



# From gaps to transaction: Reflections on a long-term collaborative research practice in VET

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on and theorise collaborative research practices. Research–practice collaborations are widely recognised and encouraged by means of university strategies, policy intentions, and funding requirements. One way to provide for and strengthen collaborative research in education is to form long-term partnerships between schools and universities. In this reflective account, we draw on our own experiences from doing research in the field of vocational education and training (VET) as participants in a long-term collaboration among two social and health care vocational colleges and two university departments. Assisted by Dewey’s pragmatic approach to learning as transaction, we seek to move beyond the binary of ‘research’ and ‘practice’ as constituting a gap to be bridged between two forms of knowledge. Instead, we conceive of the collaboration as an emerging ‘third context’ in its own right created by various activities, all of which involve both theoretical and experiential knowledge.

**Keywords:** collaborative research, pragmatism, social and health care education, transaction



## Introduction

The introduction contains two sections. First, we introduce the collaborative agenda as it has influenced qualitative research in general, and more specifically the research fields of education and vocational education. Collaborative research is often regarded as a matter of transferring knowledge and overcoming a gap between two contexts: research and practice. Second, guided by the term 'transaction,' we question this division and suggest an analytical shift to the research-practice collaboration as an always-emergent third context in its own right. The introduction ends with the research question and an overview of the remaining part of the article.

### **The collaborative research agenda**

Inter-organisational collaboration between research institutions and the surrounding community is increasingly perceived as a key factor in developing knowledge and solutions applicable in coping with the immensely complex problems of our time. Especially the field of university-industry collaboration has developed exponentially (Anand, 2021; Brix, 2017), as the ability to engage in collaboration is key to becoming and remaining relevant in a world of increased complexity (Fritz, 2019; Volberda et al., 2021). Consequently, the transfer of knowledge between organisational contexts and the overcoming of collaborative barriers have been researched intensively (Bjerregaard, 2009; Es-Sajjade, 2019; Lane & Lubatkin, 1998).

Recently, the umbrella term 'co-production' has become popular, pointing to various processes of knowledge production in the midst of action (Bell & Pahl, 2018). It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the many forms and concepts associated with collaborative and co-created research, but the call for collaboration is often raised to challenge power hierarchies and pay tribute to experiential knowledge, for example by involving a variety of participants in the co-design of research projects and the co-production of knowledge (Kelemen & Hamilton, 2018). According to Russ et al. (2024), qualitative research is increasingly moving towards engaging participants in research processes as equal collaborators; they point out that many qualitative researchers seek to create authentic research partnerships between researchers, professional practitioners, and people with lived experience.

The question of how research can enhance the quality of educational systems and support professionals has been a focus of educational research discourse and research programmes for decades. An example hereof is the work of Hargreaves (1999) and his notion of the knowledge-creating school in which especially teachers and headmasters, but also students, become creators of professional knowledge (see Paavola et al., 2004). Collaborative research in education is

designed to involve and to further develop the perspectives and knowledge of researchers, educators, and sometimes policy makers and stakeholders (Farrell et al., 2022), and in the field of vocational education often also of internship organisations (Choy et al., 2020). Accordingly, participants in a research–practice collaboration may be employed at universities and other research institutions, in state or municipal agencies, local schools or colleges, or stakeholder organisations (Farrell et al., 2021). They may also be citizens with experience as users or relatives within the empirical field of research (Fuller et al., 2018).

Within the field of vocational education and training (VET), inter-organisational collaboration has also attained increasing interest. Here, research has especially delved into the question of how collaboration between schools and workplaces can contribute to relevant vocational education (Hiim, 2023), the mechanisms fostering a connection between learning in school and workplace (Sappa et al., 2018), and how to develop fruitful learning environments in the workplace (Mikkonen et al., 2017). The popularity of collaborative research in VET education is also evident in policies and funding mechanisms. Among many initiatives, the European Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2024) illustrates the growing interest in establishing national and especially international inter-organisational collaborations between VET schools, as collaboration is a cornerstone in developing educational quality. Also, researchers have increasingly delved into the potentials and pitfalls of increased inter-organisational collaboration and how to transfer VET educational setup across national borders (Lin & Pilz, 2023). Sporadic research exists on how researchers and VET teachers collaborate on implementation of new innovations (Burchert et al., 2014).

