

# Achieving successful academic–practitioner research collaborations

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## Introduction

Academic collaboration with NGOs occurs frequently and seems to offer a win-win situation for all participants. For the NGO, caught up in the daily demands of its work with limited staffing and financial resources, the academic can provide perspective and analytical capacities that often are not available in-house. For the academic, working with NGOs enables the use of expertise in an applied manner, while at the same time providing an opportunity to test ideas and theories or gather case material for larger intellectual projects. There are certainly numerous cases of NGOs having established long-term relationships with individual academics or research centres, enriching the experience of both and contributing to more effective development interventions.<sup>1</sup>

However, such an outcome may be the exception rather than the rule. The potential for academic–NGO collaboration is enormous, but such collaboration is far more difficult than it appears on the surface, even when collaborators share a commitment to, and values that support, a particular cause or issue. There have been many instances where such collaborations begin with high hopes and the best of intentions, only to go wrong, often gradually, but sometimes suddenly. This is a source of puzzlement and confusion to those who have been caught up in an unproductive collaboration, which may in turn have long-term adverse consequences for NGOs that are struggling to find ways to learn more effectively from experience.

Reflecting on Oxfam America's experience of academic collaboration (both successful and unsuccessful), discussions with colleagues from both the academic and NGO communities, and readings on organisational learning, it seems that the roots of the problem are both intellectual and cultural. Different intellectual

approaches in the NGO and academic communities, combined with their own characteristic styles of discourse and engagement that are unfamiliar to the other, can lead to misunderstandings and missed opportunities for learning on both sides.

## Looking at learning through different lenses

### *Developing theory versus solving problems*

In *Organizational Learning II*, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1996) discuss the problematic aspects of practitioner–academic collaboration in a chapter entitled ‘Turning the Researcher–Practitioner Relationship on its Head’. They start by noting that academic research and practitioner inquiry operate from two different logics. While both are concerned with causal inference, the academic researcher wants to identify generalisable rules that lead to probabilistic predictions. The development of such rules requires experimental or quasi-experimental design. Sophisticated, multivariate analytical techniques are often used in an attempt to isolate key variables that influence outcomes. In addition, in an academic context, where inquiry is valued in and of itself, research is often open ended, iterative, and ongoing.

The practitioner, on the other hand, is more often than not trying to solve a particular problem in a particular setting. General rules or laws rarely provide a useful guide to action. On occasion, an NGO may compare different sites or communities to determine whether an intervention is having an impact, but generally experimentation takes the form of testing a ‘theory of change’ or ‘model of causality’ within a programme context, and making adjustments when outcomes do not meet expectations. Finally, inquiry is time-bound and specific and valued only to the extent that it produces results that can be acted upon or put into practice.

### *Status and terms of engagement*

Given these two distinct approaches, it is not surprising that academic–practitioner collaborations can be problematic. There are other factors that can act as obstacles to realising the full potential of a collaborative effort. The practitioner may tend to view the academic as an expert – immersed in the theoretical literature and bringing a toolkit of rigorous methodologies – who will solve an organisation’s problems. In such circumstances, the practitioner may take a deferential posture towards the academic researcher and see her or himself more as an observer than as a participant in a research process. In the case where

the academic does 'solve' the problem to the practitioner's satisfaction, an unfortunate dependency can develop, even if the academic seeks to share resources and transfer skills.

Conversely, practitioners may be sceptical of (or threatened by) the credentials and expertise of academics, and dismiss their contributions as 'book learning'. This tends to play itself out in particularly pronounced ways if the academic, in turn, feels that s/he has to prove her or himself in the collaborative context. It may be that the academic is fairly young (and consequently has had limited work or field experience), or feels that s/he has to offset status disadvantages (gender, ethnicity, religious differences) by demonstrating superior command of the field of inquiry, whether or not it directly pertains to the matter at hand.

A related obstacle can be the difference in the way in which discourse and debate are carried out in the two settings. An academic is accustomed to pressing an opinion in the challenging arena of academic discourse where breadth and depth of knowledge of 'the literature' is valued and a certain degree of competitiveness (not always constructive) fuels debate. NGOs often have a very different style of discourse, ranging from very participatory and consensual to more hierarchical, with high deference to leadership authority. In either case, an academic who engages with NGO staff in the same way that s/he might engage with fellow scholars is likely to generate cultural clashes with NGO staff and leadership.

