Towards Open Theory - How to Bridge the Theoretic Gap Between Academia and Practice

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Abstract

A gap between theories used in business and theories used in research on business implies that theories used by one side are not viewed as relevant or interesting enough for the other side, and one may not only ask why but also if we can do something about it? Building on a participative perspective and collaborative innovation the paper stress a more open approach in order to collaborate on theories in constant change – open theories, written in open collaboration, where the paper has been given the following aim: To provoke reflection on how we through an open approach can make better use of theory.

The paper draws from theories of knowledge activism (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000; Nonaka, Von Krogh, & Voelpel, 2006) for initiating and driving a collaborative activity of open theorizing encompassing abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing (Weick, 1995). Through knowledge activism and responses to a mutual problem an interlinked knowledge space (cf. "ba" in Nonaka et al., 2000) will emerge, consisting of complementary problems, stories and ideas on how to handle and think about a problem. Open theory texts, constructed in this process will, just like the expanding communicative knowledge space they are built through, be in motion, in perpetual reconstruction, and consist of mutable association patterns around a theme, thus defining them as both theories and ideas in the public domain.
The quality of open theory is more concerned with the usability of a text than its validity as it is traditionally defined; usable in the sense that it liberates us from ideas and other structures that binds us to a problem; helping us to think better about business. The practice and theories created in open collaboration will be especially suitable for emancipatory knowledge interests in line with Habermas ([1968] 1972) reasoning on critical social sciences, giving them a different epistemological status than traditional theories on business. If our knowledge interest is to free ourselves from structures, a text that helps us in this process is more useful than one that do not. By doing this we will be moving away from a debate between how we know and what we know towards theories on how we can free ourselves from our problems by thinking better through provoked reflection.

The process will in time create a common language for business and research on business, favouring more central concepts for different open theories, thus also closing the gap between business and academia. Some concepts and ideas of an open theory will be temporarily stabilized, indicating a more profound reference point in that theory, whereas others change quicker, indicating less relevance or flaws.

The text ends with a first sketch of the Open Theory logic as well as reflections on this logic and suggestions for how to proceed from here.
Introduction

The gap

There is a gap between theories used in business and theories used in research on business. In Academia, business preference for normative ‘cookbooks’, ‘guru theory’ and the ‘management knowledge industry’ that goes with it, are looked down upon (Collins, 2004; Kieser, Nicolai, & Seidl, 2015; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). At the same time business practitioners find little use of the output from business scholars as academic writing is mainly designed for gaining peer approval, whereas communicating with those outside the ‘ivory tower’ is deemed less important (Babin, Griffin, & Hair Jr, 2016; Hosie & Smith, 2009; Kaplan, 1998), although scholars believe that research published by business school faculty is relevant to practitioners (Miller, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011). Harvard Business Review (HBR) appears as an oxymoron by many academics; reluctantly given approval due to the impact, but where other journals are viewed as more serious and important for your true academic influence and career (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007; Schulz & Nicolai, 2015). The gap implies that theories used by one side are not viewed as relevant or interesting enough for the other side, and one may not only wonder why but also if we can do something about it?

Suggested Paths

There are suggestions how to proceed. Kaplan (1998) amongst others (e.g. Coghlan, 2011) propose a closer collaboration in research that builds on (innovation) action research. Similarly a Mode 2 research has been proposed by scholar who would like to see more of trans disciplinary team working among academics and practitioners (Bartunek, 2011). Another approach, advocated by for instance Rynes et al. (2007) and Madhavan and Niranjan (2015), would be to study concrete managerial results (in quite a positivistic way) in
evidence-based management. Kieser et al. (2015, p. 146) as a fourth example, recommend “a more rigorous and systematic research program to investigate how the results of scientific research are utilized in management practice”.

Even though these suggested paths might increase some usability of theories, they still are created inside restrictions of a divide between practitioners and scholars, that Coghlan (2011) explains by different knowledge interest concerning *how we know* (practitioners) and *what we know* (scholars). Mode 2, with the aim of eloping this divide, has according to Bartunek (2011) so far not been able to show any results worth mentioning. The same goes for action research (Coghlan, 2011). In my reading, all these attempts still tend to favour a science tradition where academic results are to be published in journals (and magazines) and thereafter popularized in order to fit practitioners better. The scalability of these initiatives is also limited to participating researchers. Although there are several ideas how to bridge this divide between business and research on business (Cohen, 2007), there is no real progress in ideas for how to more forcefully dismantle it even if both action research and Mode 2 is moving in that direction (Coghlan, 2011; Kieser et al., 2015).