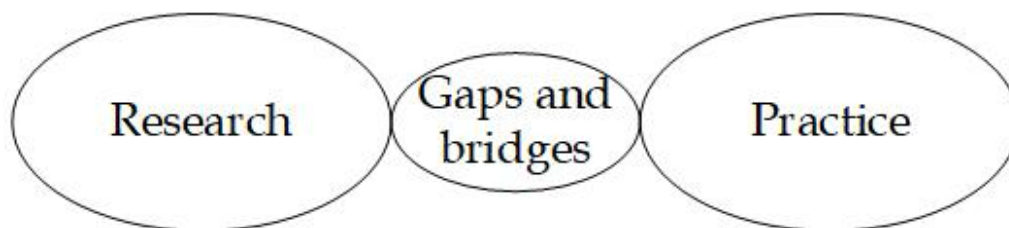
### **Beyond the binary of research and practice**

There is a broad consensus that it remains challenging to integrate research into organisational practice, a challenge often referred to as the ‘gap’ between research and practice (Mohajerzad et al., 2021). Mohajerzad et al. (2021) identify two streams of research, placing the responsibility on either research or practice: either the results of educational research are not sufficiently relevant and applicable (produced in seclusion from real life in the so-called ivory tower), or the conditions for the adoption and use of research findings are inadequate due to the lack of mechanisms for transfer from research to practice. According to Penuel et al. (2020), the increased attention paid to various kinds of collaboration can be understood as an ambition to bridge the research–practice gap by combining the two strands and focusing on the relations between research and practice in all phases of the research process.

Questions of societal relevance and power hierarchies have given rise to debates. Some encourage researchers to let go of their own epistemic authority

and allow knowledge to emerge by being radically open and vulnerable (e.g., Rhodes & Carlsen, 2018). While this may be the way forward to collaborative research on equal terms, there is also a risk that researchers refrain from investing valuable knowledge – experiential or theoretical – in the collaboration (Wegener, 2021). Others criticise the collaborative agenda for subordinating the university to the needs of the market economy, whose parameters are finance based and under an imperative to produce ‘fast knowledge’ and ‘fast publishing’ (e.g., Peters, 2014). These references are just examples to illustrate fundamental concerns rooted in a separation of ‘research’ and ‘practice.’ Turning the hierarchy on its head and arguing that the value of research is to be assessed by its immediate societal impact does not question this separation (Wegener, 2021).

Rather, there is a need to rethink knowledge, as we attempt to do here, in binary terms as either theoretical or experiential, and to reassess the value of the knowledge produced in terms of either academic or societal impact. In this, we conceive of research–practice collaboration as ‘transactions’ (Dewey, 1933). ‘Transaction’ is a central term referring to the reciprocal influences of individuals and their contexts in which the context, with its activities and material and discursive elements, always overrides the individual participant as the unit of analysis (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Elkjaer, 2003). From this it follows that we shift analytical attention away from individual research participants representing either ‘research’ or ‘practice’ and conceive of the research–practice collaboration as an emergent new practice created by activities all of which involve both theoretical and experiential knowledge. We thus seek to move beyond the notion of research and practice as two distinct contexts constituting a gap that must be bridged, as illustrated below.



*Figure 1. Research and practice as two separate contexts constituting a gap to be bridged (developed by the authors).*

Instead, we place transaction centre stage and pay attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between individual participants and their social and material environment. Accordingly, we ask:

How do the terms 'transaction' and 'the third context' lend themselves to reflections on a long-term collaboration among two VET colleges and two university departments?

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly state the rationale of our reflection. Second, we elaborate the pragmatic theoretical inspiration and the terms 'transaction' and 'the third context.' Third, we present the collaboration among two social and health care colleges (VET) and two university departments in which we are involved and describe three stages toward greater formalisation of the collaboration, which starts out as a loose network, is transformed into a formal partnership and then further into a well-established research centre. Next, we reflect on the collaboration as a third context, and finally we make some concluding remarks.

## Method

In this section, we explain how Dewey's pragmatic notion of learning has inspired us to move beyond the binary of 'research' and 'practice' and suggest this to be an example of 'pragmatic theorising.' The second part is a personal reflection on the process of writing this article, which pushed us to inquire into our own collaborative learning as co-authors.

