated the idea of learning from the everyday life of tourism workers. 'We believe in the idea of tearing down the wall that separate theory and practice, that theory and practice are located in different places. We believe that the role of researchers will change in the future. The idea of researchers working in a cubicle will soon be gone; the role of researchers in our society is changing' (Excerpt 1, interview, Pääkkönen, 2011). Their motivation based on their personal and professional interest in the topic and the dynamic collaboration with the companies contributed to a high level of engagement in the project (Dredge et al., 2013).

By opening their doors to the research group, the companies allow the researchers to take part in their product development meetings, employees' training programs and service programs among other business activities. For example, in one case one of the researchers spent several days in a snow-shoeing tour implemented by one of the companies. By participating in the tour, the researcher was able to gather ethnographic data that helped the company to gain a better understanding of its customers and thus refine its service strategies (see Cayla and Arnould, 2013). 'During the night I waked up a couple of times. It could be because it felt weird to sleep on a bed with a sleeping bag. I would prefer to sleep on the floor. But it was just me. Some human noises could be heard through the night. For example, the Brits in the neighboring room were snoring all night. Snoring became a topic of discussion during the tour. It seems that sleeping as a practice is an important part of this kind of tourism products. One is not only in a new dormitory, room and using impersonal sheets but also sharing the practice with strange individuals. Perhaps not only this company but other similar firms should give a thought about how to make the sleeping experience more pleasurable' (Excerpt 2, field journal). This excerpt also shows how the collection and analysis of the data are influenced by the different perspectives and positions that the researcher may take during the ethnographic research. The researcher is at the same time a tourists, a tourism expert and a body in need of sleep.

In effect, during the project the benefits for everyday practices of the companies became clearly graspable. 'Total outsiders [referring to the researchers] bring new things, new perspectives all the time. They question why we do things the way we are used to do them, even though it may not be the best way of doing it' (Excerpt 3, interview, Pääkkönen, 2011). Researchers play a key role in promoting reflexivity allowing tourism workers to question their organizational practices (Islam, 2014). 'When the researcher was taking part in our

tourism product, when he was looking into our product from a customer's point view, we got a lot of different ideas that we have implemented in practice and regarded as very important' (Excerpt 4, interview, Pääkkönen, 2011). Eventually the idea of developing theory from practice and letting researchers to take part in the everyday of the tourism company was viewed by the six companies as a successful approach. This is an interesting result considering the initial negative attitudes and distrust of companies regarding research and the idea of opening their doors to a group of researchers. In line with Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), the companies realized the value of research that focuses on observing doings and sayings in a natural context rather than asking respondents to generalize about their actions in a survey research. As one company representative put it: 'The best thing of this project was when we organized a brainstorming session with the researchers. It was a very fruitful event, they had analyzed very well our work offering us good recommendations for both our future actions and developing our company's identity' (Excerpt 5, interview, Pääkkönen, 2011). The process of combined development and research actions encouraged company staff to try out new ideas, even if they might have questioned their organizational routines, procedures and practices (Ballantyne, 2004, p. 329).

The six companies that took part in the project got concrete benefits from their involvement in the research process. The objectives in each company were set collaboratively and they were continuously reflected through out the research process. In general, all companies were satisfied and positive with the research approach used in the project. 'This was such a project from which we got some benefits. Just the expert advice and the product development process, it was good that there was a person [referring to the researchers] who was looking and following our product from a specific perspective. For me, it is very easy to pass things unnoticed, but here, I was continuously reminded of what can I could improve' (Excerpt 6, interview, Pääkkönen, 2011). Most of the entrepreneurs told that the approach taking in the project helped them look at their tourism products and services from a different perspective.

By combining the knowledge and experiences of researchers and practitioners, new theoretical insights and connections emerged during the project (Ballantyne, 2004, p. 328). One of the main outcomes of the process was the co-creation of an online publication "Handbook for Tourism Product Developers" (reference to be added later). The idea of building theory from practice gave way to an action and reflection process aimed at combining the knowledge of academic and tourism workers whilst at the same time creating a document that would be meaningful to a wide range of stakeholders (see Dredge et al., 2013). The handbook is based on the results of the literature review, interviews and the research done with the six tourism companies. It was created with the idea to bring product development closer to the everyday life of tourism practitioners and encouraging them to explore it as a holistic process. The handbook also suggests concrete tourism product development tools that were tested to a certain extent during the project. In addition, a short description of the work done in each of the six companies is offered at the end of the handbook. The cases provide a brief explanation of how the ideas illustrated in the handbook were implemented and developed within the different companies participating in the project. Also cases from other

European countries are used in the handbook as an opportunity to understand the conceptual ideas presented in it.

