

# Lessons Learned from a Collaborative Effort towards Co-creation – Sliding Doors Reflections

**Abstract** This paper examines the challenges encountered during a collaborative project involving research and practice in a Norwegian municipality. The objective of the project was to apply co-creation by involving users, employees, and researchers in the development of coordinated, flexible, and knowledge-based services, with a strong emphasis on user-centeredness. However, the project faced several obstacles that hindered its progress. In this article, we adopt a 'what-if' perspective to explore alternative scenarios, identifying pivotal moments in the project and envisioning how alternative realities could have facilitated some of the fulfilment of its initial intentions. We argue that co-creation represents a mindset shift within the public sector, emphasising relational practices and embracing the inherent uncertainty associated with welfare service provision. By engaging in second-level inquiry, we propose that organisations can develop a co-creative logic that prioritises flexibility, innovation, involvement, and ongoing evaluation, moving away from traditional reliance on routines, manuals, and measurable outputs.

**Keywords:** practice-research, co-creation, welfare services, relational practices

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to share our learnings gained from a collaborative effort between research and administration in a Norwegian Municipality<sup>1</sup> to develop new welfare service practices. Building on a study that is part of a project aimed to achieve change in current practices by bringing together leaders, frontline staff, users, and academics in collaborative and co-creative processes, the paper offers an analysis of how intentions for co-creation developed and a discussion of how research could have facilitated the re-orientation towards co-creation. The project, set in a large Norwegian municipality, addressed questions of whether the ‘right users got the right assistance at the right time’ and emerged from an acknowledgement that services and practices targeted at complex social issues requires innovation and flexibility in both service development and delivery. At the outset, the Municipality envisioned a future characterised by collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including management, front-line practitioners, users, citizens, and other relevant actors in both service development and provision. This collaborative approach aimed to integrate various perspectives, enhancing the targeting and effectiveness of services. This vision entailed better utilisation of the diverse knowledge and resources held by these stakeholders, with research serving as an integral partner and the voices of users and practitioners playing a significant role.

The initial ideas, however, proved challenging to materialise, and the envisioned partnerships between the different stakeholders were never established as intended. Carrying out change in organisations is difficult, and Pasmore et al. (2011) estimates that over 50 percent of change efforts fail. This seems to apply for attempts to re-orientate the welfare sector towards innovation and co-creation as well, and research conveys that many efforts struggles with low success rates (Eimhjellen & Loga, 2017; Voorberg et al., 2017; Vries et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016). After nearly four years, with minimal progress made towards the project's initial objectives, we recognise the need to reflect upon the missed opportunities. Adopting a 'what-if' perspective, we employ a sliding doors metaphor to envision an alternative process — one that could have nurtured a mindset conducive to co-creation. By examining the project's progress and identifying significant turning points, we explore the potential of collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> The municipality is anonymised and will simply be referred to as Municipality

practice-research partnerships in guiding a re-orientation towards co-creation. Co-creation is used here as an overarching term, referring ideas covering co-creation in service development, and co-production in service provision (Author, 2023).

To begin, we offer a brief case description to establish the project's context and present a description of the intended practice-research collaboration. We provide insights into the study's design and method employed for data collection. Moving forward, we outline our perspective on how collaboration can facilitate change by fostering reflexive skills and cultivating an inquiry-based mindset. Subsequently, we present some of the key aspects in the project's process and an alternative reality, drawing from the lessons learned in our empirical study. Finally, we conclude with reflective thoughts.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on an extensive field study focused on current organisational activities, aimed to obtain a more profound understanding of co-creation in the public sector. This research approach provided us with a unique opportunity to delve into the specific challenges associated with fostering co-creation in public service development. Although research on co-creation is growing rapidly, given its recent surge in popularity as a strategy, there remains much to explore and understand. The study's exploratory nature is well-suited for probing areas that have not yet been extensively studied. Moreover, the complexity of our research setting, marked by a close interplay between research and practice, is particularly pertinent for acquiring new insights about the challenges of actualising co-creation, as well as the potential benefits of integrating research into these processes.