### Pragmatic theorising

In this reflective account we draw on a long-term collaboration among two social and health care (SOSU) colleges and two university departments in Denmark, where social and health care training programmes come under vocational education and training (VET) (Randers Social- og Sundhedsskole, 2024; SOSU Østjylland, 2024). We use Dewey's (1933) pragmatic notion of learning and collaboration as transaction, as with a pragmatic approach it becomes possible to place the collaborative activities centre stage and thus move beyond the binary of 'research' versus 'practice' and 'theoretical' versus 'experiential' knowledge. In so doing, we conceive of the collaboration as an emerging 'third context' in its own right (Thomassen, 2013, 2024).

In this endeavour, we suggest a dissolving of the 'research' versus 'practice' binary and conceive of research as a practice. For want of another vocabulary, however, we refer to participants employed in welfare organisations (VET colleges and municipalities) as 'practitioners' and to participants employed at a university as 'researchers.' In practice, however, some individual participants are both, for example because they (as is the case with the first author of this article) have had a long career as a teacher or educational consultant before their employment at a university, or because they are employed part-time at a college and part-time at a university.

The method we use can be termed ‘pragmatic theorising’ (Styhre, 2022). Theorising as a verb indicates that inquiry is tentative and ongoing as a meaning-making procedure that proceeds from common-sense descriptions and re-descriptions of empirical events gradually connected to theory. As is the case with this article, we do not suggest a final and firm framework or an indisputable conclusion. As Styhre (2022, p. 8) puts it, ‘in the pragmatist perspective, skillful theorizing is re-examined as the capacity to align what Latour (2004) calls matters of joint concern, empirical material, and the semantics of everyday language so that the empirical material become meaningful in the eyes of the theorizing scholar, and thereafter for audiences.’<sup>1</sup>

### Reflections on writing this article

Having read the call for this special issue, we were sure: we would like to participate with an article reflecting on how the collaborative research centre was established, and not least the obstacles and possibilities we as researchers experienced during the process. We had worked together for more than 4 years, and we could easily write about this – or at least we thought it would be easy. However, the writing process turned out to be more tortuous than expected, and maybe our pre-understanding of ‘we can easily write this’ became a trip-up, which we did not recognise at first, but which became increasingly visible during the writing process.

Wegener had worked with social and health care education in various positions before entering academia, whereas Thomassen entered the field as the research network was initially being established. We knew each other when we began the writing process, and we had participated in and experienced how the network developed into a centre. Suddenly we felt puzzled: why did the writing of the article not flow as expected? Inspired by Dewey’s pragmatic thinking, we had to inquire into what was going on. We had not foreseen the explorative reflective journey we were about to enter; however, it has brought new insights. Next, we present some of them.

During the 4 years, we had gained new insights and new experience – however, we had only shared them sporadically. Writing the article meant that we had to explain our experiences orally and on paper – somehow the experiences became less detailed and less nuanced. In addition, experiences went from inside each of us to being something we shared. In collaboration, we inquired into the shared experiences, a transactive process which over time gave us new insight into how the collaborative network was formed and new personal understandings of the many actions, changes, and experiments we had participated in – we experienced the process of transaction ourselves. In retrospect, by initiating the writing of this article, we initiated a third context.

By coincidence, pragmatism and practice theory have been the theoretical inspiration for the researchers who have followed the journey from network to centre. We did not pay much attention to our overlapping theoretical approach – perhaps because it did not puzzle us. The writing process has made us curious about the implications of our theoretical inspiration and how we *jumped into* collaborative network possibilities where neither the process nor the result was clear from the beginning. Hence, the writing process has pushed us to inquire into our actions and experiences, and this provided new insights – insights which we did not have beforehand.

### Research collaboration as transaction

To understand the idea of collaborative research practice through a third-context lens (Thomassen, 2013, 2024), we draw on philosopher and educator John Dewey's (1859–1952) conception of learning as practices of critical and reflective thinking with the aim of being able to act in an increasingly informed and intelligent way in the world (Dewey, 1933; Elkjaer, 2004). According to Dewey (1938), learning arises from reflection on experience. Experience is more than what happens to us, and more than simple participation in an activity. Experience involves interaction and even *transaction* in which everyone and everything involved is affected and changed. Transaction happens in discussion or collaboration, in ongoing movement between people, ideas, material or whatever a given situation consists of (Dewey & Bentley, 1959). Precisely this, that an experience consists of transaction between a person and their environment, implies that not only the person, but also the current environment, changes. We do not just change the world; it also changes us. Or, if taken slightly further, we (as human beings) are not *in* but *of* the world.