As the handbook was developed within an EU-funded project, it is freely available online. There are versions in Finnish and English. Since the introduction of the handbook several seminars and training for tourism entrepreneurs and workers have been organized in Finland. The handbook is maintained and updated by the tourism research institute. Also consulting and training services based on it are sold through the tourism research institute. In general, several tourism companies and regions in Finland have been benefiting from the research done in the project. Although the handbook represents a good example of fruitful results of the combination of development and research activities, it also draws attention to the challenges pose by the nature of project work. Indeed, the full utilization and dissemination of the handbook was hampered by the end of resources (time and financial) once the project culminated. Next we will discuss the researcher experiences on producing research results from the data collected.

### ***Development over Research Practices***

Embarking on a research and development project entailed, among other things, finding a balance between the research and development objectives. The engagement of the research group was not only extensive in terms of being actively involved in a three-year research and consultation process, but it was also strongly task-oriented and time-consuming. For instance, giving consultancy services to the companies, participating in practitioners' conferences and networks and the creation of the 'Handbook for Tourism Product Developers' were not only among the tasks with highest priority in the project, but also extended considerably the process of doing research. In fact, these activities not only demanded time and focus, but also data was continuously emerging out of the engagement between the research group and practitioners. Although academic dissemination took place at multiple stages of the project through the research group participation in international tourism and hospitality conferences, academic publications had to wait until data had been collected and enough time had been spent in the companies for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (see Dredge et al., 2013). It can be argued that neither the universities nor the funding organization were prepared for this type of project, which was demanding in terms of time and finding a balance between the different research and development tasks.

While the funding organization clearly stressed the priority of development objectives as a pre-condition for including research in the project, the research group felt that research tasks were underestimated as consequence of a lack of understanding of the process of doing research. For the funding organization, the research goals were met through the presentation of papers in academic conferences and seminars. On the other hand, research publications were possible, but only after the collaboration with the companies and other development tasks of the project were completed. At the end of the project, the research group had a large amount of data for working on academic publications. Nonetheless, the research group ran out of time resources as the project officially ended. As a result, the members of the

research group were relocated to new projects and/or teaching and research tasks. Research publications related to this project were still considered important but priority was given to the new working assignments and responsibilities. This draws attention to the existing tension between the long-term aims of academic knowledge production and the short-term expectations of economic effects experienced in the current knowledge economy (Häyrynen and Peltola, 2006).

Even though the universities were supportive of the approach taken in the project, the academic system didn't offer the research group the support needed for conducting the research till the end (see Schultz and Hatch, 2005). In line with Dredge et al. (2013, p. 40), the research group found that the collaborative ethnographic approach taken in this project didn't easily fit the current performance-driven environment characterizing the Finnish university sector. Indeed, the result-based performance and input-output efficiency among other market-oriented logic adopted by Finnish universities were pushing the research group towards greater collaboration with practitioners, but it was also at the same time hindering them from developing theories with practical implications. The research group felt that more time for research was needed after the termination of the project. It would considerably have helped the research group to wrap up the academic results of the project and to publish them in academic journals. These experiences also draw attention to the unequal power relations between researchers and practitioners (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999). The resource allocations, tourism planning and policy, institutional practices embedded within a market society clearly favor the needs of practitioner institutions over the needs of academic institutions.

While the ethnographic approach taken in this project was rewarding for researchers and practitioners, it was also physically and mentally demanding for the researchers in particular. 'As everything was packed, we went out. -33 degrees were waiting for us. We walked down the road to reach the track that was supposed to lead us to our next stop. The Brits were walking behind the group. I think that they were still under some kind of shock. We should remember that at such a temperature it takes some time before our body warms up' (Excerpt 7, field journal). Researcher had to step out of their comfort zone for gathering data. This meant walking between 10 and 20 km a day in the wilderness in extreme winter temperatures during a whole week, arranging meetings in the late afternoons or even expending four week-ends in a row collecting data. 'It is the third week-end I have to wake-up at 6:30am on Sunday again. Why I have to go? I'm not going to work as a safari guide. I don't need the training. I told to myself "put yourself together! One more week-end and it is over!" I know it. This material is worth it and I will even drive a snowmobile today' (Excerpt 8, field journal). Due to the active participation of researchers in the services programs and meetings, it was very challenging to find the right place and time for writing notes. "After three days of walking in the forest, I got time for writing my notes. I sat on my bed, opened my laptop and started writing. Soon I realized that the rest of the group was staring at me. Marjukka smiled and asked "Are you workaholic? I said with an smile in my face, "No, I just checking my mail" and I turned off my laptop' (Excerpt 9, field journal). Researcher had to be very flexible regarding research practices such as location and time of the field work, writing



field notes and any special request from the participating company. Indeed, the field work design and implementation was not done by researchers alone but in cooperation with the representative and employees of each company.