### *The case*

The project under study, which was politically desired and initiated, was launched in a large Norwegian municipality in 2018. Workshops and dialogue involving managers, practitioners from the welfare sector, and users revealed that silo organisation and fragmentation in service provision were significant major issues. This fragmentation, characterised by sector-based service delivery and reporting, led to inflexible practices and the disintegration of users' needs and support. These challenges were particularly pronounced for families facing multiple difficulties that require sustained coordination of support, and this insight shaped the

Municipality's vision for a more integrated approach to welfare services. The Municipality emphasised the need to foster collaboration, directing attention towards transforming welfare service provision into a collective effort spanning across sector boundaries, with the users placed at the centre. Rather than creating new services, the project focused on improvement of current practices within services tailored to children and families, including kindergartens, schools, health services, child protection services, etc., by promoting collaboration among these services and facilitating for flexibility to better meet the needs of users. To achieve this, the project aimed to develop a collaboration model, encompassing new tools supporting a collaborative, innovative practice. These tools were intended to be developed through interactions involving frontline practitioners from various services working with children, youth and families, along with input from users and research. The project was structured with a project owner at the director level, a steering committee consisting of four to six strategic managers at the administrative level, and a project group initially meant to include operational resources from the front line. This group, which ended up consisting of six to ten participants from various parts of the organisation, was to be mandated to shape the model based on bottom-up processes. Emphasis was on leveraging the best available knowledge to address the challenges at hand. Co-creation served as a central premise in describing and outlining the approach for this project, and it is on these intended co-creative processes that this article focuses.

### *A practice-research collaboration*

The Municipality's desire to involve research as a partner in the project led to an agreement with a Norwegian university. Bringing academics and practitioners together in a practice-research project is a way to align research and service development in a collaboration that can foster new ways of seeing the world while also building new and useful knowledge to scale up learning and theorise about promising practices (Bradbury, 2015; Burns et al., 2014; Heimburg & Ness, 2021). From a research-based perspective, such a practice-research collaboration is concerned with an emergent inquiry process that integrates scientific knowledge with practical, organisational knowledge and applies it to address real issues (Coghlan & Shani, 2018). As a part of the practice-research collaboration, the university committed itself to supporting the desired changes in the project. The partnership would seek to simulate change in practitioners' practices by enhancing their understandings of these practices and the organisational conditions under which they work (Kemmis, 2009). It is

simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organisations, developing self-help competencies in organisational members, and adding to scientific knowledge. The collaborative effort was intended to foster a focus on evaluation and learning and sought to promote critical reflection, enhance collaboration and cultivate a “mind for learning” among practitioners, all with the ultimate aim of enhancing the organisation's capacity to navigate the growing complexity by fostering collaboration and enhancing self-evaluation capabilities (Marthinsen, 2004).

For these kinds of partnerships to be successful and efficient, trustworthy, respectful, and inclusive relationships between stakeholders are crucial. It necessitates investing time in relationship building and ensuring that this is done in both formal and informal ways (Perrault et al., 2011). It is also crucial to acknowledge that the process of building respectful and trustworthy relationships requires time, and collaborators must adopt a longitudinal perspective (Julkunen et al., 2023). Moreover, it is important to recognise power dynamics and how they affect partnerships. While approaching collaborations with an inclusive and respectful mindset increases the likelihood of more equitable power distribution, it does not eliminate power differentials entirely (Blowers et al., 2012; Julkunen et al., 2023). This power manifests itself in various aspects within a collaboration involving different stakeholders who bring diverse interests and perspectives. In a partnership that includes academics, public sector officials, practitioners, and users, there exists a hierarchy in terms of knowledge and decision-making, and it becomes essential to address this dynamic. Engaging in practice-research entails a possibility for the researcher to support the organisation's aspiration to change by actively assume a broader range of social roles. These may include providing emotional and practical support to participants, fostering connections between different individuals and areas of expertise, mediating between different stakeholders, or advocating for the development of collaborative services to relevant authorities (Guribye, 2012; Heimburg & Ness, 2021).

