



Reducing the distance between thinkers and doers in the entrepreneurial discovery process: An exploratory study☆☆☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

The existing gap between thinkers and doers is one of the main reasons behind the failure of the modern research system in the field of management, as many scholars suggest. Participatory, action research and experience-based methods are now attracting scholars as well as institutions who actively participate in improving the efficacy of policy-making. This study presents the work conducted by the JRC-IPTS of the European Commission in the Greek region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace for supporting the implementation of the region's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3). The study presents the methodology based on participatory and experience-based methods and offers reflections on how to reduce the thinkers–doers gap.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, a revolution in research methods and educational models (Cavicchi, Santini, & Bailetti, 2014; Huff & Huff, 2001; Santini, 2013) aims to reduce the existing distance between *thinkers* (scholars or researchers) and *doers* (practitioners and entrepreneurs). This gap is at the base of the failure of the modern research system in the field of management (Bartunek, 2007); therefore, scholars are now exploring new approaches to tackle this gap. As a consequence, participatory, action-research, and experience-based methods are capturing a great deal of attention. Interestingly, participatory approaches are

also receiving support of institutions whose aim is to improve policy effectiveness by reducing the distance between thinkers and doers. This study examines one such case, to highlight the potential that these methodologies hold. Following the definition of the problem under study, the research describes the work that the JRC-IPTS of the European Commission conducts in the Greek region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, and the European Parliament Preparatory Action; a formal collaboration agreement between DG Regional Policy (REGIO) and the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission that has promoted its implementation.

This activity centers on the provision of support to the refinement and implementation of the region's Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), supporting, among other things, its Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP). The latter, one of the pillars of the Smart Specialisation approach, is as an inclusive and interactive mainly bottom-up process in which participants from policy, business, academia, as well as other sectors, engage with each other to identify potential new activities and opportunities. Methodologically, the project applies participatory and experience-based methods to bring researchers, entrepreneurs, and the public sectors closer to each other. As such, the project offers important reflections on how to reduce the thinkers–doers gap.

The structure of the study is the following: in Section 2, a literature review introduces the problem of thinkers–doers gap, describing how the gap originates and why this gap is of interest to academics and public bodies. Section 3 reviews the importance and role of participatory method in the debate on the thinkers and doers gap. The following section describes the JRC case in Greece; although the approach followed

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by the JRC can fit under the definition of action-research adopted in this study, the JRC-IPTS itself has not employed this term in this context. Section 5 concludes the study.

2. The thinkers and doers gap: boundaries and motivations

A wide debate exists on the growing distance between thinkers and doers in entrepreneurial settings (Cavicchi et al., 2014). Such a gap between theory and practice has several causes (November, 2004): many authors point to a lack in communication between academics and practitioners (Bartunek, 2007; Thomas, 2007; Van Aken, 2004; Whitley, 1988), which can affect management practice (Mowday, 1997). Others highlight the struggle of thinkers to understand the real needs of doers (Hills & LaForge, 1992). Thinkers' compelling need of meeting the requirements of the scientific community creates a separation between what is "read" by theorists and by practitioners (Van Aken, 2004), effectively hindering the creation of a "common language" (Whitley, 1988).

As a solution, Bartunek (2007) stresses the importance of building productive relationships for both scholars and practitioners, whereas Thomas (2007) and Whitley (1988) focus on the improvement of communication flows, or on conveying research insights in terms that can be familiar to practitioners (Wilkinson, 1999).

Pressure to reduce this gap is increasingly arising from academia (Ellson, 2009), the private sector, and policy makers. For instance, most universities and research institutes promote cooperation between theory and practice, going over and beyond the concept of the third mission (Trencher, Yarime, McCormick, Doll, & Kraines, 2014). Some educational programs in various fields are undergoing a re-design process to reduce business students' perceived distance between what they learn and what the "real world" demands (Morgan, Rudd, & Kaufman, 2004; Roberts, 2006; Simon et al., 2004). Furthermore, academics are increasingly aware that reducing the gap by focusing on the research needs of professionals (rather than addressing insights to other researcher) is critical to ensure that research is itself useful, thereby increasing trust between the two communities (November, 2004). At the policy level, the communication and cooperation between research and industry is of primary importance for the effectiveness of some funding programs (for instance, the EC Erasmus + program). Communication and cooperation is also a prominent feature of the current multi-annual programming period for the EU regional policy (2014–2020). Indeed, the concept of EDP, described below, posits that the interaction between thinkers and doers needs to result in the shared identification, among stakeholders, of priorities for regional development.