The amount of ethnographic data collected during the project was enormous. While the amount of data collected provided the funding agency with concrete evidence of the work done in the project and also serve the companies to reflect on their daily practices, less data would have suffice for achieving the research goal of the project. Nevertheless, the project offered researcher access to a variety of sites and situations that it was difficult for the research group to be without gathering empirical material. Just after the end of the project, we realized the mistake we did when defining the clauses of the agreement signed with the six participating companies. The rights for using the empirical material were exclusively limited to the project and the members of the research group. Once the project concluded only the members of the research group have the rights to access and make use of the data. Based on these experiences, we suggest that academic-practitioner collaboration agreements should be signed by the academic institution and not by the representative of a single project which exist only for a limited period of time. This new form of agreement may allow academic workers and students who were not directly involved in the collaboration to utilize the data in their research, bachelor or master thesis.

## **Final Note**

In line with Ennals (2004, p. 241), market-oriented tourism and hospitality institutions of higher education should have a vital intermediary function, involving those who speak the languages both of action and of research. This function not only challenges the traditional top-down approach of knowledge transfer from academia to practice but also highlights the role of academic and tourism workers in sharing and co-creating knowledge (see Schultz and Hatch, 2005; Valtonen, 2010). Considering this, we took up the task to reflect on the experiences from a development and research project aiming to use the everyday life of tourism workers as the point of departure for theorizing tourism and hospitality phenomena. In doing so, we expose the opportunities and challenges faced by both tourism and academic workers when embarking in such endeavor.

This study draws attention to the opportunity of improving tourism and hospitality practices and theoretical understanding through the establishments of dialogues and collaboration between academic and tourism workers. In the case discussed in this paper both practitioners and researchers were highly satisfied with the approach taken in the project and its implications for theory and practice. Similar to the study conducted by Schultz and Hatch (2003) in the LEGO Company, this study identifies clear benefits for both researchers and practitioners. For instance, the study conducted in the nature-based safari company allowed the first author to explore service encounters and customer experiences as they take place in a real tourism context. Through the data collection and analysis he helped the company to improve its service processes by gaining a better understanding of the role that its employees, customers and other key stakeholders played in creating meaningful experiences within a one-

week non-motorized nature-based tour. The reflexive dialogue established with the employees and the manager of the company was certainly useful in theorizing how tourism service experiences and notion of sustainability are co-created through stakeholder interactions and relationships (see Islam, 2014). These insights represented a significant input for developing theoretical understandings on sustainable marketing and product development within the doctoral dissertation of the first author (references to be added after review).

Though the good results described above, the research group experienced two main challenges, one at the beginning and one towards the end of the project. The first challenge was related to the process of gaining access to the field and the everyday life of tourism workers. While universities are politically recognized as key drivers of market knowledge, there are still biases in the way practitioners perceive research and the work of researchers. Research is seen as an activity based on an intensive process of data collection which usually disturbs normal business and customer practices. In this study, practitioners were very concerned about distracting limited resources such as time and money into activities that were considered to have a lower impact on the practices of the company. Overcoming these biases demanded a lot of efforts of the research group and other people involve in the planning of the project. Gaining access to the companies didn't automatically mean having access to the tourism workers (Erikson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 55). Indeed, researcher needed to continuously work on building trust with employees of the companies. The open-mindedness, flexibility, perseverance and the ability of the research group to put themselves in the shoes of tourism workers were critical for gaining access to the everyday practice of tourism and hospitality companies.

The second challenges emerged at the end of the project when the research group realized that they were running out time and resources for reaching the final stage of academic work, namely, the theorizing process and the dissemination of research results. It was very difficult for the researchers to reach a balance between development and research activities. While most of the development work was connected to the collection of data, the intensive collaboration with the companies left no time for theorizing during the project implementation. Once the project ended the members of the research group were relocated in other projects, teaching and research tasks within their universities having no time for continuing with the analysis of the data collected during the project and the development and academic documentation of new theoretical insights. This put in evidence that academic-practitioner collaboration that should lead to both practical and theoretical developments requires a high degree of institutional support. Universities and funding organization should be able to offer a framework that supports not only the development of practice but also the theorization process which starts at the end of project interventions.

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