### *Study design and data collection*

As part of the practice-research collaboration, a three-year long participatory process study centred around co-creation was established as a public sector PhD project. The research design was structured to enable feedback-loops, allowing research-based observations and analysis to inform continuous evaluation and adjustment. Through the internal recruitment of

the candidate and co-location, the necessary proximity was facilitated to establish the high-quality relationship required for this collaboration.

The data used in this article is based on formal and informal meetings and conversations with strategic management, administration, and practitioners that were held as a part of the broader research collaboration. This has been supplemented with individual qualitative interviews with project developers, strategic management, and frontline employees conducted through the PhD study. Additionally, internal project documents have been reviewed, and longitudinal participatory observations made as a part of the participative process-study. This article is a result of the lessons learned through this project, based on the data collected through the PhD study, which are consolidated with the research-teams previous experiences and theoretical insights.

### **Two paths towards achieving a change in practice**

At the outset, the dialogue between researchers and project management was rich. Through formal and informal meetings, the issues at hand and how they were to be understood were discussed. These discussions revolved around the necessity to develop practices that cultivate a collaborative culture with the user at the centre and determine how co-creation could support this by its focus on diversity, involvement, integration and innovation. Due to shifting priorities from the top management, frequent turnover among project leaders and managers, and the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the connection to research was weakened bit by bit. The possibility to follow up on collaboration with research gradually worsened, leading to little systematic dialogue. Here two doors appeared, one representing how the project came to develop and the other representing the missed opportunities.

The following section adopts a sliding-door perspective to explore how the initial ideas of co-creation could have been promoted through engaging in second-level inquiry and establishing organisational structures that support relational inquiry as a part of everyday practice.

#### *Understandings of the issues at hand – control vs. co-creation*

I believe that we find ourselves in many situations where knowledge is lacking, and the solution is not clear. There are a lot of dilemmas, and I think most practitioners can relate to that (...) But it is not always easy to know how to proceed.

The quote, taken from an interview with a healthcare worker, encapsulates a central challenge of providing welfare services: welfare service provision is characterized by a significant degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty can be managed in different ways, and while we at the outset of the project appeared to be on the same page, this turned out to not be the case.

The fact that welfare service provision is characterised by a significant degree of uncertainty poses a challenge for policymakers and organisations, who seek predictability and consistency in the delivery of such services. In public administration, quality standards are often defined in terms of quantifiable metrics that can be used to evaluate tangible results. Consequently, professions delivering welfare services have become increasingly reliant on manuals and procedures, which has had a notable effect on how knowledge is perceived and valued (Parton, 2008). Collaboration across different sectors, involving users, research, and engaging stakeholders who are not typically involved in service development, adjustment, and evaluation, introduces increased complexity. Moreover, comprehending the impact of collaborative efforts on both service development and delivery is challenging. As expressed by a healthcare worker, the essence of collaboration resides in relationships, but assessing its impact presents a challenge. The construction of the issues at hand, originally attuned to the needs of users and front-line staff, such as involvement, knowledge integration and innovation through co-creative processes, gradually became more oriented towards a need to simplify the practices and maintain control over the processes.