In this article, I suggest a complementary way towards this goal, by following the trend of opening all sorts of innovative processes (where theory could be one) to a diversity of stakeholders that has something to add. Developing a process for ‘open theory’ seem as a promising move; following ideas from open innovation and collaborative innovativeness but also made possible right now by seizing opportunities that modern technology give us. Following the trend would also bypass existing discussion on planning how to proceed in favour of the entrepreneurial method where we by *effectuation* (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011) successively will identify what works. The practice and quality of open theory will then be developed alongside with the mutable theories the emerging practice produce. The practice and theories thus created will be especially suitable for emancipatory knowledge interests in
line with (Habermas, [1968] 1972) reasoning on critical social sciences, giving them a different epistemological status than traditional theories on business. By doing this we will be moving away from a debate between how we know and what we know towards theories on how we can free ourselves from our problems by thinking better. It is also a move away from the risk of practical irrelevance upheld by the limitations of traditional publication practices (Babin et al., 2016).

This new fundament for theory construction is in itself a force that works against structures, such as the troublesome divide between scholars and practitioners. Hence, open theory will not so much replace existing traditions for creating theories, but complement them with knowledge created through open collaborations between scholars, practitioners and others with complementary competences.

Aim

With this background, the article has been given the following aim, where some of the wording will become clearer in the next sections of the text: To provoke reflection on how we through an open approach can make better use of theory.

Origin of Thought

The origin to the ideas presented in this article can be traced back to my research on organized intelligence work, more popularly known as competitive intelligence. The dominant scientific idea on intelligence at that time (2009) was that it supports formal decision-making, where I through my research presented complementary perspectives. In particular, I stressed that intelligence was used to make managers think better about business problems they faced, instead of just supplying them with information. Intelligence then had to be active in these processes, and not passive bystanders awaiting orders by their internal contacts. By taking
agency, they influenced crucial knowledge building processes of their organizations and affected future actions (Hoppe, 2009, 2013a, 2013b).

On Knowledge Activists

Intelligence professionals could thus be viewed as knowledge activists (Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka et al., 2006) where their four main responsibilities can be translated into an intelligence program (Hoppe, 2013a).

- To initiate and focus knowledge creation,
- To reduce the time and cost needed for knowledge creation,
- To leverage knowledge creation initiatives throughout the organization, and
- To guide knowledge creation by the instigation of complementary reference points.

The influence process described above was especially visible in the tollgates of a product development process of a pharmaceutical company (Hoppe, 2009). The requirements for passing the tollgates were both fixed and flexible, where the intelligence unit had the responsibility of adding complementary questions in need of answering, quite specific for each project but attuned with other projects. Without addressing these questions, the tollgate report was incomplete and the project would not even be assessed for further funding. Most pharma-researches were, as members of the project team, reluctant to move their attention to areas outside their own interest, but they had to in order to build an informed understanding of their joint project, its risks, possibilities and chances of contributing to the wellbeing of the company. By the influence from intelligence professionals and complementary reference points the project team came to expand their knowledge by thinking better, from a company perspective. Their understanding was then written down, assessed and evaluated by portfolio managers for its risks and potentials in relation to other pharma-projects.
What really caught my attention in this process was the instigation of *complementary reference points*, or even *forced reference points* that I later came to label them. What these forced reference points did was to *provoke reflection* on something the intelligence clients had not chosen themselves. The reference points were also loaded with a distinct perspective; in my thesis described as an *ideal company thinking* emanating from the vision and mission of the company. The intelligence professionals thus became *knowledge activists* or *agents for an ideal company thinking*, supplying different decision processes with *forced reference points* that *provoked reflection* in those targeted for intelligence action. Through the process, *shared reference points* as well as a *common language* for discussing these shared reference points evolved. In this manner, the intelligence professionals influenced the thought processes in relation to important assessments and decisions.

Intelligence professionals did though not control the individual *insights* active in these processes; instead they used a diversity of tools for affecting them, such as choice of analytical models and distribution of different intelligence *artefacts*.