Exploring ways to reduce the separation between theory and practice is clearly necessary, and this research is an attempt to clarify these aspects.

3. New participatory-based methods and modes

The urgency of understanding the gap between thinkers and doers goes hand in hand with the need to identify the most appropriate research method (Amabile et al., 2001). Background research shows that traditional teaching and research approaches have a limited efficacy for entrepreneurial education (Munoz & Huser, 2008), pointing to the importance of physical proximity, or full immersion, between researchers and practitioners as a means to fill the "gap" (Carson et al., 2002; Gilmore & Carson, 1996, 2007). Learning for entrepreneurs requires a type of interaction that is uncommon in traditional research and teaching methods because this learning is a social construction (Cook & Brown, 1999; Higgins & Elliott, 2011).

Researchers are thus reconsidering their methodological approach to investigation, placing emphasis on the positive role that participatory approaches could have in this scenario. Broadly, participatory processes' design aims to ensure that stakeholders participate actively in a given exercise based on various rationales that the designers of the approach

define. Within a policy context, such as the one described below, participatory approaches pursue an alternative to purely "top-down" decision-making, emphasizing engagement, the development of a shared understanding, and action within a community. Participatory-Action-Research (PAR) adds an investigative dimension and goal to these issues in that PAR seeks to understand the world by trying to change the world collaboratively and following reflection (Susman & Evered, 1978). Contrary to other research methods, the reproducibility of findings is not a concern for PAR.

The circular approach (Fig. 1) identifies the four key steps in PAR, which, as Santini (2013) points out, are critical in promoting a reflexing criticism.

PAR has social implications. Since PAR's initial employment in the field of minority problems, one of the aims of the methodology was to contribute to social wellbeing and to improve the living conditions of the people involved in the research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Background research shows that PAR can renew standard research process (Crockett, Downey, Firat, Ozanne, & Pettigrew, 2013).

As this research aims to demonstrate, PAR approaches—appropriately adapted to the specific research needs (Bohman, 2004) by following the experiential learning principles (Kolb, 1984)—can successfully reduce the academics-practitioners gap (Cavicchi et al., 2014). Indeed, evidence suggests that methods that promote the active involvement of researchers and stakeholders can be successful in entrepreneurial education in the field of marketing management (Cavicchi et al., 2014; Santini, 2013), as well as in social science and entrepreneurship (Eden & Huxham, 1996).

4. The case study: JRC-IPTS and Smart Specialisation in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace

The Institute of Prospective Technological studies (IPTS) is part of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's in-house science (<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en>).

Among a range of dedicated policy support activities, the IPTS hosts the Smart Specialisation Platform (<http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu>), which supports regions in the development and implementation of their Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3). Of primary importance in the implementation of EU Regional and Cohesion Policy 2014–2020, the existence of such strategies represents an ex-ante conditionality for interventions on research, innovation, and ICT access (Martínez-

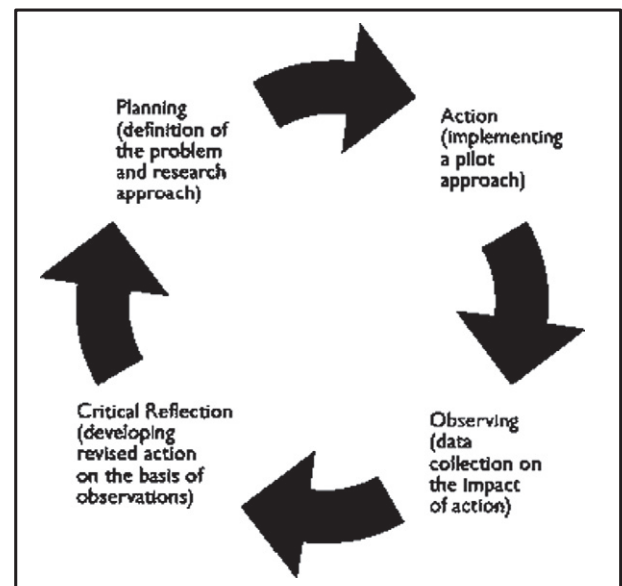


Fig. 1. The cycle of participatory action research.

