

# Learning for expertise in collaborative networks – Insights of practitioners

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## Abstract

In this work in process study the focus is on work place learning in network context. We conduct a qualitative case study focusing on two service networks. The interest is in the experiences of experts, who have a key role in facilitating network collaboration and activities. Drawing from the network and learning network literature together with the insights of workplace learning, we explore learning on different levels and analyze the characteristics of the learning process in the network context. Our research also contributes to the discussion about learning networks research, since we argue that even networks established without specific learning objectives can become learning networks. Our findings indicate that a network provides a platform for developing expertise through progressive problem solving. In our study we also highlight the importance of network facilitation and explore the experiences of experts having central role in facilitating collaboration and coordinating the network. This study offers a fine-grained analysis of learning on different levels and also highlights the elements that support learning in different levels. This study also provides practical knowledge about learning on different levels and factors to be considered and developed in order to support learning in networks.

## Keywords

Work place learning, expertise, learning networks, knowledge networks

## INTRODUCTION

The current study addresses the need to reflect both the nature and content of expertise in the changing world (Tynjälä, Nuutinen, Eteläpelto, Kirjonen & Remes, 1997), in a network context, which can realize the benefits of the voluntary exchange of applied skills and competencies for mutual wellbeing between economic actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004 and 2008). New domain extensions, such as business fields, ecosystems, and value platforms have been introduced in literature on networks management to denote the complexity and interdependence of networked collaboration among firms and organizations (Möller & Halinen, 2017; Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017).

Networks can be seen as mediators of value co-creation, permitting access to resources, interaction, and aiding in reshaping social contexts, through which the value is derived and learning takes place (Akaka, Vargo & Lusch, 2012; Maglio et al., 2009; Salojärvi et al., 2010). Collaborating in networks has also extended the range of abilities needed. In addition to domain knowledge, different kinds of social, communicational, and cooperation skills are called for. The ability to select, acquire and use knowledge also remains important (Tynjälä, 1999).

Synthesizing skills are essential to process new and emerging ideas into an opportunity for new business: combining, sharing, and expressing new ideas in a concrete way to guarantee knowledge co-creation (Möller & Svahn, 2006; Möller & Halinen, 2017).

For this study, the literature on work place learning (e.g., Tynjälä, 1999; Tynjälä, 2008; Elvira, Imants, Dankbaar & Segers, 2017), together with insights from learning networks literature (e.g., Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001; Morris, Bessant & Barnes, 2006), form the theoretical background. A learning network can be defined as, “*a network formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge.*” It is 1) formally established and defined, 2) has a primary learning target, 3) has a structure for operation, with boundaries defining participation, 4) includes processes that can be mapped in to the learning cycle, and 5) includes the measurement of learning outcomes, which feeds back to the operation of the network (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001).

In many network management studies, the knowledge perspective is embedded, but seldom addressed as central to the study (Möller & Halinen, 2017, 8). In this qualitative study we are especially interested in the learning experiences of experts having an important role in facilitating the collaboration in networks. When defining *the expert* in this specific context we refer to Tynjälä (1999) and the model of Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986), which sees the development of expertise as a continuum starting from the initial stage of *novice* in the field who rigidly follows the rules and ending to the *expert* who is able to act intuitively and without thinking of the rules most of the time. In other words the development of expertise is seen “as a long process during which the different elements of expert knowledge are integrated into a coherent whole” (Tynjälä, 1999, 361). The focus is on the process of learning, with the idea of developing the insights based on listening to professionals describing how they learn (Webster-Wright, 2009.). More precisely, our research questions are: How does expertise develop during collaboration in network? and How experts reflect their learning?

Despite that fact that extensive amount of literature concerning work place learning has been conducted, we believe that there is still a need to focus on the micro processes of learning from, and during collaboration in network consisting of different kind of actors. This study will contribute to the literature on workplace learning by exploring learning in b-to-b networks by looking at the learning from the perspective of experts facilitating network collaboration. Also we will look at learning networks by focusing on the process of learning and how learning takes place, whereas existing literature (e.g., Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001) tends to concentrate on the structure and operational design of the learning networks. This study also offers practical implications for any organization engaged in and interested in development and facilitation of multi-sectoral networks focusing on knowledge development to promote business development and innovation.