Unaware of the new direction of the project, we held on to the initial interest in the potential benefits of co-creation. In dialogue with the project leader, we dwelled on how the imposition of inflexible and bureaucratic policies seemed to have impeded the welfare service professionals' capacity to connect with subjective and relational knowledge and meaningfully engage with service users and other practitioners (see also Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). Our discussions revolved around co-creation as a possibility to move beyond a practice anchored in linear professional traditions towards an approach that opens up for relational practices, innovation and continuous and collaborative knowledge production with a focus on evaluation and learning (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009; Ruch, 2005). A review of the concept of 'co-creation' was made as a part of the PhD study, offering a possibility for the Municipality to evaluate how it related to their project and how it could support the path towards their long-term goals. Co-creation represents an approach to achieve long-lasting outcomes by

fundamentally changing the relationships, positions and rules between involved stakeholders by opening up for participation, exchange and collaboration with different stakeholders, including end-users (Voorberg et al., 2015, p. 1334). Recognising the significance of relationships is a central aspect in the co-creation of welfare services, as supportive relationships are crucial to well-being and serve as a critical driver for social change (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Heimburg & Ness, 2020, 2021). This approach has the potential to invite different stakeholders to explore new paths collaboratively and view welfare as a shared task, acknowledging the contextual, complex, and uncertain nature of social issues. This prompted us to consider how we could bolster the Municipality's vision by supporting second-level inquiry. Emphasising second-level inquiry involves a recognition that engaging in collaborative reflection amplifies our ability to question our assumptions and actions, which can promote an enduring change of practice.

In engaging in building a relationship with the Municipality, we invited the project leader and others working with the project in network meetings with ongoing work to innovate practice and create learning organisations. Gaining access to local, national and international experiences, and existing research, could provide a possibility to contextualise the situation in the Municipality, enabling them to understand their challenges and possibilities in new ways. While the project leader participated in the first of many planned series of meetings and activities aimed at the operationalisation of both how to make research count in the development and provision of services, and how to ensure that co-creation could support the envisioned future, this was also the last. Although seemingly insignificant, this was an important set-back for the research-practice partnership, which affected the collaborative modelling of the Municipality's vision and how to reach it.

#### *Understandings of means – development of routines or engaging in second-level inquiry*

Everything has become institutionalised, all of us have, into the system we work. Other ways of working could have opened other possibilities.

This quote is from an interview with a social worker and aligns with the assertion made by a healthcare worker in another interview, who claimed that an exclusive focus on routines could hinder “natural collaborations”. Despite the initial recognition of the importance of fostering collaboration and quality relations between practitioners, and practitioners and users, as well as knowledge integration and organisational learning, the Municipality opted to

rely on routine descriptions and working manuals. This choice aligns with more traditional ways to change practice and corresponds with the need to maintain control, thereby reflecting a perpetuation of the status quo, which would not have been possible if co-creation had been fully realised. This marks a pivotal turn in the project. Rather than opening up for innovation and co-creation through collaborative inquiry, they ultimately chose to only consider a partially pre-developed web-based model describing routines for the inter-organisational collaboration and implementation of a shared tool for record-keeping. One of the project leaders ascertained that *“focus was directed at a manual for routines, but what the municipality really needed was a change in culture”*. The project leader explained that:

This model is a tool, a description and manual for how to work. You get the feeling that they want something from ‘outside’ that solves the challenges of real collaboration, while the issue is about attitudes and culture, and what they really need to do is invest time and resources to understand each other.

Another one of the project leaders, reflecting on how the project developed in retrospect, pointed out that by selecting this model, the Municipality restricted the potential options and possibilities available to them. As a result, other viable alternatives were not thoroughly explored or considered, and the potential for transformative change was limited.

How then could the way towards the desired future have been operationalised differently? Considering the project's initial aim to improve services through enhanced collaboration between diverse stakeholders, better knowledge integration and self-evaluation capabilities, it is relevant to consider how the contributions of people with different experiences are valued, and how they fit into the manuals (cf. Bornemark, 2020). A question raised by Gergen (2009, p. 31) aptly illustrates this perspective: Can one genuinely claim to have helped someone in need if the recipient detests the assistance provided? The concept of "helping" ought to be tied to the affirmation and acceptance of the recipient, rather than simply adhering to established procedures. To address epistemic injustice where the expertise of certain actors is valued more highly, it is necessary to empower individuals by assisting them in recognising their own knowledge and capabilities (Julkunen et al., 2023). To achieve the goal of empowering users and relevant stakeholders, enabling them to significantly influence service development, provision, and evaluation with the aim of fostering innovative and flexible services capable of addressing uncertainty, a commitment to open inquiry is essential. Achieving more far-reaching and lasting outcomes requires stakeholders to have subjective

interests aligned from the beginning, as Julkunen et al. (2023, p. 78) notes, “the more these objectives coincide, the more sustainable they appear to become”.