**On Insights and Artefacts**

Artefacts, the physical remnants of man, in the shape of intelligence reports and other bits of information, were at the centre of what was described by the practitioners I interviewed. The importance of insights, the ideas that guide our thought and action, were less pronounced but could still be understood as utterly important in the mission of the intelligence officers. For instance, one of my informants said, “The choice of analytical model is less important than the discussion it triggers”, meaning that artefacts were not important in themselves but you could use them to force people to reflect on certain aspects, process ideas, make conclusions and build joint ideas on how to proceed.
What especially intrigued me, was that most theories on intelligence dealt with artefacts; how distributed analysis, commonly on paper, should inform managers and their decisions. The focus was on the tangible, easily described and perceivably controlled. The theories did not really deal with what actually guided decisions and actions in the company; shared insights upheld by leading members of the organization (Van der Heijden, 2011). On the other hand, dominating popular theories on intelligence used the vocabulary of intelligence professionals and were easy to understand (cf. Fuld, 2010), which could explain their use. But were these less developed theories the best for understanding how intelligence worked inside organizations? My answer was no, why I also suggested that one should differentiate insights from artefacts and view intelligence work as two, but interconnected, intelligence processes, where insight processes influenced artefact processes and vice versa.

What I did not at the time was to see that we use to divide theory in the same way as intelligence. Theories described on paper are just artefacts, easily distributed and then there are insights active in the evolvement of the written theories and insights emanating from these written theories. Another way of putting it is that the intelligence reports written by my informants had the same characteristics as theories. Personal and collective insights from analysing the competitive environment were converted to written theories and then distributed as artefacts.

We are also bound to use artefacts (like this article) in communicating with a bigger audience. At least we used to be. Now, the interconnectivity of the world is increasing, and with it new opportunities arise how to create and share ideas, knowledge, or if you like theories. In organized intelligence work, the creation of intelligence artefacts is changing towards more collaborative processes, for instance through the use of wikis on competitors and markets. Through this development artefacts are becoming more temporal constructs built on the collective insights from those participating, less fixed and less personal. But, if
intelligence artefacts can be viewed as theories, could it not be that theorising could be arranged more like organized intelligence work? Could not more people engage themselves as knowledge activists? My answer to these two questions is of course yes, where open theory can be viewed as an elongation of organized intelligence work, but in another setting and with other goals.

**Open Theorizing**

In a way, we already know how to construct open theory, as it is similar to how we use different sorts of communicative tools today, we just have not organized us in order to create open collaborative theories. You simply start with presenting a problem in a communicative knowledge space – a designated public domain for open theory - inviting scholars, practitioners and others to respond. A problem could for instance deal with how to build and maintain a unique profile in a highly competitive generic market. With responses to the problem an interlinked knowledge space (cf. "ba" in Nonaka et al., 2000) of ideas will emerge, consisting of complementary problems, stories and ideas on how to handle and think about the stated problem. All this data will simultaneously be stored in a database connected to the public domain.

Problems that are interesting, that is that they provoke reflection, will muster more effort compared to those that do not, thus prioritizing amongst problems and steering recourses towards those spaces that generate most attention. Building on the experiences from Wikipedia, people will assign themselves to different tasks, thus enhancing the total quality of the open theory output. A picture of how it can look like below.

*Figure 1: Open theory as an evolving extract from an expanding knowledge space with self-assigned roles*
One discussion thread will for instance deal with refining and developing the problem while another thread will deal with reflections on how to resolve the problem by giving references to existing theories and similar cases. In time, data in the form of complementary stories and other references will accumulate, making it possible to extract mutable collaborative meta-texts (that is open theories) on both the problem at hand and ways of thinking about the problem. It is a process of theorizing, which in the language of Weick (1995) consists of abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing but compared to the normal scientific tradition where all contributors can participate. These open theory texts will, just like the expanding communicative knowledge space they are built upon,
be in motion, in perpetual reconstruction, and consist of mutable association patterns around a theme, thus defining them as both theories and ideas in the public domain. The process will also create a common language, favouring more central concepts for the open theory through reappearance and reuse, thus also closing the gap between business and academia.

Modern technology will be able to support this process, for instance by automatically indexing all texts and by the use for instance of hyperbolic trees (digitally generated associative patterns between concepts) aid researchers and practitioners in their investigation of emerging patterns in the data. If data is rich in contextual information, the same data can be reused for all sorts of problems, supporting collaborative theorizing on different but interlinked problems. In time, the database will contain a vast amount of data on for instance managerial problems, practices and theories, making it possible to write open theory on almost any kind of issue a manager will experience.