Next we will briefly introduce the literature on learning networks (e.g., Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001) and expertise development and learning. (e.g., Tynjälä, 2008). After that the methodological choices are explained, followed by presentation of preliminary findings. This paper concludes with discussion of some preliminary managerial and theoretical implications, and by outlining its limitations.

## **LEARNING FOR EXPERTISE DEVELOPMENT IN NETWORKS**

### **Learning networks**

Interorganizational collaboration in the form for example of clusters, networks, and supply chains denotes configurations of enterprises working together to achieve collective efficiency, through enhancing knowledge sharing and new practice creation (Salojärvi, Tynjälä, Myyry, Ikonen-Varila & Nikkanen, 2008, 376; Bessant & Tsekouras, 2011). Our study is linked to the discussion of workplace learning highlighting the importance of networking and also other forms of social exchange to both individual learning and organizational development (Salojärvi et al., 2010, 377). Bessant and Tsekouras (2011) define the concept of formal learning networks pointing out, that although it appears that networks form for particular purposes, they can also offer the possibility of additional activity taking place based on the core cooperative frameworks. The concept of learning networks builds on the knowledge of learning organizations and mechanisms for developing the capacity to learn (e.g., Senge, 1990, Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka & Konno, 1998) and the model of the experiential and cyclical process of learning (Kolb & Fry, 1975). If learning is to take place, a motivation is essential. Learning can, however, be supported by structures and procedures, such as challenging reflection, facilitated sharing of experiences, and experimentation (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001). In addition, participation is required from all the members of the network for learning to take place and putting the expertise and knowledge of each member to good use, which in turn requires the existence of trust and a collaborative climate (Sveiby & Simons, 2002; Salojärvi et al. 2010).

The current study is linked into the knowledge perspective in network management literature: examining the role of various kinds of knowledge and focusing on the learning of individuals and the organization, since learning has an integral role in the process of exchanging and acquiring resources through co-creation, adaptation, and transfer of knowledge from other actors in an ever-increasing networked way of doing business (Möller & Halinen, 2017; Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000; Möller & Svahn, 2006). In this study, networks are viewed as a forum for the exchange, transformation, and creation of knowledge (Salojärvi et al. 2010). The interest lies particularly in the micro level process; that is, the learning process of people who have a role as network facilitators or network brokers and their experiences.

### **Expertise development and learning**

Professional expertise can be seen to comprise of theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and self-regulative knowledge. Formal and theoretical knowledge is turned into skills when it is used in real working life situations to support problem solving. When practical knowledge is reflected and conceptualized, it also becomes part of the theoretical knowledge base (Tynjälä, 2008, 144-145; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993, 66). Professional development takes place through: a) elaboration and development of work competencies, b) expanding theoretical knowledge and insights and c) sharing the practical and theoretical insights to benefit the team, organization or even the profession as a whole (Simons & Rujters, 2004). Ericsson (e.g., 2006) discusses the concept of deliberate practice; learning and developing abilities through work and complex situations that must be solved. The notion of deliberate practice means continuously striving to improve oneself, in addition to acquiring extensive experience.

Learning in the workplace can be described on the individual level, the group or community level, and on the levels of organizations, networks, and even regions (Tynjälä, 2008). Also the interaction between novices and experts is extremely important to any workplace learning. Furthermore, both individual and group learning at the workplace can be categorized as a social activity demanding interaction and dialogue. Learning being a process of social participation is even more characteristic of learning in communities of practice, a notion elaborated by Wenger (1998). Tynjälä (2008, 136) considers learning a participatory process being consistent with “recent accounts on the nature of expertise as a collective rather than individual phenomenon.” The recent research on workplace learning has established a new branch by studying learning in networks by a group of organizations. Tynjälä (2008) refers to Knight (2002) and Hakkarainen et al. (2004) when emphasizing that the most important aspect of the network learning process is not only the interaction between the network participants, but also that the members of the network are aware of the knowledge and expertise that is distributed in the network. This kind of knowledge sharing is not possible without motivation and that the members of the network feel that the atmosphere in the network is trusting and collaborative. The categorization of elements in expertise development and learning presented in Figure 1 will be used as a framework for data analysis in this study.