The second part of experience is continuity. According to Dewey, continuity involves the way in which we create meaning from each new experience with the help of our previous experiences and other knowledge (others' experiences, ideas, and material) about the world. Interaction and continuity are the X and Y axes of experience (Rodgers, 2002). Without transaction, learning is passive and will not really be able to change the learner. Without continuity, learning will be haphazard and fragmented, and it will not really target anything either in the world or in the learner. If we connect Dewey's ideas about experience to collaborative research, the third context develops through mutual change of everybody and everything involved. The key is to create opportunities for interaction and continuity – that is, for experiences (Dewey, 1916).

The term 'the third context' (Thomassen, 2009, 2024) is relevant as, due to its pragmatic inspiration, it rejects the binary of research and practice (Dewey, 1933). Hierarchy between the two is of no interest; of interest is how learning unfolds,

and how new knowledge is developed through transaction. The pragmatic stance that our being in the world is fundamentally social implies that social contexts occur as collaborations are established and unfold. Much research on collaboration between researchers and practitioners focuses on collaborative characteristics enhancing or impeding learning and problem solving; unfortunately, collaboration as learning processes is overlooked (Thomassen, 2024). The term 'the third context' supports a view of collaboration as mutual engagement in learning processes, that is, how to develop a research collaboration, thereby offering a processual approach to collaborative research (Thomassen, 2011, 2024).

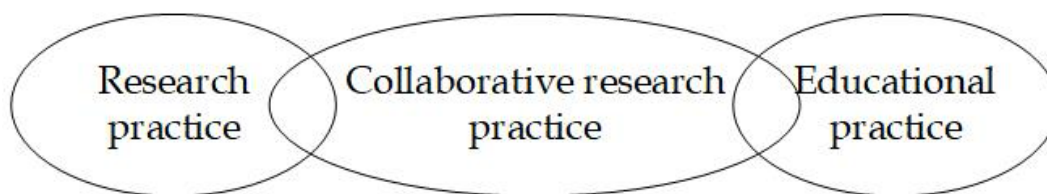


Figure 2. *The third context* (Thomassen, 2009, 2013, 2024).

The above figure of the third context illustrates that researchers and practitioners bring knowledge, experience, and practices into the new social context, which develops as actions unfold. Collaboration is transaction providing the opportunity for researchers and practitioners to bring experiences into play in the process of inquiring into puzzling questions and situations (Dewey, 1933). Situations being puzzling does not necessary imply that this is problematic; it might also be a surprising opening of new possibilities. Of interest is how mutual engagement can lead to new ways of action, and the third context thereby transcends the theory–practice gap.

Now follows a chronological presentation of the collaboration, followed by a description of how selected activities constituted the development of the collaborative practice.

### Development of a collaborative research practice

The initial organisational participants of the collaboration were two social and health colleges and two university departments. We will now present the development of the collaboration in terms of three stages of formalisation termed 1) the network, 2) the partnership, and 3) the centre.



### **The network (2018–2020)**

The initial steps of networking were taken before anyone was aware that a network was about to emerge. For several years Wegener had worked at a social and health care college as a teacher and later as Head of Education. Still an employee at the college, in agreement with the Principal and the Head of Research & Development (R&D), she applied for and received funding for an industrial PhD project. After her degree, Wegener was employed at the university but maintained close collaboration with the college during various externally funded projects. In 2016 the other social and health care college enrolled their pedagogical leader as a doctoral student at another university department, where Thomassen worked as an associate professor. A couple of years later, the college where Wegener was associated co-financed and employed a doctoral student with Wegener as supervisor.

Each college now had a doctoral student. Following conversations between the heads of R&D at the two colleges, the idea of establishing a research network developed. The intention was to provide a community for the doctoral students who were pursuing their studies at two geographically close colleges and to explore the potential for developing future research activities together. At this stage, the network comprised the two doctoral students and Wegener. Their networking was encouraged by managers at the university and the two colleges, but with no economic or administrative support other than the two financed doctoral positions.