Through our exploration of the concept of co-creation, we came to the understanding that the Municipality's aim to integrate diverse knowledge and resources into welfare services while also minimising power imbalances could be promoted through the engagement in second-level inquiry. Second-level inquiry involves working with others to collectively address mutual concerns through cycles of action and reflection, which enhance self-awareness and inform future action (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Collaborative inquiry depends on the quality of relationships among the involved actors, which need to be built on trust and an appreciation for diversity (Ruch et al., 2016; Schruijer, 2020). This includes acknowledging the different resources and knowledge brought in, whether it be personal experiences, professional expertise, or theoretical insights. By doing so, different stakeholders can take part on equal terms, which allows for exploration of the unknown and uncertain. Such an approach would involve a bottom-up process guided by principles of partnership, prioritising the involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-making process. By emphasising mutual learning and collaboration towards a shared goal, this approach promotes an understanding of knowledge as something that is created through innovative processes of collaborative inquiry (Rasmussen, 2012). It is about moving into the unknown where new ideas, knowledge and practices are continuously created, and the initial knowledge is either enriched or transformed during the process (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2012). Such a mindset can reduce the risk of professional or other unspoken hierarchies undermining the potential of collaborative spaces, but it requires a willingness to continuously negotiate and reconstruct professional boundaries and practice through collective reflection (Julkunen et al., 2023; Julkunen et al., 2022).

We proposed actions and measures that could be taken to promote second-level inquiry. This included the potential development of a ‘toolbox’ that would provide research-based insights through seminars and workshops on how to work with welfare service development, evaluation and change of welfare services, as well as strategies for enhancing collaboration and incorporating user involvement. We also offered more concrete measures, such as developing communication protocols and creating a reflective space, which allows participants to gain a fuller awareness of relational dynamics and perform self-observation (see also Schruijer, 2020). By creating a safe and supportive environment for dialogue,

stakeholders could have developed a shared understanding of the issues and worked collaboratively towards the desired future state through learning by doing. The intention was for the researchers to facilitate and take part in these processes, not as neutral actors, but as engaged participants assisting the process of experiencing, reflecting, and learning by asking questions and seeking to understand the issues at stake. Through the use of collaboration between management, frontline staff, users and academics as a pivot for change, new knowledge and understandings could have been generated, which then would become embedded in the concepts and thoughts of the organisation, contributing to the desired “we”-mentality (Kildedal, 2012). By emphasising second-level inquiry, we aspired to encourage a co-creative logic that supports knowledge integration, learning and continuous improvement. Cultivating the capability to engage in second-level inquiry can contribute to first-level inquiry, which pertains to an individual’s ability to self-observe and evaluate the impact of their actions, as well as third-level inquiry, which is associated with change in the organisational structures. This seemed to align with the standpoint taken by practitioners interviewed, where one principal contended that “*The mantra is that relationships are the key to learning. If you manage to establish a relation, you will learn*”. Although the project came to revolve around the specific procedures and routines applied to assist families in need, our focus remained on the importance of developing reflexive and relational capabilities and drawing attention to questions of organisational support and structural conditions.

#### *Organisational structures – Status quo vs. transition*

If the process is too controlled, there is no room for development or understanding user needs. It’s about the managers and owner of the activity feeling secure in their role and being willing to take risks. We didn’t do that.