López & Palazuelos-Martínez, 2014). In broad terms, Smart specialization is a strategic approach to regional economic development through support to research and innovation (R&I). Smart specialization involves a process of developing a vision, identifying territorial strengths and weaknesses, setting strategic priorities, and making use of smart policies to maximize the knowledge-based development potential of any region. The concept of the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) lies at the core of the RIS3, and focuses on the need for private, research, and public actors in a given territory to collaborate in order to identify key sectors for RDI-based development (Martínez-López & Palazuelos-Martínez, 2014). EDP “could be defined as a process in which the entrepreneurial actors are discovering and producing information about new business and innovation activities and the government is collecting, assessing and transforming this knowledge into policy action” (<http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/s3-governance>) Smart Specialisation and EDP imply adopting a collaborative leadership approach by involving relevant regional stakeholders.

Under the umbrella of the Smart Specialisation Platform, and since September 2014, JRC-IPTS is implementing a 15 month European Parliament Preparatory Action. This action aims at facilitating the refinement and implementation of the RIS3 strategy in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, a region heavily hit by the crisis.

A core part of this action revolves around activities aiming to implement, test, and optimize the EDP, further developing selected priority sectors of the RIS3 where financing should concentrate.

The EDP approach that IPTS follows embeds many of the concepts of Participatory Action Research methodology in its planning, development, and follow-up process. Nevertheless, IPTS' activities design does not explicitly take into account the principles of Action Research as such. Rather, the design builds on participatory approaches to the definition and implementation of policy-decisions.

4.1. The implementation of EDP in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace: the structure of the EDP focus groups

To pursue the aims of the project, JRC-IPTS organized four EDP focus groups, each focusing on a sector of the region identified, in defining the RIS3 as having potential for smart growth. These sectors are, respectively, the sectors of wine (November 2014), dairy and meat (January 2015), tourism (February 2015) and marble and non-metallic minerals (May 2015). These highly interactive meetings required extensive preparation: the regional authorities and local experts engaged with stakeholders in the region, while JRC-IPTS identified key international experts to invite to the sessions and devised and subsequently refined the appropriate method.

The meetings (which normally lasted between one and two days) consisted of a combination of plenary and interactive parallel sessions. Invited regional, national, and international experts made presentation speeches and catalyzed discussions around a selection of relevant themes. Each focus group followed a similar template; however, the methodological and organizational lessons derived from each event included the previous ones.

Table 1 presents the basic agenda. The plenary sessions, which took place at the beginning and at the end of the event, included an introduction to the regional RIS3 and to the project, one or two presentations from reputable international speakers, and time for open discussion. The parallel sessions, which were essentially the core of the EDP, covered different segments of the value chain of each sector, and included a presentation from national and international experts in the field and a phased participatory exercise.

4.2. The core of the EDP focus groups: methodology of the participatory exercise

In each of the parallel sessions, grouping the participants guaranteed a mix of participants with the following characteristics:

Table 1

Template-agenda of EDP focus groups.

Plenary introduction • Presentation of the region and the regional RIS3 • Presentation of the project • Presentation from international expert on the sector at stake
1st parallel sessions covering four different parts of the sectoral value chain • Presentation by a national expert on the specific value chain building block • Participatory exercise to stimulate interaction among stakeholders
2nd parallel sessions covering four different parts of the sectoral value chain • Participatory exercise to stimulate interaction among stakeholders
Plenary conclusion • Reporting back from the participatory exercise • Presentation from international expert on the sector at stake • Round-table and QA from the public

- Coming both from within and outside the region, and from different counties.
- From both the public and private research sectors.
- From organizations operating principally in different parts of the value chain
- Having a policy and/or strategic perspective as well as scientific/technological perspective

Each group had a moderator and a rapporteur who reported to the plenary the outcomes of the parallel session and conducted other follow up activities.

As set out below, the exercise comprised five steps and aimed at (1) generating and selecting innovative ideas requiring expertise from different sectors, (2) creating partnerships around them and reflecting on their potential development, (3) and outlining the first necessary steps for implementation.

Task 1: Individual generation of ideas

In task 1, each participant filled-in a short card with the following information:

- Personal profile (i.e. entrepreneur, private sector, researcher, etc.)
- Identified challenge and potential innovative idea to solve it.
- External expertise/Partners needed to implement the idea.

Task 2: Presentation of ideas

In task 2, participants presented their ideas to the rest of the group, highlighting also the profile of the expertise needed for its development. To ensure an open and creative environment, criticism on the ideas was not part of this stage.