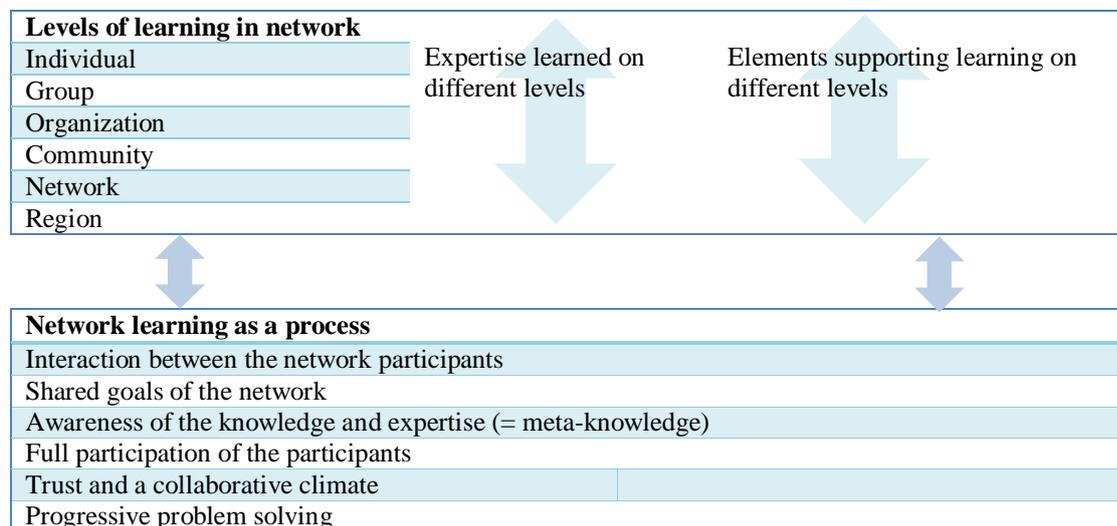


Figure 1 Categorization of elements in expertise development and learning (Tynjälä, 1999 & 2008)

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and analysis

This study focuses on the learning experiences of experts, who have an important role in facilitating the collaboration in business-to-business networks. Our research questions are: How does expertise develop during collaboration in a network? and How do experts reflect on their learning? This is a two-case study and the interaction and collaboration between actors in both of the service ecosystems introduced characterizes the case. A case study is “a research strategy that examines, through the use of variety of data sources, a phenomenon in its naturalistic context, with the purpose of confronting theory with the empirical world” (Piekkari et al., 2009, 569). In line with the work of Tynjälä (e.g., 1999; 2008; 2013), the current study adopts the constructionist view of learning, and learning is seen as a process of active construction of knowledge by individuals and social communities. Knowledge is not something

that is passively received, but instead created through active participation (Tynjälä, 1999). The constructionist view emphasizes the situationality and contextuality of learning. The learning situations, and the way each individual learns, affect what is really learned and how people transfer the thing they have learned to new situations (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, it can be argued that context is one of the most important influences on learning and reflection (Webster-Wright, 2009).

For the findings section of this work in process paper, interviews with the experts facilitating networks - two business developers from the network A and visionary architect from the network B - provide the primary data analyzed. To explore the learning around expertise development in a network context, the literature of work-based learning (e.g., Tynjälä, 1999, 2008) forms the backdrop against which we will explore the learning process in our two case networks, by focusing on different levels of learning and highlighting the process of learning. The elements in expertise development and learning guiding our analyses were presented in Figure 1 at the end of shot literature review.

The recorded interviews were first transcribed and then both researchers read the data through individually concentrating on identifying the expertise learned at different levels, and also the content describing network learning from the process perspective. The two researchers then discussed their preliminary findings to establish a shared description and to ensure research triangulation. This is a work in process study and at the first stage we have focused on the data collected by interviewing the facilitators of both our case networks and highlighted the learning based in their experiences. To supplement the information gained from the interviews, the observational data collected longitudinally from both networks, for example research notes, video material, and memos of the meetings will be used in the next stage to acquire an even more detailed picture of the learning processes in our case networks.

### **Description of case networks**

Network A in our study is a business community founded by a development organization, two higher education institutions (a university of applied science and a local unit of a university school of economics), together with five companies operating in different industries. The purpose of the network is a) to support the companies operating in the region by providing different services useful to them in their business development and management, and b) to develop new concepts and services for management coaching through co-creation and learning. The business development organization (here referred to as *Development Ltd.*), operates as non-profit organization of experts in business development, research, and project management. It is also a member of the Finnish Association of Regional Development Agencies engaging the experts working in the organization in nationwide networks for business development. In this study, we focus particularly on the role of two business coaches, referred here as *Mia* and *Marian* and their experiences of learning in the network for developing learning camps (a series of three 36-hour workshops) as a new concept for management coaching. As business coaches, Mia and Marian have roles in bringing different kinds of actors together, and through their expertise providing consultation for business organizations facing challenging situations.