This is an excerpt from an interview with one of the managers who reflected upon the fact that the project retained the character of what the project group came to call a “Big design up-front”. While uncertainty provides opportunities for innovation and change, it can also increase anxiety and trigger mechanisms to maintain the status quo (Bay et al., 2015; Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Metz et al., 2019). Rather than promoting the idea of how co-creation in service development and a co-productive service provision can ensure that needs are met more efficiently by promoting flexibility and engagement, the project focused on an approach that retains routinised practices supported by the implementation of a shared system for record-keeping. Despite the early internal documents promoting a decentralised, bottom-

up approach that places the users and frontline staff at the centre, the Municipality maintained a traditional, hierarchical structure within project, with a focus on top-down development of new routines and manuals.

If we slide open the imaginative door, envisioning that the project had centred on cultivation of the ability to engage in second-level inquiry to promote knowledge integration, involvement, innovation, and evaluation, a new mindset is required. It is about building an organisation that places trust in *“that things are happening out there, and that what is happening out there is what is best for the whole”* as described by one of the managers. The re-orientation towards co-creation calls for a mindset that challenges the tendency to favour manual-based practices where the organisation rather endures the relational aspect of service provision and the inherent uncertainty that comes with it (Author, 2023; Leerberg, 2020). Instead of seeking fixed solutions, this involves focusing on the continually evolving nature of welfare services. This shift in focus implies that the quality of an action is not to be judged solely by a predetermined output, since that excludes creativity, but whether the process retains flexibility through continuous cycles of knowledge generation, reflection and co-evaluation (Coghlan, 2019; Stacey, 1996, p. 271). This kind of change is not a question of a radical paradigm-shift, but rather entails incremental progress towards something new. We advocated for an approach that gradually integrates and embeds the new understandings derived from engaging in second-level inquiry through iterative development, implementation, and co-evaluation. This approach would allow for a continuous improvement of practices based on first-hand experiences that then would spread throughout the organisation bottom-up. By encouraging employees and users to share their ideas, the organisation could build a structure where changes are not imposed from the top-down but rather driven by the needs and insights of those who are closest to the ground.

An increased consciousness and intentional engagement in first- and second-level inquiry may then potentially pave the way for the development of third-level inquiry. This third level is impersonal and aimed at creating conditions that support inquiring qualities in the organisation, empowering participants to engage in knowing-in-action and collaboration with others. This transformative process goes beyond mere routine adjustments; it is an organisational change of the third-order where previous logics consisting of both practices and culture and social structure are altered (Author, 2023). By deliberately fostering and

encouraging first-, second- and third person inquiry focused on critical reflection, it becomes possible to challenge underlying assumptions and raise awareness of the advantages and limitations of shared understandings and practices at the individual, collective and organisational levels (Bartunek & Moch, 1994; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009).

### **Reflections – why did it end up like this?**

“That’s something I’ve wondered about myself at times, and maybe we’re back to talking about culture. The idea that we’re a part of a structure, a part of a history, that makes it difficult to challenge oneself. (...) We have a tradition of a purchaser-provider model, and moving from that model to a co-creation model is a significant mindset shift. There are many minds that need to be changed, and what does that really mean? It’s about culture.”

This is how one of the managers answered the question of why the initial intentions of co-creation became difficult to fulfil. The Municipality recognised the need for a more integrated and collaborative approach to welfare service provision that places the users at the centre. The project aimed to achieve these aims by facilitating for innovation in service delivery provision through co-creation, leveraging the knowledge and resources of managers, practitioners, users and research. We suggested that this requires developing the ability to engage in second-level inquiry, which involves acknowledging different types of knowledge, the importance of relationships, and a mindset oriented towards uncertainty. By developing these skills, the organisation could also foster first- and third-level inquiry, involving capabilities to perform self-evaluation, and promote a mind for learning. These capabilities could ultimately contribute to the third order change that a co-creative logic, as a relational approach (cf. Heimburg & Ness, 2020), calls upon where both material practices, and the social structures and organisational cultures under which they operate, are addressed.