### **The partnership (2020–2022)**

After defending their dissertations, both doctoral students were employed in positions shared between the university and the social and health care colleges. Simultaneously, the research activities increased and Thomassen, who was employed full-time at the university, became part of the network. During 2020, numerous discussions took place between managers at the two colleges and the two university heads of department. The concern was primarily how to develop a partnership suitable for developing further research activities. After approximately 6 months of dialogue, a formal partnership agreement was signed by the two social and health care colleges and the two university departments. During this stage, the four researchers carried out a scoping review of existing research on learning in social and health care education in Denmark (Møller et al., 2021). The review confirmed what we had already experienced in practice: that social and health care programmes are underrepresented in VET research. It also revealed a lack of collaborative research and a tendency to position social and health care colleges as research objects rather than as co-creators or collaborators. The managers of the colleges were intent on enhancing the agency and power of the colleges as research partners. The partnership organised the

first Danish research–practice conference and created a format for national researcher–practitioner gatherings for practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders in the field of social and health care education. The activities were initiated and run by the four researchers and supported by the heads of R&D at the SOSU colleges and by the university heads of department. Shortly after the partnership agreement was settled, a discussion developed regarding the relevancy of turning the partnership into a centre. The discussion was initiated due to an increasing number of activities, increasing interest from external stakeholder organisations, and not least increasing public and political interest in vocational education and training (VET).

### **The centre (2022–present)**

The intention behind establishing a centre (FoCUS, 2024) was to strengthen the organisational foundation for the many activities mentioned above and boost the visibility of social and health care education, both as a research field and as a major but often ignored part of the Danish VET system. We (the researchers) had obtained a couple of new research grants, and we had received many enquiries from researchers at other universities and project managers at other social and health care colleges who wanted to know about our work and the possibility of participating in collaborative activities. Establishing a centre signalled increased commitment and provided infrastructure for developing new activities. Developing from a partnership to a centre required many rounds of negotiation regarding roles and obligations, as each organisation saw itself as having more at stake. For example, the wording of the legal contract had to leave no doubt that the university had full responsibility for the centre’s research output, because a vocational college is not legally defined as a research institution. Alongside these negotiations, the activities continued and expanded to include a website with a newsletter, facilitation of a network of associated members, and a podcast series. The two social and health care colleges financed the management of the centre and allocated time for administrative staff to assist with communication and practical matters. Research activities were financed from external funding. Below is an overview of the development of the collaboration.

Table 1 provides an overview of the degree of structure, formality, and legitimacy of the work done in the collaboration. What becomes obvious from the table is that the network and the partnership were short-lived transitional phenomena. The informal network soon became a formal partnership, and negotiations to establish a centre started soon after the partnership agreement was signed. Recently, two researchers from two other Danish universities have joined the centre as collaborative partners due to overlapping research interests.

Table 1. Three degrees of formalisation (developed by the authors).

	<b>The network 2018–2020</b>	<b>The partnership 2020–2022</b>	<b>The centre 2022–?</b>
Degree of formalisation	Oral agreement on a shared interest in research	Partnership agreement on aim, vision and mission	Legal signed contract describing roles and responsibilities
Organisation	Unstructured	Collaboration between Heads of college and university department	Formal steering committee
Meeting formats and sequences	Occasional meetings	Fixed meeting sequence	Development of meeting formats
Communication	Individually	Occasional newsletter	Webpage and newsletter
Research activities	Based on individual interests	Initial collaboration between partners	Collaboration with external researchers and organisations
Funding efforts	Based on individual engagements	Partners bring own funding into the collaboration	Outline of a funding strategy
Dissemination	Individually	Initial collaboration between partners	The centre is a lever for dissemination

## Network activities as collaborative practice

In the following we present the three categories of activities that constitute the collaborative practice, all of which involve both experiential and theoretical knowledge.

### Research

Research activities hosted by the centre have a learning perspective in common, but involve diverse research communities within pedagogy, didactics, innovation, workplace learning, cross-organisational learning, and management.