The main objective of learning camps process was to improve the ability of the managers as change managers, provide an arena to share experiences, and enable feedback and ideas from peers to be put to practice in the managers' organizations. Central to the design of the learning

camps was that knowledge should be co-created and shared informally between participants rather than be delivered by an expert. The five network member companies were: were: 1) *The Energy Company*, a small electricity firm serving customers locally in the region 2) *The TechCompany*, a provider of technological solutions for smart textiles and sensory clothing development, 3) *Packaging Ltd.*, a provider and developer of innovations and products for flexible packaging, 4) *Bathroom and kitchen solutions Ltd.*, a manufacturer and designer of faucets and other plumbing fittings for wet rooms, and 5) *Software Solution Company*, a provider of turnkey software solutions for various industries.

The initiator and key person in network B is an architect and a former owner and entrepreneur of a micro firm, referred to here as *Gabriela*. A prior longitudinal empirical study (Lemmetynen et al. 2017) followed her career as an owner-manager of a small spa and resort center located in a historic villa area in Western Finland. Gabriela envisioned the service concept of her business as part of a joint umbrella brand that would identify with a Nordic way of life that it is of interest to tourists from around the world. The Danish concept of *hygge* (coziness), for example, exemplifies how cold has been made cool, and how coziness, comfort, and social connectivity create a good quality of life marked by simple pleasures. Gabriela works to involve the stakeholders in co-creating the brand ecosystem, which requires credibility and trust for the conveyor to obtain the stakeholders commitment to the joint brand. Gabriela has searches for partners and private investors who share her values and vision. To date she has managed to commit a core group of partners to developing a wider ecosystem around her vision. This works as a pilot for a wider ecosystem for a nationwide service provision in cultural tourism (Dimitrovski et al., 2017).

Gabriela began to assemble the core team for the envisioned ecosystem several years ago. When talking about the network members who she is building and developing the eco-luxury concept with and belonging to the core network, she mentioned as her closest collaborator John, who is an expert in digitalization and systems thinking. Gabriela describes John as the first person who ever has been able to structuralize and give her vision a concrete form. The intensive cooperation between these two is characterized by a constant sending each other information relevant for the purposes of building and developing the ecosystem. There is also another expert on digitalization and concept design, called Jean. Gabriela, John, and Jean are the core team of the ecosystem. Gabriela herself, has long experience in the field of tourism and in the service business, and expertise as an entrepreneur in the field. The other key persons are experts in varied various areas: Alex is an architect with a talent for business; Paula is an interior designer; Lars's talent is in investment knowledge; Mary-Ann is an expert on tourism, Johan is a recognized expert in strategic management, Mark specializes in brand storytelling, and another Johan on the preservation of cultural heritage.

## FINDINGS

Both of these b-to-b networks can be seen as learning networks, though starting from a different premise. The network for developing and piloting a learning camps concept for management coaching (A) has focused primarily on learning and supporting peer to peer learning, with the main theme in the workshops being change management. The start-up project for the development of eco-luxury tourism (B) aims to develop a platform for companies offering services for customers interested in eco-luxury tourism and cultural services. The joint platform would allow customers to tailor their trip by easily selecting from an array of different service packages. Even though the starting point in this second case network is different, we argue that

learning and the ability to learn together and from others is crucial to successful platform creation. Secondly the fact that in both of these networks the members and participants have engaged in developing something new to them, makes these networks an interesting context in which to study the learning process.

### **Learning at different levels**

We will now discuss the findings on learning at different levels starting with the individual and ending with the regional level. What the expertise comprises of? Mia and Marian highlighted the ability to listen to customers and partners and the ability to be able to recognize cross-cutting themes for discussion and development that connect different businesses and industries. Gabriela's expertise, on the other hand, is concentrated in her ability to understand wide systems of knowledge, and linking other people's knowledge to her own and begin to see nodes of knowledge that fit together. For Mia and Marian also designing the atmosphere (facilitation), is key expertise: being able to recognize the themes that individuals and organizations find both important and challenging to discuss, and being able to facilitate the collaboration and dialogue. Gabriela's expertise is also in developing interactions with people whose talent complements her own, and she is constantly searching for such people.