To learn about the impact of the collaboration and its efficiency in reaching the initial aims we need to attend questions as to whether we managed to create the right conditions. This particularly concerns whether the practice-research relationship was properly established, and whether there was a shared understanding of the project’s vision. The short answer to these questions is no. At the outset of the project, both the researchers and the Municipality shared a commitment to co-creation. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that there were divergences in both the construction of needs and aims, and in the operationalisation of the means to reach them within the Municipality and between the Municipality and the

researchers. While the researchers continued to prioritise co-creation, the Municipality came to focus on the top-down development of new routines and manuals for coordination between services. This resulted in a traditional “big-design-upfront” approach that was challenging to reconcile with the co-creative bottom-up processes that we originally intended and advocated for. This led to a breakdown in collaboration between the two parties, with the Municipality gradually reducing their consultation with the researchers. As a result, the project developed without input from the research team, leading to a lack of coordination. Hence, the PhD-study maintained its original focus on co-creation, with the processual data collected informing why co-creation is difficult.

The hesitation from the Municipality could be attributed to the fear of stepping out of the comfort zone and venturing into uncharted territory, as mentioned by the manager in the quote above, or a lack of insight into how to proceed. It may also have to do with a lack of confidence in practitioners’ abilities, which could relate to the tendency to favour some knowledge over other kinds. However, when emphasis is placed solely on measuring concrete output, the importance of other types of knowledge or impacts might be overlooked. This brings us back to the question posed earlier, about how one can know that an action intended to help, has actually helped. To gauge the effectiveness of executed activities beyond a mere count of implementations, it is essential to consider also qualitative data, including user and stakeholder perspectives both before and after measures. Co-creation builds on a logic where relational practices are prioritised and embraces that each situation is unique and contains an element of not knowing (Bornemark, 2020; Heimburg & Ness, 2020). Allowing for uncertainty to prevail entails a shift in attitude where surprises are not sought to be minimised through rigid procedures, which tends to lead to a coverup of errors (Collingridge, 1982). The re-orientation towards co-creation calls for an understanding of manuals as adaptable and flexible resources that can be applied differently in each unique situation. Rather than rigidly constraining how help can be provided in each situation, formalised routines can serve as a framework to navigate new challenges (Bornemark, 2020).

This actualises a need to pose some self-critical questions: Where did our effort to support the desired change fail? Our understanding of co-creation developed incrementally throughout the project. As Bion (1970) notes, on the one hand we bring in a body of knowledge, on the other our stance is one of not knowing. Over the course of the project, our understanding of

co-creation evolved gradually, as did our understanding of the Municipality. In retrospect, it appears clear that we did not catch the scope of the changes needed to achieve co-creation, and our efforts might have been misplaced in terms of the amount of support the Municipality needed to re-orient itself towards a co-creative logic. Another issue might have been the lack of formal structures in the collaboration. Although the researchers provided suggestions both verbally and in writing, their roles and contributions were never formally established and therefore carried little weight. Due to high turnover, new project owners and leaders came in, and the longitude perspective needed to the establish trustworthy relationships was marked by disruptions.

### **Concluding remarks**

The collaborative effort highlighted several key lessons. It became evident that co-creation faces challenges when trying to reconcile with the existing governance logic, which tends to favour hierarchical arrangements focused on maintaining control and producing tangible outcomes. Co-creation, on the other hand, operates on a bottom-up logic that emphasises the importance of building high-quality relationships among diverse stakeholders. These relationships are crucial for fostering creativity and collaboration. They are complex in nature and require a sensitive approach to ensure that the knowledge and perspectives of all participants, including users, practitioners, administrative managers, politicians, and researchers, are acknowledged throughout the entire process (Julkunen et al., 2023).

Engaging in co-creation challenges established roles and power dynamics, necessitating a willingness to embrace uncertainty. It calls for a third-order change, involving adjustments in both material practices and social structures (Author, 2023). By embracing co-creation, organisations can tap into the collective wisdom and expertise of stakeholders, enabling the development of innovative solutions that address complex societal issues.

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