### ***Too complicated to understand***

This gap becomes particularly wide if the research methodology is complicated or sophisticated and not easily understood by the practitioner. Anyone who is not trained in quantitative analysis and is presented with the results of a multivariate regression or a cost-benefit analysis, undergirded by a series of assumptions and generated by processing large quantities of data, has to take the results on faith to some extent. Many researchers are extremely comfortable with quantitative methods and may not even realise that they are failing to present their methods and results to the layperson in a comprehensible way. This becomes even more of an issue if the results of the research are not consistent with the practitioner's own experience and analysis. The practitioner (perhaps recalling the famous joke: 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics') may end up feeling at worst manipulated or misled by the academic, and at best bewildered and unconfident of the results (see Barnett 1994:38-45).

Any one of these factors – competing logics, incompatible styles of discourse and attitudes towards authority, or inaccessibility of methods and results – can undermine collaboration. These difficulties tend to appear in conjunction with each other, leaving even extremely well-disposed and open collaborators with unsatisfactory results. In the worst cases, where a vicious cycle of misunderstanding develops, the end result can be low opinions of the other’s commitment to learning and collaboration and a breakdown in the relationship.

That said, it is quite possible to construct useful and productive academic–practitioner collaborations. To do so requires that collaborators approach the relationship with open eyes, being aware both of their counterpart’s agendas, preferences, and dispositions, as well as of their own perspectives (which are often so ingrained that they are not readily accessible for critical scrutiny).

## **Constructing productive collaborations**

All parties in a learning collaboration are responsible for making it work. Several factors are essential for achieving success in the academic–practitioner context. These are:

- being clear about the goals of the collaboration;
- understanding what is at stake for each of the participants regarding the outcomes of the collaboration; and
- calibrating the engagement to match the needs, capacities, and interests of the NGO partner.

In other words, learning is not simply a technical exercise, but a process that occurs in a particular context, with a range of stakeholders, and is shaped by the resources, motivation, and capacities of the participants.

### ***Being clear on the goals of a collaboration***

A collaboration may begin with the shared goal of conducting research to improve the effectiveness of an NGO’s intervention. However, an important first step is to ‘unpack’ what both parties mean by this. There are several possible approaches that are distinguished by their scope and by the way in which each party defines the terms of the collaboration:

- 1 *The expert-consultant model*: in which the academic expert comes in and analyses a problem and makes recommendations, and the organisation is a consumer of the product.

- 2 *The expert-trainer model*: in which the academic helps the NGO develop organisational skills to deal with a particular set of problems.
- 3 *The joint-learning model*: in which research regarding a particular problem is used as a platform for developing skills in conscious or critical inquiry (discussed below).
- 4 *The 'best practice' model*: in which the researcher is documenting organisational practice for the purpose of sharing that experience more broadly in order to improve development practice.
- 5 *The theory-development model*: in which the research is meant to contribute to the development of theoretical literature and may be part of a broader intellectual undertaking.

In the first two instances the NGO is often the initiator and is, in a sense, contracting the services of the academic researcher to focus on specific areas of organisational performance. In the last two instances the academic is usually the initiator and may be working with a range of NGOs, or may be building on his or her previous work or the previous work of other researchers. Any individual collaboration is indirectly helping the NGO by contributing to the overall level of knowledge in the field (although depending on the design, the NGO can derive direct benefits through action-research).

In the joint-learning model, the starting point of the collaboration may be to answer a research question or solve a particular problem. However, the long-term interest is to develop capacity and an organisational culture that promotes and rewards inquiry that tests basic assumptions, practices, and beliefs on an ongoing basis. The participants approach their work in a spirit of humility (no one has a corner on the knowledge market) and with the recognition that each brings expertise, experience, and insights that, when fully deployed, create new knowledge and improved practice. In this model, there is no end product as such; rather, there are processes, a series of products, and various configurations of relationships that are ongoing, fluid, and adaptable to the needs of the moment.

Each of the five models has particular implications for the resources, timing, and types of expertise needed, and for creating or relieving stress within an organisation. However, the complications increase exponentially if there is a misunderstanding concerning the approach being adopted. If an NGO thinks an academic expert is coming in to develop strategies for enhancing security in a refugee camp where the delivery of services is being adversely affected by violence, when s/he is

in fact gathering data as part of a larger study on determinants of violence in refugee settings, there are obviously going to be problems. Another not uncommon scenario is that the headquarters agrees on a broader research agenda (e.g. documenting best practices in the customising of education kits), while the interest in the field may be narrower (e.g. simple delivery of those kits and identification of teachers within the camps). Because of poor communication (and understanding) between the headquarters and the field, the field staff may have no idea why a researcher is there, what they are supposed to do with him or her, and they may be suspicious about the stated agenda.

### ***Knowing what is at stake***

Knowing what is at stake raises another important point about research in an organisational context. Sometimes research is directed at acquiring information about the context or environment in order to provide a better basis for NGO action. Often, however, such research involves analysing the NGO's capacity and behaviour and its ability to intervene constructively in its environment in order to achieve its goals, with a view to improving the organisation's effectiveness. While, rationally, organisational inquiry should be a high priority, in fact organisational learning, and beyond that, change based on that learning, is very difficult to achieve.