Compared to normal research and theory construction, there is no research filter present in the sample selection beforehand; instead this filter is applied in the collaborative construction of the open theory text, acknowledging any bias in the data at hand. All data and reference points are also immediately available (through hyperlinks) to scrutiny by those sceptical to the open theory constructs. The open process will also allow oppressed voices, previously neglected by applied research filters and normal business science, to be heard and incorporated in the emerging theories. By continuous critical reflection on the theory constructs thus produced, anyone participating can engage in knowledge activism by initiating and focus knowledge creation by for instance inviting people with complementary competences and perspectives to participate in the further development of theory.

Constructing a process for creating open theories thus appear as quite possible, but there are also some other aspects of open theory creation worth reflecting on, where I now turn to the title of this article.
On the Title: Towards Open Theory

All three words in the title have a specific meaning; giving perspectives on open theory and open theorizing. In this section and the following I give a few ideas on how to think about open theory and how it suits the needs of business today.

Towards

Towards is an expression of something uncompleted but with a goal and a direction, emphasising a process perspective on knowledge and organizations. Towards, means that we were not at an endpoint looking back at what has happened up until now. Instead it is a starting point for moving forward, using the past as a rather neutral reference point that does not has to be defended. Absolute claims, building on ideas of total stability, have no meaning except as something to be deconstructed and criticised when we are moving towards something else. It is not an answer but a question of how we at this point in time move forward in order to close in on our goal. It is also a recognition that we will never be satisfied, that mankind and knowledge evolves.

Consequently, the focus is not on discovery (and now has been found), nor creation (that something suddenly has been accomplished and sometimes from nothing), but on evolution, where we constantly move away from structures of the past.

Open

Open has become a buzzword in itself and can for instance be found in the academic context as Open access, MOOCs and Open University. Many researchers also participate in open to semi open collaborations built on social media where they for instance share research on Research Gate, share ideas on Linked In and collaborate through Facebook groups. The same process goes for other professional groups, including managers. Openness is becoming the
norm on which we arrange many aspects of our professional lives. It mirrors the
interconnectivity of the world and how we view society and business today (Björk &
Magnusson, 2009; Chesbrough, 2003; Tuomi, 2002).

Parallel to this development, our mutual understanding of value creation in society and
the role businesses have in it changes (Osborne & Brown, 2005). With ideas like service
dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), we see that value is created in the interfaces between
actors, and not in a predefined order. We also experience the world as more complex and
rapidly changing than before, correspondingly we redefine business and organizational
models. At this point in time adaptive processes and flexible organizations seem to be a path
towards success, where most organizations define themselves in a network of different ties
and obligations (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011). Your own adaptability and flexibility
becomes dependent on others, why you need to communicate better with those around you,
enabling joint movement. In other words, organizations need to be open to other actors.

If businesses just had to live for today, openness would not be that problematic. The
problem is the future. With totally open businesses other actors would be able to take
advantage of other companies’ openness, infringing on their ability to stay viable. So, some
aspects of the business are kept closed, and the more possible influence on future performance
the more secret and closed these aspects will be. But then comes our time, with a new
understanding of value creation, where many companies adapt their development processes
accordingly; explaining why a lot of ideas have been created around the concepts of open and
collaborative innovation (Bommert, 2010; Chesbrough, 2003; Crosby, ‘t Hart, & Torfing,
2017). To cope with the occasional conflicting needs for collaboration and staying viable,
companies turn to law and their focus drifts away from the necessary openness in
 collaboration to for instance intellectual property rights in order to secure whatever value they
can define beforehand.
Openness sometimes distorts existing industrial logics. Maybe the most interesting cases can be found in industries involved in the digitalization of society, where the instigation of the Linux project can serve as a good example. Linus Torvalds decision to open the code of Linux to other skilled programmers was a game changer. By doing this, one can say that he opted the quality and survivability of the program (and the idea behind the program) on expense of possible short-term financial gains. The business as a cohesive structure was replaced by a shared vision amongst a physically and legally loosely coupled community of programmers. Linux became an institution (cf. Selznick, [1957] 2011). The Linux-system is not finished, instead it is constantly moving towards completion through a shared vision endlessly adapting to the changing needs of the users. Some parts are more stable than others, but still one might say the whole code-structure is in ‘constant beta’.