Besides working with research questions related to societal challenges and theory development, a common feature of the projects is an interest in exploring collaborative research methods and co-productive approaches. In the transformation from network to partnership, we established a vision of doing research not 'about' but 'with' people (Russ et al., 2024). As the collaboration developed and more participants joined, the 'learning perspective' and the 'research with' methodologies became our guidelines and inclusion criteria when choosing which activities or research projects to pursue. Emphasising a learning perspective was (and is) important, because social and health care education is well researched and well evaluated, but mainly from perspectives of *lack*: during our work on the scoping review we found ample applied research and evaluation reports, for example on drop-out, vulnerable youth, actual and future understaffing, and sick leave among social and health care professionals (Møller et al., 2021). We acknowledge the importance of all these areas; however, the 'research with' mantra supports much more nuanced questions. And what is profoundly underrepresented in both policy and public rhetoric and in research concerned with social and health care is a *resource* perspective.

### Communication

Besides initiating and hosting research projects, the centre acts as a forum for collecting, disseminating, and exchanging knowledge of relevance to social and health care research, policy, and educational development. The centre runs a website and a newsletter presenting new collaborative projects and partners, invitations to future activities, and photos and materials from past activities. The site also features peer-reviewed publications from national and international journals in one section and another section for publications in popular outlets, debate, and opinion pieces. The centre has launched a podcast series, each episode featuring a theme (e.g., management of learning, learning through simulation, a learning perspective on innovation) in dialogue between one guest representing a perspective from education/work practice and one representing a research practice, facilitated by a journalist. Hence, the intention of integrating research and practice is also constituted in the design of the podcasts. Moreover, every 2 years, the centre hosts a national conference which attracts over 150 participants, a mix of researchers, educators, policy makers, and volunteers.

### Network

The centre hosts a researcher-practitioner network to which everyone with an interest in the field can sign up on the website. The aim of the network is to create infrastructures for new contacts and dialogue. The network acts as a knowledge base where members can seek new collaborative partners for projects, exchange information, and find experts on specific topics. The network participants are

from all organisational levels across colleges, welfare practices, and research institutions involved in social and health care education and learning. Participants from other types of VET education have also found their way to the network, expressing a need for learning across vocational fields.

The centre runs two annual workshops for anyone interested in research and educational development. The workshops are organised around a keynote and short presentations from ongoing or finished research or development projects, alternating with facilitated dialogue in groups. As such, each workshop features a theme of mutual interest (e.g., recruitment, learning communities, research in practice) but, just as important, provides a repeating and recognisable (infra)structure within which new networks can evolve among participants. This may be between researchers and practitioners, but also between, for example, employees from different municipalities. The workshops are hosted around the country at different research, educational, or municipal locations to make the network meetings as accessible to as many as possible. However, the material and discursive elements are always the same: a table plan mixing participants, a keynote, facilitated dialogue in groups, lunch, shorter talks, a second round of facilitated dialogue in groups, summing-up and conclusion by a host, and, within no more than a week, a newsletter summing up impressions, ideas, and insights from the day is distributed.

### The third context: Reflections on the collaborative research practice

By applying the third context as the analytical lens, we next engage in a reflection on our experiences of how the collaborative research practice has developed. What makes this collaborative research network unique is that Wegener participated even before anyone saw it as a network. It illustrates the fact that collaboration often develops merely by coincidence rather than on purpose. The initial discussions between Wegener, the two PhD students, and the two managing directors were based on a common interest in research. It is important to note how the collaboration was initiated, because researchers and practitioners often collaborate in a pre-defined project to solve a pre-defined problem (Anand et al., 2021; Bjerregaard, 2009). Instead, curiosity and ambitions on behalf of social and health care education were the origin and formed the germ of the action-oriented way of collaboration. As will be seen below, this core interest has greatly influenced how the network collaboration has developed.

Reading through the description of the three phases (network, partnership, and centre), it becomes apparent on the one hand that management at the two university departments and the two social and health care colleges has a very clear and strong influence on the steps from network to centre, and on the other that it is loosely coupled to the researchers' activities. During the initial steps of

the collaboration, the managers of the two social and health care colleges were invited to participate, illustrating the assumption that if we are to collaborate, we need managerial buy-in. Subsequently, university and college management met to discuss collaborative possibilities, thereby initiating what can be described as a managerial third context – at first a fragile construct, but becoming more solid as the negotiations regarding the different phases took place. The management level was first and foremost interested in creating a balance between each of the four organisations' interests and the researchers' opportunities to develop research activities. Over time, the transaction unfolding in connection with negotiations of the network, partnership, and centre formed a (managerial) third context.