There are time and resource constraints, but in addition:

*Organizational inquiry is almost inevitably a political process in which individuals consider ... how the inquiry may affect their standing or their reference group's standing, within an organizational world of competition and contention. The attempt to uncover the causes of systems failure is inevitably a perceived test of loyalty to one's subgroup and an opportunity to allocate blame or credit. [Inquiry may lead to] strategies of deception, preemptive blame, stone-walling, fogging, camouflage ... [which] frequently inhibit inquiry into the causes of organizational events and the reasoning of the actors involved in them.*

(Argyris and Schön 1996:49)

While this is written about the business sector (and most research and writing on organisational learning focuses on this sector), an NGO can be just as political a place as any competitive business and engage in the same dysfunctional behaviours described above.

The point here is that research is not necessarily viewed as a benign intervention. Who initiated the activity? Who are the key contact people within the agency? Is research taking place at a time of

expansion or contraction in the agency's programmes? Is there a culture of learning in the organisation or is this a departure from normal practice? The answers to all of these questions affect the practitioner–academic relationship.

Another complicating factor, touched on above, is that it is not unusual, particularly in activist or community-based NGOs, to find an anti-academic bias. This may not be something that is explicitly held or stated, but it is important for the academic collaborator to determine if such bias exists and, if so, what its roots are. Is it because academics are in an 'ivory tower' talking 'theory', when the NGO staff members are out there 'making a difference'? Does it come from latent class conflict or intellectual insecurity in the face of the 'expert' with the PhD? Does it come from the belief that the academic may have a lot of knowledge but not much wisdom? Or are strains coming from other sources – such as who has mandated the research (e.g. an external funder), an institutional crisis that some are hoping the research will resolve, real ambivalence about the usefulness of spending scarce resources on research as opposed to direct service, and so on?

It may not necessarily occur to academics, particularly those new to collaborative relationships, to concern themselves with these questions; they are not organisational development specialists, after all. Likewise, an NGO's leadership may not be fully aware of these internal issues or, conversely, may be all too aware of internal dysfunctions and be turning to academic researchers to break log-jams within the organisation through their rigorous, objective, and 'value-free' methods. Whatever the situation, all these factors will shape the nature and the likelihood of success of a collaborative relationship, and sensitivity and insight on the part of all parties is necessary.

### ***Calibrating engagement to the characteristics and needs of the practitioner***

There are many different types of NGOs – small, grassroots activist organisations, multi-million dollar international organisations that rely on government funding, technical organisations that provide services to community groups or other NGOs, and so on. Aside from size and sources of funding, NGOs are distinguished by their ideology, their state of organisational evolution, the extent to which their capacity is matched to the goals they have set themselves, and so on. Finally, as touched on above, there are the internal dynamics within an organisation – which may be cohesive or conflictual, consensual or hierarchical, proactive or reactive, reflective or non-reflective.

The academic designs a course based on the overall quality of training of the students, previous work done on similar topics, and level of the course. The good teacher also recognises that students have different learning styles. (Some learn through reading, others through lecture, some learn through research or hands-on experience while others need the incentive of exams and grades. Some learn through some combination of these approaches, and others apparently not at all.) Likewise, the effective academic collaborator knows the NGO and engages with it in ways that match its interests, its capacity to provide data, its learning culture, and so on. The practitioner's responsibilities include identifying the right academic collaborator(s), being aware of how the research is perceived by key stakeholders, and helping to structure and manage the institutional relationship appropriately.

A final point in this section is to note that different research interventions may be appropriate at different times, and an implicit goal among those who try to promote academic–practitioner collaborations is that *ongoing* relationships will be established. Given the different worldviews of academics and practitioners, an initial engagement may be one of building trust by doing some very preliminary work. In keeping with a commitment to developing a capacity for ongoing critical inquiry, the first phase may be just to demystify the process of research by using participatory, inductive methods that allow people to systematise what they already know and identify what they do not know. Over time it is possible to develop a relationship in which the practitioner becomes an eager partner in contributing to theory development, sets aside the necessary resources for research, is proactive in coming up with research ideas, and actually recruits colleague institutions to participate.

## **Learning to learn together**

All five approaches to research that have been mentioned above are valid. Furthermore, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Of the five models, practitioners are perhaps most inclined to view that of joint learning as being most likely to contribute to organisational effectiveness. However, organisations often come to this model only after having gone through a number of ‘problem-solving’ exercises and finding that old problems keep re-emerging. Likewise, the academic researcher who is really committed to NGO–academic collaboration comes to see the limitations of his or her approach and, through exposure to the day-to-day workings and challenges of practitioners, begins to combine, adapt, and create new methods.