Another, and especially in respect of this article, interesting project building on openness is Wikipedia. People of all kinds are contributing in expanding the scope and upholding the quality of this virtual encyclopaedia. Having contributed myself, I have also learned about the non-visible organization of Wikipedia, where different people with different qualifications also contribute by performing different tasks, for instance checking the content for false claims, poor language and weak support. In the beginning many scholars questioned Wikipedia and were upset due to lack of quality, but also (in my belief) a lot of them felt threatened about their position as guardians of collective knowledge. Today, Wikipedia stands out as a pillar for easy accessed introductions to many subjects, and the critique has faded. Given time the project could evolve and establish both working procedures and a viable organization. Still, users need to be critical in their use of Wikipedia. The same goes for any theoretical construct, including open theory. In that respect, nothing is changing. But still, openness seems to be part of many aspects in the future now evolving.
Theory

Theory is a big word, where we have many different interpretations of its meaning depending on context, ontology and epistemology (Stegmüller, 1978; Sutton & Staw, 1995). When it comes to science as a whole, many ideas about theory, as the language and concepts normally used, come from the natural sciences, their knowledge interests and their favoured procedures. This is problematic.

To get a perspective on this we can turn to Habermas ([1968] 1972). In his reasoning on knowledge and human interest, he divides science into three main categories: natural sciences, humanities and (critical) social sciences. The logic for this is that they all rest on different knowledge interests. Where natural sciences aim to create knowledge that will make it able for us to control nature, and humanities aim to create knowledge for the understanding of ourselves, (critical) social sciences aim at creating knowledge for the emancipation from structures that bind us.

Launched in the year of the Paris student revolution in 1968, these ideas of emancipation were received favourably, and have since affected the social sciences but not really reached the public domain. I also find it troublesome that researchers are keen to use the adjective “critical” in many places, but are at the same time quite blind to many a structure that confine their scientific work and contributions. A possible explanation is that we are still burdened with ideas emanating from other knowledge interests and then mainly natural sciences, forcing us to use words and rationalities constructed for other purposes. Business studies are no exception, where I am not surprised that practitioners find a lot of theories on business hard to understand. I do not say that business researchers lack scientific rigour, but that predefined and favoured scientific domains have a negative influence on theorizing as a communicative tool for reaching outside these domains, making it harder to understand and use any theory constructed in the confines of academia. No wonder that academics and
laymen do not use the same knowledge constructs for making sense of the world. Theories in use do not speak that well with each other.

In business research and social sciences one goal can be describes as to create a language that makes it possible for us to talk about and make sense of the phenomena we chose to study. All concepts and categorizations, models and arrows, are just suggestions for how to approach, think and talk about a phenomenon. When we encounter something new, one of the endeavours is to create an appropriate language. Unfortunately, both those who want to talk about this novelty and those they would like to talk to are bound to existing language, which to some degree correspondingly explains why it is difficult for new ideas to spread and why a lot of people initially are sceptical. When a new vocabulary has been established, connected to existing knowledge, theories as language can be spread and used. Today, organizational scholars sometimes use concept like ‘decoupling’ and ‘bounded rationality’ together with ‘garbage-can-theory’ in the same sentence, probably because they talk to other organizational scholars. At the same time, business managers possibly do not understand much of it, even though it is their leadership practice the scholars talk about.

If we, as I here suggest, together want to move towards open theory, we need to establish a language that makes it possible for us to talk about the theory itself. This insight is reflected in all parts of this article and my suggestions for concepts that could be used as building blocks. Sometimes, there are already established concepts that would work just as well, but it is my firm belief new concepts will work better because they are not laden with preconceived meanings that will hamper the adaption to this new knowledge context.
Open Theory - A Concept in the Making

Given this short background of each term in the title, putting the words open and theory together constitutes an opportunity to change some of the current preferred order of business research and social sciences.

The construct ‘open theory’ it is not an invention by me though; it already exists but primarily in other knowledge contexts. It is not frequently used and according to my research not developed at any length anywhere. The documents I have found mostly relate to mathematics and computer sciences. There are however some interesting examples from current use. In international law, for instance Schieder (2000) uses open theory in a plea for a ‘new’ pragmatic international law, beyond universality and objectivity. Engeström (2008), in an article on human-computer interaction, provides us with another example of current use as he describes ‘activity theory’ as an open theory to make a point that it is under constant development. But when it comes to business, I have not found any real use of the open theory concept.

