

Creating Innovation: Reflecting on the MEDEA Studio at Malmö University

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Tags

[Innovation Centre](#), [Knowledge Management](#), [Organizational Learning](#), [Higher Education](#)

The MEDEA Studio was a research centre founded at Malmö University. It focused on collaborative media and design to promote research and practice in connection with its surrounding environment for better innovation and outreach. During its history, MEDEA has undergone several changes leading to diverse challenges. This field report examines MEDEA's development from the perspectives of knowledge acquisition and learning with the aim to analyse factors for success and failures. As society and especially academia struggle with understanding how to innovate and connect, reflecting on the different instantiations of the MEDEA studio can bring insights for researchers, practitioners, administrators and the studio's future development.

1. Introduction

In this short field report, we examine the history of MEDEA studio at Malmö University between the years 2009 to 2014. The MEDEA studio (version "1.0") was created as a space for co-production, collaboration, media, and design that would connect researchers from different academic disciplines and provide a place to bring together society. The studio started off with a large number of financed (local, national and European) projects that resulted in roughly sixty publications and two books. Additionally, MEDEA developed an international presence that included a series of MEDEA Talks with different artist, designer and entrepreneur in-residence programmes¹. During this period, the studio went through a major transformation as the funding landscape changed and in 2011. A new director from an industrial background began to shift the focus of MEDEA towards the development of the new media sector in local, national, and international arena with focus on research and development for innovation (creating a "2.0" version of the studio). The aim of our ongoing research is to reflect on what lessons learnt from the experience of creating a multi-organisational innovative studio in a university setting. Through this retrospective analysis of the MEDEA story and examining the two distinct phases we hope to share our experiences and contribute to the next incarnation. Currently, MEDEA (version "3.0") is being redeveloped as a research platform under the Faculty of Culture and Society at Malmö University. The notion of a platform is to provide a more dynamic foundation for research that can operate

¹ See <http://medea.mah.se/>.

with greater inclusion and less overhead than a standard research centre.

2. Background

Multidisciplinary labs and studios similar to the MEDEA studio strive to bridge the gaps between academia, research, education, and society. An example of the labs that influenced the creation of MEDEA is the Interactive Institute² in Sweden, where some of the principal researchers at MEDEA (1.0) have been involved. Interactive Institute is an experimental IT and design research institute that conducts applied research and innovation. The goal of this institute is to create new research areas, concepts, products and services while providing strategic advice to corporations and public organisations. Another example is MIT's Media Lab³, which has a focus that combines industrial partners with research. The aim of the MIT Media Lab is to promote a unique, "antidisciplinary" culture, which goes beyond known boundaries and disciplines, encouraging the most unconventional mixing and matching of seemingly disparate research areas. It creates disruptive technologies that happen at the edges and pioneered such areas as wearable computing, tangible interfaces, and affective computing. Other relevant and important labs include the Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol⁴ that shares a similar history with MEDEA and today continues to be an open and innovative space. The Pervasive Media Studio can be described as a community of artists, creative companies, technologists and academics exploring experience design and creative technology. The studio is collaboration with the University of West of England and the University of Bristol, managed by Watershed, a cultural centre. Additional lab of interest is Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID)⁵, which describes itself as an international hub of creative minds. CIID's integrated structure aims to create a unique environment that encompasses world-renowned education (1 year private masters program), an international research group and provides design consultancy. Both the MIT Media Lab and the Interactive Institute inspired the MEDEA (1.0) to position itself with the initial funding as a more independent, innovative entity that focused on social engagement in the city. This brief background of these four labs illustrate that diverse entities in the arena between universities, organisations, and industry, see the need for research, design, and innovation to

2 See <https://www.tii.se/>

3 See <http://www.media.mit.edu/>

4 See <http://www.watershed.co.uk/pmstudio>

5 See <http://ciid.dk/>

be coupled together, but building a sustainable studio requires different ways of management, communication, and working.