The pace of formalisation illustrates that the collaborative research network is not *only* formed by actions within the network – societal changes and agendas are translated into a managerial understanding of urgency for formalisation, illustrating how the managers bring experience from other social contexts into the research collaboration. Worth noticing is that increasing formalisation seems to entail increased focus on the wording in legal documents, somehow reducing the experimental curiosity which also characterised the managerial level in the beginning. The intention behind increased formalisation was good, but sometimes good intentions create unintended tensions. Thus, it is worth considering which instruments (e.g., formalisation) are brought into the transactional processes, as in this case formalisation triggered a gap between research and practice which required lengthy negotiation.

As mentioned, curiosity and ambitions on behalf of social and health care education originally brought the researchers together – and as previously described, we brought different experiences into the network. At this stage, our collaborative research practice (understood as the third context) was rather fragile, as limited action had unfolded up to that point. In this early phase we did not have a clear picture of what a collaborative research practice was or how to create it; we knew that we wanted to conduct research in close collaboration with stakeholders, and we wanted to cross the theory–practice gap. This objective became our lens, or as Dewey (1933) would say *our tool to think with*, through which we engaged in an inquiry as to how to develop the network.

Subsequently, several activities were initiated to gain new experiences that we could use in the future development of the collaborative research network. Some of the activities were initiated due to external possibilities: for example, the faculty of Social Science and Humanities provided seed money for a small research project, whereas other activities were initiated due to a common strategic decision. Behind these decisions were multiple discussions influencing the transactional development of the network. The decision to make a scoping review became a milestone in the network's development process, as all

researchers were focused on the same task, thereby developing the collaborative connections. Further, the published review became an artifact/tool in our engagement with different external collaborative partners, implying that the review illustrated our research interest and thereby the research network's characteristics. Hence, the review was integrated into the transactional processes, leading to a stronger internal and external profile.

Besides the literature review, several activities were initiated, as previously described. Today, it looks as though it had been settled from the start that the activities would be divided into three groups: 1) research, 2) communication, 3) network. However, this was not the case. The three categories developed tentatively over time as we initiated different experiments – hence, action was the main driver in forming the activities. In this regard it is relevant to note the vision informing the actions, namely the intention to bring researchers and practitioners together and create new knowledge with the objective of developing social and health care education. It would have been perfectly fine only to establish a collaboration between the two university departments and the two social and health care colleges – the intention of collaborative research would have been met. However, the vision of collaboration between researchers and practitioners was also soon transformed into other collaborative formats. It is notable that in the research network we initiate new types of third contexts with other actors, organisations, and stakeholders. All the activities are based on the assumption that by bringing people with different experiences together (participation), new inspiration and knowledge emerge, and all participants are acknowledged as experts.

The various activities do not only create new relationships among researchers and practitioners; the activities also contribute to our developing a better understanding of ourselves as a network and as collaborative researchers. As individual researchers and as a research team, we are transformed as the network transforms. The role of researcher expands as more and more activities are incorporated into the network. Transaction due to the increased number of activities means that the network, understood as a third context, is growing more and more established.

### Beyond binaries: Further reflections

We have initiated a reflection on a research–practice collaboration as ongoing transaction and as an emerging 'third context' by presenting three kinds of activity (research, communication, and network) which cannot be delineated as either 'research' or 'practice.' All three kinds of activity use and produce both theoretical and experiential knowledge. We assume this applies to most research practices. Nevertheless, the notion of two distinct contexts constituting a gap that

must be bridged is prominent. The distinction also seems to be the underlying premise in the discussions as to which knowledge forms come first or are at the top or bottom of power hierarchies as discussed by, for example, Rhodes and Carlsen (2018), Peters (2014), and Kelemen and Hamilton (2018), although with differing conclusions and suggestions. Abandoning the binary of 'research' versus 'practice' and inquiring into our own experience, we have worked with the hypothesis (Elkjaer, 2018) that the first and second contexts (the research context and the practice context, leaving unaddressed the question of which is the first and which the second) do not *exist* a priori but are *produced*. The first and second contexts are not static but mutually constitutive and changing as the third context evolves. Moreover, there are also a municipal context, a political context, and so on. Focusing attention on the 'middle' allows for metaphors other than 'gaps,' 'bridges,' and 'translation.' Here we have experimented with 'transaction,' but we trust that non-dichotomic metaphors are plentiful.