The key thing to understand is that the professional service provider or network facilitator does not always have to be a subject expert. Instead it is important to recognize the current themes and to be able to find experts with whom to collaborate, and then to build a bridge between those experts and customer organizations and networks. Learning from others and together with others, trusting the process, building a network and being an enabler, are important expertise. Shifting the thinking from, *"I am here to produce a service for customer, to something different by highlighting the joint process of finding the solution together. This is the only way, that one can understand, where the customer is coming from and what his/her reality is like"* as Mia said. For Gabriela, an element supporting her individual learning is collecting a large amount of information and sending it to closest collaborator to discover aspects of the information to use in building the ecosystem of professionals. Interaction with various people whom she and the core team consider might complement the pool of knowledge in the core team or on the surrounding levels of the ecosystem, is also important.

Mia and Marian are aware that there are areas where they still need to develop their expertise, for example understanding diversity and becoming a manager of diversity by challenging oneself and endeavoring to collaborate with people from different cultures or industries. This can be achieved, as Mia said, *"by challenging oneself and going into new places and unfamiliar contexts."* Gabriela was emphasizing the ability to trust in what she believed was the correct direction in building an ecosystem of experts in the field of tourism, even though her visions have often been neglected or ignored. She used the term *aloneness* to describe the situation when she was left alone with her visionary ideal and somewhat disruptive thoughts. Only recently has she been able to gather "a tribe" around her that believes in her ideas. Both Mia and Marian highlighted the fact that their experience of working in a business development organization enables them to experiment and conduct their work quite freely without the need to adhere to standardized processes or service concepts. That led them to suggest that a potential development would be to move toward more standardized processes, methods, and facilitation tools. Marian added that even though they have been quite brave and experimental in their work and in finding means to collaborate with customer organizations, trusting the process and throwing oneself into new situations continues to be challenging.

The act of challenging oneself needs to be conscious, as Mia said, the brain works like a machine that adjusts to routines quite quickly. That is why one needs to decide to go into unfamiliar contexts and situations. As a means to develop one's expertise, both mentioned the pain of creation. This means ideating certain tools and structures for facilitating workshops together, and continuing to ideate and test ideas, until the process and tools feel right (they can feel that they have reached the core of the challenge that cross-cuts the participating organizations). As for Gabriela, she is constantly challenging herself and does not hesitate to utilize the experiences she has had as an entrepreneur and the mistakes she made when running her firm. Forcing to close her country and spa resort a year ago did not prevent her to preparing a start-up b-to-b platform, and she realizes that the failure has given her invaluable experience and knowledge.

In the following Figure 2 we present some of the most interesting extracts of the how the experts experienced the learning in the group, community, organization and the network levels.