Culture Bridge workshop at MEDEA 2011

3. Methods

This exploratory report uses single case study design (Yin, 2014), inspired by an ethnographic approach with involvement of the researchers in the case, which has proven to be a common method of a good number of recent organizational studies (e.g. Simeone, 2014). Currently work in progress, this field report investigates the different incarnations of the MEDEA studio at Malmö University during 2010-2014. The case study-design used includes a series of interviews with key participants, review of the different MEDEA projects and analysis of similar national and international studios/centres. To date, semi-structured interviews (and subsequent discussions) have been performed with four senior academic researchers and two practitioners, currently more research is planned. In addition, four MEDEA projects and five national and international studios/centres (see "Background" above) are being reviewed through content analysis. Since the authors have been and are participating in different levels in activities at MEDEA, the methods also include participant observation. The collected material (documents, notes, observations, audio recordings, unstructured conversations) has been analysed by placing the material in a thematic narrative structure, elaborated to write the field report.

4. Theory

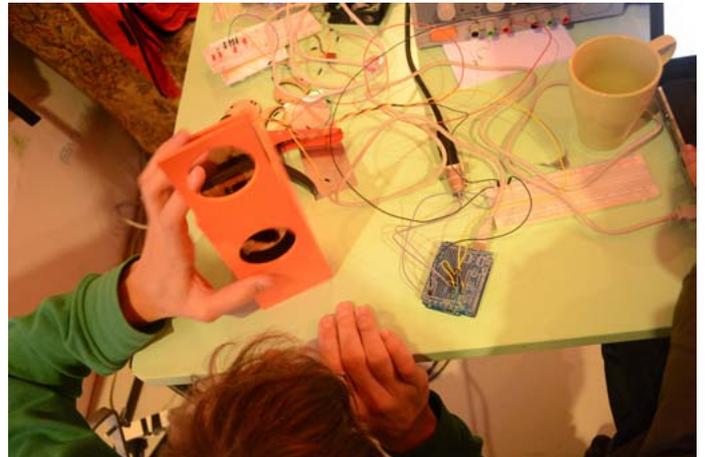
Knowledge is today seen as an important commodity in most organizations. However, many organizations struggle with how to make best use of the knowledge that exists within them

(Jonsson, 2012). Academic and practitioner collaboration is one example of knowledge creation gaining importance today. The intention of these collaborations is to leverage disparate knowledge economic and political conditions. Previous studies have shown that such relationships play an important role in driving innovative processes. However the organizational dynamics of these relationships remain under-researched (Perkmann & Walsh, 2007), where the management of learning plays an important part.

The complex activity of learning can be viewed as the process of knowledge acquisition across social and individual practices in the organization. These types of learning take place in different steps and on different levels: exploratory vs. exploitative learning and individual vs. organisational learning. Exploratory learning is based on different constructivist approaches that focus on rich and multidimensional knowledge derived from real world experiences (Rieber, 1996), whereas exploitative learning is using knowledge already acquired. This leads to a paradox between them, because going for exploratory learning also means making mistakes and learning from these, while the exploitative approach generally leads to a known and secure result that consequentially, tends to be less innovative (Su et al., 2009). Therefore, successful organizations have to place themselves in the spectrum between these two poles. According to Wang and Rafiq (2009) a balance between approaches, like diversity and creativity, as well as implementing goals and a shared vision, helps to find the right position between the two extremes. Implemented goals and a shared vision also help to integrate individual with organizational learning. Otherwise, these two approaches can work against each other (Kim, 1993).

Previous studies of academic-practitioner collaboration also highlight the role of the socialisation process in the early beginning of the project, building credibility between partners, in order to overcome cultural gaps (e.g. Hermans & Castiaux, 2007). This is important since the tacit knowledge - personal, context dependent and difficult to formalize - created in the socialisation for example regarding responsibilities and deliverables, is converted into explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) in the externalisation process. Physical examples of the latter knowledge are contracts and confidential agreements, which have been shown to enhance the commitment between partners (Hermans & Castiaux, 2007). However, there is a balance between how much the researchers are allowed to pursue avenues that are not immediately tied to economic revenues, and how much they are accountable to the aim of the external

stakeholders (Simeone, 2014). Previous studies also showed that scientific knowledge was not automatically an outcome of academic-practitioner relationships, but trust, credibility and social network enhancements were underestimated benefits. Trust has also been shown to have a central role in such relationships, and a condition for conducting collaborative projects, according to Hermans and Castiaux (2007).