A necessary condition for good academic–practitioner collaboration is for both to recognise that they need to learn how to learn together. For the academic this might mean acknowledging that NGOs are often looking for the minimum amount of information necessary to make a somewhat better decision (95 per cent confidence levels, and the investment it takes to achieve them, are way beyond the pale). It might also mean recognising that better information is not enough, and that who is consulted, and how information is collected, presented, and reviewed will strongly influence whether learning leads to any change.

For the NGO, good collaboration requires a genuine commitment to questioning underlying assumptions, the willingness to make the investment in time and funds to move beyond anecdotal evidence to more systematised information, and a recognition that NGOs occasionally become victims of their own rhetoric. In other words, because so much NGO funding depends on convincing others of how well they do, they may begin to believe the content of their direct-mail appeals, foundation proposals, and reports as the sum of their experience when, in fact, failure, setbacks, and slow, very incremental progress more accurately reflect reality.

### ***Criteria for success***

Taking this approach, the success of the academic–NGO collaboration is not measured solely by the ‘quality’ of the final report in terms of methodological rigour and the robustness and comprehensiveness of results, although this is important. An alternative view is to look at the research activity as a platform for helping an organisation develop the capacity for critical inquiry and a learning orientation:

- Did the NGO find the process of inquiry and the results useful and did the NGO use the research (results, recommendations, areas for further study)?
- Did more people within the NGO become interested in or directly engaged with the research effort? Did they want to continue the collaboration?
- Was the researcher skilful at affirming the intuitive or experiential knowledge of the practitioner(s), helping them to gain confidence in their analytic capacity? Were participants motivated to read some of the ‘literature’ to help them gain a more substantial theoretical grounding?

- Was the researcher skilful in facilitating discovery by the practitioner of areas of weakness and strategies for improvement, rather than simply saying what the results were, and creating synergy between their different foundations of knowledge and experience?
- Did the engagement lead to a constructive questioning of basic assumptions and strategies and a strengthened learning orientation of both practitioner and academic?
- Was an environment created where difficult issues could be raised and dealt with in a systematic and professional manner?
- Did those who participated in the experience want to share that learning outside the agency with clients, peer organisations, or others?

For the academic, measures of success might include:

- Did the collaboration open the door for other collaborative efforts in the future either with that particular NGO or others s/he might be referred to?
- Did the academic improve his or her capacity for eliciting information and creating actionable knowledge?
- Did the experience generate learning that contributes to the broader development discourse both within academia and within the NGO community?

## Conclusion

One of the most distressing things about a failed academic–practitioner collaboration is that those involved feel that it *should* have worked and recognise that a promising opportunity slipped from their hands. When they do work, there is something almost magical about such collaborative exercises – ideas are flying, connections are made, people feel validated and empowered, and distant ambitions can be transformed into achievable goals. In the best cases, this experience can take root at an organisational level and an organisation can go through a significant developmental leap. While the gains ultimately may be great, experience seems to indicate that it is often more effective to start small, with one unit or aspect of a programme participating in a collaboration (being low key and low visibility also helps remove pressure). A successful outcome will create advocates within the agency and an internal momentum for constructing similar experiences, which then gradually expand (either in number or in

scale). Eventually, the role of the academic specialist should diminish significantly, if not disappear entirely.

There are a number of positive trends in recent years that are helping to diminish the academic–practitioner divide. One has been the growing number of Master’s-level programmes that are geared towards practitioners, primarily in Europe and the USA, but also elsewhere, which people attend for a year or two, and then return to development practice. Likewise, there are now more opportunities within the UN system, bilateral aid agencies, and some NGOs (generally the larger, well-established ones) for individuals with higher degrees to contribute to these agencies in a staff capacity. In addition, an increasing number of institutions seek to serve as a bridge between NGOs and academics, such as INTRAC in Oxford, the Hauser Center for Non-Profit Management at Harvard, and others reflected in this special issue such as the School for International Training. Self-awareness, mutual understanding, and enabling institutional settings all contribute to a learning culture in a world where knowledge is an extremely valuable development currency.

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## Note

- 1 This paper was inspired by a collaborative experience that Oxfam America and Oxfam Québec enjoyed with Winifred Fitzgerald, then Executive Director of the Harvard Center for Population and Development. The collaborative review of peace building and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda was supported by Mellon Foundation funding through the Mellon–MIT Inter-University Program on Non-Governmental Organizations and Forced Migration. For a detailed discussion of that experience see Fitzgerald and Roper (2000).

## References

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