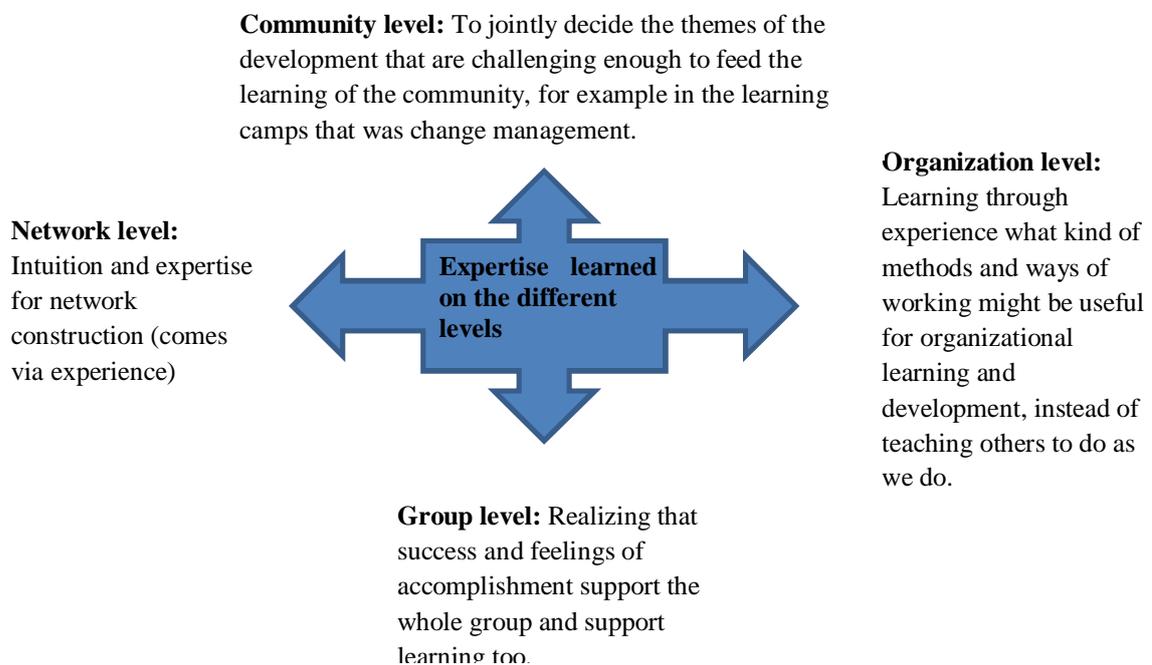


Figure 2 Expertise learned on the different levels

What then are the most important take-aways from the experiences of facilitating a network? Mia stressed how rewarding it is, when one finds one has succeeded in steering people to talk about questions and themes that are meaningful to them, and one can see that people feel free to express their opinions and share experiences. Another important take-away for both facilitators was the realization of the importance to stay up-to-date with the situations in the customer organizations if their workshops and interventions are to be useful to those organizations. Important learning experience is to be able to scale back one's role as a facilitator once trust has been developed and the group is ready to work more independently. The situations and context where learning takes place are not only those where everything goes smoothly and as planned. Situations where one has to reschedule or try different tools or materials to initiate the discussion are equally important for learning. For this type of learning network to function, the recruitment of appropriate network members is a vitally important expertise, incorporating as it does the ability to select those organizations and people who would be willing to engage in

the necessary activities and to benefit from them. The network relationships from the learning perspective are highlighted in Appendix 1 and discussed more in detail in the full paper.

### **Discussing the network learning as a process**

The previous section outlined the experiences of the network facilitators regarding learning on different levels and how collaboration in the network facilitated the development of expertise. Below we discuss the learning process in our case networks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the interviewees viewed interaction, and especially face-to-face interaction, as a prerequisite for learning to take place in the network. The different kinds of platforms and tools to facilitate interaction were seen to have a supporting role to face-to-face interactions. To ensure the collaboration and operation in the network, according to Mia and Marian, facilitation and a script for working is necessary, but must be flexible rather than restrictive. Working to achieve the set objectives means that the organizational boundaries blur when working together, *“it is the people and their expertise and knowledge and ideas that matter and not the organizations so much,”* as Mia said. In addition, shared goals of the network are recognized and decided through a process where the members of the network discuss them. To be able to tackle themes that require open discussion and sharing experiences requires trust to be established beforehand. Mia and Marian talked about how it is the responsibility of the facilitators first and foremost to find the tools and define the processes that foster the formation of trust. Gabriella also talked about how hers is the focal interaction with network members, and how it is also a time-consuming process to place each of the collaborators onto the map and see their role in completing the eco-system she is building.

It is a characteristic of the learning process in our case networks is not only to seek and welcome varied expertise, but to elicit the kind of expertise necessary to solve the challenge at hand, and which also complements the existing knowledge and expertise. Gabrielle emphasized the fact that the network is constantly evolving, and new members, who have some expertise that is recognized as important for advancing the platform are invited. For a learning network to function and benefit its members, there must be a shared understanding of the fact that the learning network can be seen as a group of multichannel actors acting as sounding boards for each other. It can also happen that some network members decide that the collaboration is not no longer serving their purposes and decide to move on. The constant change among the network actors is a factor that makes Gabriella’s work especially challenging, and she feels that her responsibility is to build the ecosystem by recognizing the missing competence that is required to address knowledge deficits and to invite people into the network who possess appropriate competencies.

In both of our case networks, the facilitators highlighted the fact that understanding meta-knowledge is crucial: being aware of what kind of expertise and knowledge other network members possess. Thus it was important to invite people who a) would be willing to engage with the process of reflection and commit to sharing ideas and experience; b) have varied backgrounds and would bring varied expertise to the network. Mia and Marian talked about how through the process of familiarization, joint problem solving, and wrapping up the idea and realizations together, even some of the tacit knowledge of the network members can be shared. The network for developing and piloting a learning camp concept for management coaching has been a kind of temporary learning network, with the process clearly having a beginning and an end. The temporary aspect can also be seen as a strength in the learning

context, enabling members to engage and collaborate intensely since they know that it will exist for a specific time period.