Task 3: Formation of “idea-partnerships”

In task 3, each parallel session, building on the outcomes of task 2, created a consolidated list of ideas that clustered similar or complementary proposals into one. Following that, participants identified the ideas to which they were more eager to contribute. Building on the responses, the group—with the moderator as a guide—proceeded to organize itself into different sub-groups or “idea-partnerships.” These sub-groups typically comprised individuals from different sectors (i.e. research and industry) with similar interests.

Task 4: Development of ideas (Phase 1)

In task 4, the “idea-partnerships”, within each working group, discussed the ideas further, defining them in greater depth, identifying the contributions necessary from different partners, and developing the first considerations on framework conditions (legal problems, needs for human capital, capacities, etc., on financial planning, and on the first “next” necessary steps).

Task 5: Development of ideas (Phase 2)

In task 5, the “idea-partnerships” defined the concrete title, the subsectors of interest, a brief project description, a rough estimation of

the resources needed, a timeline for the event, and the stakeholder groups involved. The work followed a set of guiding questions and took into account the criteria for funding.

The outputs of each EDP workshop are a set of entrepreneurial ideas, merging the different research and business sectors, and compatible with the local RIS3 strategies. The study compiled all the ideas systematically on the project website (<http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/remth>). In the weeks that followed the focus group, participants received several emails informing about the further steps of the project and the website updates accordingly presented those steps.

By bringing together stakeholders from different sectors and facilitating dialogue among them, as well as exposing them to international expertise, the events ignited the EDP. The outcomes of the events fed into other activities of the Preparatory Action and supported the Managing Authority of the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in their RIS3 implementation, allowing them to channel the available funding for R&I into areas relevant for the region, hence supporting local competences and competitiveness.

4.3. Methodological reflections and evaluation on the case study

Although, as mentioned above, the methodology design is not explicitly action-research, the process followed makes the EDP approach in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace an interesting example for PAR; one that allows to draw important conclusions for reducing the gap between thinkers and doers.

In particular, the role of the organizers within the process (mainly JRC- IPTS) follows that of the researcher (or thinker) in PAR, along the lines of Checkland and Holwell (1998), achieving the objective of balancing theory and practice and getting them closer to each other. Indeed, at the beginning, the thinker employs literature and desk research for defining the theory and the framework. In the case study, desk research is necessary for organizing the exercise and identifying topics and speakers capable of setting the scene. Next, information and secondary data gathering is necessary to understand the real world situation. In the EDP approach, data gathering took the form of the background research in preparation for the event and of invited experts' actual presentations during the day. In the action phase, the researcher has to identify ways to spur action itself. In the case study, this is the core of the EDP approach, where the methodology allows a set of facilitators to ensure a meaningful and targeted discussion.

Finally, after the action, the thinker needs to perform a critical analysis of the collected information. In the EDP case, JRC-IPTS need to ensure that the follow up of the process takes into account the ideas developed during the participatory exercise fed into the broader policy process, and that the sharing of these ideas with the RIS3 community of practice occurs.

Following the EDP focus groups, the international experts invited to the events provide some evaluation feedback. The feedback was indeed positive. The participants praised the approach for its ability to generate critical thinking. Several respondents mentioned that higher participation of the private sector would have enhanced the results.

Many respondents also agreed that the events stimulated entrepreneurial thinking across the research and business community, although a perceived lack of entrepreneurial culture in the region persists. Respondents were also positive about the networking opportunities the EDP Focus Groups offered, although they highlighted that opportunities for international networking were scarce.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study argues that participatory approaches can contribute to narrowing the gap between thinkers and doers by describing the practical example of the EDP in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. The findings confirm what background research suggests: when the methodology employed aligns with the nature of the object under observation,

participatory methods and action research can provide an opportunity for mutual learning and enriching dialogue across different communities of practice (i.e. thinkers and doers).

The use of participatory methods, including action research, to support the implementation of the EDP shows the increasing importance of a reflection in a scholarly methodological debate. Examining how to understand each other best is indeed necessary for analysis, policy makers, researchers, and entrepreneurs. From an academic perspective, this understanding is particularly relevant to formulate adequate research questions and improve the effectiveness of research insights (Bartunek, 2007).

In conclusion, although the four EDP focus groups offer important insights on this issue, many questions remain open for future research. In particular, researchers should tackle the same issues both with a longitudinal and cross-sectional perspective. In particular, exploring the long-term implications of participatory approaches in the entrepreneurial dynamics of a region and to compare these results across different geographical and institutional set-ups would be interesting.

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