Connectivity Hackathon 2012

5. Results

Our field report focuses on understanding the changes between the first the more research focused MEDEA (1.0) to the second incarnation that was more consultancy oriented (MEDEA 2.0). The different studios discussed in the background provide some different clues on how these unique research and innovation based organisations can work in their individual contexts. However, each one is unique and the “modus operandi” is not as transferable. For example, MEDEA 2.0 illustrates that when the new director (industrial focused) took over the studio, it became centred on finding more diverse funding sources and the projects expanded from solely the research based. This also meant that not all projects were initiated by MEDEA, but driven by clients (e.g. funders and stakeholders). Thus, the vision changed from being a research-focused creative and innovative space to a more reactive approach, where research was not the sole focus. The initial idea of a centre, that is, working across borders on a large scale with actors from outside academia, remained, however. Consequently, the results show that the on-going projects in MEDEA (2.0) were more “consultant like” in their approach with shorter time periods and increasingly based on prototype building. Moreover, specific deliverables were now required from the project participants. Hence, the “new” approach was more focused on the outcome and

deliverables than previous focus had been. In MEDEA (1.0) the aim was instead focusing on the process, i.e. “infrastructuring” (Björgvinsson et al., 2010), where the researchers did not know from the beginning what they were supposed to deliver. It was an approach relating to the idea of the “free scientist”, which not necessarily delivered what the funders had provided money for.

The downplaying of the research focus in the second phase of the MEDEA studio resulted in lesser time for documentation of results, which endangered the knowledge transfer, whereas at the initial MEDEA (1.0) documentation was a big part of the process. The idea initially was that the research should be transparent, with shared knowledge and collaborative open processes, and with a non-hierarchical leadership. The change to a more consultancy MEDEA (2.0), created a lab environment that the researchers did not understand and decisions they were not involved in. Preliminary data from the case highlights at different times MEDEA experienced communication and relationship problems in its existence, in its effort to get people from different areas, with different goals, to work together. Additionally, the ability to secure researchers’ time in a more consultancy environment worked against how the university budgeted time in half year blocks versus a more project oriented framework required by engagement industrial and society stakeholders. An important finding that drives our research is to further investigate how the collaborative environment evolved between the two MEDEA studios.

6. Conclusion

As pointed out by previous research (e.g. Hermans and Castiaux, 2007) one of the crucial elements working in multidisciplinary environments and across organizational borders, is to establish trust and mutual respect, in order to make it possible to work innovatively and productive together, despite not having the same goal or interests. This seems to have been easier said than done in the investigated case. A crucial reflection is that creating the right balance for an innovative environment (see e.g. Wang and Rafiq, 2009) in academia requires a careful balance between research, funding, and people that combines a vision of open research with sustainable funding. As we point out this, is a very difficult balance in the best of industrial cases and very challenging in the academy.

The history of MEDEA shows a turn from a research-like to a more consulting-like environment, due to the change of

funding and leadership. This change resulted in a shift of the position, between explorative and exploitative learning, from the explorative learning (research oriented) approach towards the exploitative learning (consulting oriented). In the first MEDEA perhaps, the researchers were too independent, and in the second version of the studio, the research became focused on being accountable to the external stakeholders (cf. Simeone, 2014). Our initial conclusion is that the MEDEA (1.0 & 2.0) struggled to place itself in the spectrum between these two approaches. It resulted in imbalance with either too much/less of each approach, affecting the knowledge creation, the knowledge transfer and in the end the existence of the studio (cf. Kim, 1998). However, in accordance with previous research (e.g. Hermans and Castiaux, 2007; Simeone 2014), we believe that environments, like the MEDEA studio, can be valuable for the way we create, learn and transfer knowledge from and between academia, society, and industry/organisations. Additionally, there is a need to further understand the different incarnations of the MEDEA studio as a means to contribute to the next iteration (3.0), so that a better balance between the exploratory nature of the studio can be exploited in a sustainable manner.

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Edition and production

Name of the publication: eLearning Papers

ISSN: 1887-1542

Publisher: elearningeuropa.info

Edited by: P.A.U. Education, S.L.

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