Other conceptual models are in line with Elkjaer's (2004) suggestion that we combine acquisition and participation approaches to account sufficiently for novelty. For example, Paavola et al. (2004) note that the acquisition and the participation approaches have in recent years been revised to deal with innovation. They analyse three influential models of innovative knowledge communities: a) Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi's model of knowledge creation, b) Yrjö Engeström's model of expansive learning, and c) Carl Bereiter's model of knowledge building. The authors propose that all three can – despite variations – be understood as a third approach to learning that incorporates innovation; they call this a 'knowledge-creation' model of learning. We find that a knowledge-creation perspective on collaborative research practices resembles core ideas found in social innovation literatures and suggest that further studies into collaborative research may benefit from a social innovation perspective (Wegener et al., 2023). The term 'social innovation' involves changes in social relations, new ways of organising, framing, doing, and knowing (Avelino et al., 2019) and is hence closely connected to the everyday work practices where professionals interact, reflect, and carry out their work (Haapasaari et al., 2018). Moreover, it is often emphasised that for social innovation to evolve, professionals must have the opportunity to engage in collaboration and learning across professional and organisational contexts (Sydelko et al., 2021) and not least acknowledge and engage with the experiential expertise of users, clients, and patients (Fuller et al., 2018).

According to Dewey, continuity involves the way in which we create meaning from each new experience with the help of our previous experiences and other knowledge – which may be other people's experiences, concepts, ideas, or material. Without continuity, learning will be haphazard and fragmented. Experience alone is not enough, according to Dewey. What is decisive is the



ability to perceive and 'weave meaning' around the threads of experience. Meaning arises when we create connections between the different elements of experience and knowledge available as the third context evolves. In our long-term collaboration, the three clusters of activities – research, communication, and network activities – can be understood as threads continually woven into each other, producing new meaning and attracting new collaborative participants with a variety of experiences and ways of inquiring.

## Conclusion

To understand the idea of collaborative research beyond binaries, we have drawn on Dewey's conception of learning as practices of critical and reflexive thinking with the aim of being able to act in the world in an increasingly informed and intelligent way (Elkjaer, 2004). According to Dewey (1938), learning arises from reflection on experience. Experience is more than what happens to us, and more than simple participation in an activity. Experience involves *transaction* in which everyone and everything involved is affected and changed. Transaction happens in research projects, in communication and network activities as we have addressed above, in ongoing flows between people, ideas, material, or whatever a given situation consists of. For collaborative research, this means that the third context is not a place the researcher (or any other participant) can enter, leave, and re-enter. It is ongoing creation of learning grounded in past experiences and oriented towards the future.

Research that seeks to elevate various kinds of knowledge will involve new sets of participants in the collaborative processes of knowledge, state Kelemen and Hamilton (2018). However, as mentioned, we do not suggest that a reversal of hierarchies is the solution. Rather, we have found inspiration in Dewey's rejection of knowledge hierarchies and his processual approach to experience as being always in the making due to transactive processes, as something people do and say as they act amid the material world – which simultaneously exercises its influence on people.

We have initiated an inquiry into our long-time collaboration that moves beyond dichotomies of research versus practice and researchers versus practitioners, and which may contribute to the evening-out or dissolution of power hierarchies – of practices, people, and forms of knowledge (Phillips et al., 2019). This is not to deny power dynamics and hierarchies. In particular, we have found power dynamics between top-down and bottom-up processes to exercise their influence. However, we find that abandoning the 'gap' and constructing the unit of analysis in the midst of collaborative practice assists ongoing attention to the co-creative aspects of learning and to forms of value that can be both societal and academic.

VET education may be particularly interesting and inspirational in this endeavour, because it already operates in a collaborative or co-creative space between a college context and a workplace context as students alternate between school-based learning and internship training. Accordingly, a collaborative research practice concerned with VET always already involves workplaces and potentially municipal and national policy practices along with stakeholder and interest organisations, the media, and more. A next step in theorising collaborative research practice in VET may be to further map and inquire into *activities* as the unit of analysis.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Styhre refers to Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical inquiry*, 30(2), 225–248.  
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