In contrast, the network supporting developing the platform for eco-luxury tourism is constantly evolving, complicating facilitation and entailing building as a continuous effort. It is also important that members participate fully to define and understand the benefits of collaboration. This entails talking about the challenges that really matter and receiving feedback and ideas from others, but also offering them and providing resources for joint learning and platform development. In both of our case networks the interorganizational learning and its facilitation is key. Both Mia and Marian who facilitate learning camps and Gabriella who has a central role in coordinating an eco-luxury tourism network utilize and facilitate interorganizational learning, as explored in this study on different levels, in order to catalyze and manage business-to-business network operations and collaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative work in process study focuses on the process of learning drawing on the experiences of facilitators from two networks. According to existing literature, learning in the workplace can be described at different levels, from the individual to the network and even at the regional level. Moreover, workplace learning includes both formal and informal ways of learning and there are differences in the ways workplaces support learning. Learners can be individuals, groups, whole organizations, interorganizational networks, and even regions (Tynjälä, 2008). In our study the learning at the workplace is explored in two business-to-business networks, each of which can be seen as a learning network. This study highlights the importance of network facilitation and thus it explores the experiences of people with a central role in facilitating collaboration and coordinating the network, offering a fine-grained analysis of learning on different levels and highlighting the elements supporting learning on different levels.

How then does the expertise develop during collaboration in a network? Our findings indicate that a network provides a platform for developing one's expertise through progressive problem solving (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Tynjälä, 1999). The way that progressive problem solving supported learning differed somewhat in our case networks, even though considered essential for expertise development. In the network for platform development in the eco-luxury tourism context, progressive problem solving was manifested as a process for recognizing and inviting actors with specific knowledge and expertise that could develop the idea and organization, and also encourage the network to experiment and implement the concept of the eco-luxury tourism platform.

When reflecting their learning, the differences in the case networks became evident. The continually evolving network presented the facilitator of the network B constantly with new challenges. That was because the facilitator's ultimate goal was to disrupt the industry in order to realize the idea of forming a multi-industry and multi-actor platform to serve both customers and prospective customers interested in eco-luxury tourism. For the experts facilitating the learning camps process (network A), network facilitation primarily provided an arena for extending their own expertise and knowledge base by inviting into the network firms operating in various industries. This is also an example of an organization that enables expertise development and work place learning by providing the professionals with the liberty to design and implement new types of interventions and room to experiment in their work.

This study stresses the importance of background organization in network facilitation and management, or the challenges posed by its absence, when something that has not been done before is developed and piloted. The experts facilitating the learning camps network have a degree of legitimation from the organization their work for, whereas the expert constructing the start-up network for eco-luxury tourism works alone and as a visionary individual, who sometimes feels that she is tilting at windmills without the organization or status to provide legitimation. In this sense, this study also contributes to the discussion about identifying the key capabilities in managing of business networks (Möller & Svahn, 2003).

Our research also contributes to the discussion about learning networks (e.g., Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001). Bessant and Tsekouras (2001) highlight in their work that learning networks are networks established formally for the purpose of learning. Our research indicates that even networks that have not been established with the specific objective of promoting learning can develop into learning networks. The network for eco-luxury tourism development represents such a network, where the objectives of the network collaboration rely on learning and knowledge development. As a network evolves and grows and becomes more of an ecosystem, that is ever more complex and constantly evolving, the manageability of the network also decreases, and the network coordination/facilitation needs to be delegated and the responsibilities shared. This in itself presents an important lesson on learning from network collaboration for the key actors. The case networks can also be seen as platforms for learning at the workplace on the network level, and as venues for the constant search for complementary expertise. The study provides practical knowledge about learning on different levels, and factors to be considered and developed in order to support learning in networks. Understanding and utilizing these insights can be equally beneficial for both networks with a defined lifecycle and for long-lasting, constantly evolving business-to-business innovation and knowledge networks.

The qualitative and two-case nature of the study means its results cannot not be empirically generalized to business-to-business networks as a whole. Nevertheless, detailed data and analysis of learning on different levels and the exploration of learning as a process can be transferable when studying learning in other network contexts. The current study has focused on the experiences of experts identified as being central to network facilitation, and therefore future studies would benefit from extending the focus to encompass the experiences of other network actors to offer an even more detailed picture of learning and networks as a site for the development of expertise.

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