But does this existence, although miniscule, of a construct mean that we also have to adopt it as it is? Of course not, the whole idea with an open theory is adaption. It is a theory with no end, where the value of it lies in the compliance with the unit of study; and when the unit of study changes so must theory. In computer science, we already have acknowledged that change is constant and fast, where Moore’s law tells us that technology will move towards situations inexperienced by mankind. The knowledge interests of computer science are also different compared to those of social sciences. Now, acknowledging that most of us in business experience the world as both complex and rapidly changing, an open attitude towards open theory appears to be feasible.
Before we leave this section, let me touch upon the question if not current theories already are open and quality assured thru collaboration and the way texts are presented? Yes of course there are collaborations in many aspects, but then these are constructed under other paradigms and knowledge interests than that behind open theory. To me, the difference lies in mainly two dimensions. Firstly, there is no real transparency in the actual construction of any scientific text at this moment. Instead we have to put our trust to the sections of the texts that deal with method and material used. In natural science, this problem is dealt with through the possibility of replication, but without hindering faulty claims (e.g. concerning superconductivity) to be accepted before proven wrong. Secondly, the collaborations on scientific texts are usually restricted to academia. There are exceptions, for instance theories constructed through action research (Kaplan, 1998), but they are not that common. The prefix ‘open’ consequently have two interconnected meanings; open as not finished (the open theory) and open as transparent in the construction (the open theorizing).

**Discussion**

In this section I move away from the construct itself, to its context in science and business, whereas I touch upon some aspects that should be of interest for understanding the present divide between the two and how to move forward.

**On Paradigms**

Could this article be the beginning in the forming of a new paradigm for business and (social) sciences? Well, that is not really the argument and it is beyond my aim to make such a claim. What it can do though is to actually point towards a paradigm already in use or under construction. My text on open theory is but an argument for building a new base for making knowledge claims that we deem interesting; interesting by provoking reflection on how we
view knowledge development both inside and outside academia today. Non-the less are there some interesting aspects regarding paradigms.

If we turn to Kuhn (1962) ideas on scientific progress and paradigms, I have in this article pointed to different anomalies of today’s dominating theories, where social sciences many times try to live up to standards and structures set by the natural sciences. However, the main anomaly I am concerned with is that in business and business research we have different views on what constitutes a good theory. That points to the fact that we do not share the same paradigm. The knowledge created inside Academia does not really comply with the more popular knowledge used in the practice of business. This problem is also noticeable at our business schools where both our students and the community on the outside do not always find theories studied that useful. Still, if we are to believe Kurt Lewin famous quote that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, how come they are not experienced in that way? Well, one answer would be that we do not share the same knowledge universe, we think and act according to different guiding paradigms.

Another take on this question is that the ideas expressed here points to a possibility of building a theory (i.e. open theory) that rest on a paradigm already described by Habermas ([1968] 1972). To me, putting my foot in my mouth, the scientific community has not found a constructive way of dealing with the fact that theories are structures in themselves, which according to Habermas hinder our emancipation. Habermas ideas are interesting, but we have not been able to map out a path towards how this view on knowledge and theory could gain common acclaim. As a closed theory represents a given structure for knowledge, it also represents a limitation to man and thus should be fought in order to create emancipation. A functioning open theory would not have the same limitation, in fact the loose end and ideas of provoking reflection drives emancipation from any structure presented in an open theory.
The idea of open theory as a way of creating more valuable knowledge constructs provides us with a complementary dimension to Habermas ideas. If nature builds on laws, there is a need for knowledge process that can unravel these laws. If mankind is expressed through culture, then knowledge process must be able to interpret cultural expressions. But if our knowledge interest lies in the emancipation of man, we must build knowledge processes that follow the emancipatory processes and continuously recreate themselves with the emancipation. The point of critical social science theories is thus not to provide us with facts about the laws of nature, nor interpretations of expressions but with usable knowledge that will help each of us to continuously free ourselves from current knowledge through usable and actionable ideas on how society is constructed. That is, to help us to think better by provoking reflection on those structures that bind us.

On Validity and Usability

What makes an open theory valid, one might ask? I think the main point to be made here is that open theory is more concerned with usability of a text than the validity as it is traditionally defined. If our knowledge interest is to free ourselves from structures, a text that helps us in this process is more useful than one that do not. We can also divide the usability on at least two different levels: personal and collective.

On a personal level a text that provokes more and/or lead to better thoughts and thus have higher emancipatory impact than a text with less impact, must be considered more useful. To me this is reflected in two ways. Firstly, a good text usually interrupts my reading where my mind wanders off in different directions provoked by my interpretation of the text. Really good texts are thus also a nuisance to read, because it takes time to get through them and your mind revisits them afterwards. Of course, this is good for you, but non-the less a bit annoying as you cannot really think what you like to think all the time. You have to change. Secondly, I
start to mess with the visible text. I underscore words, change meanings and I add comments on the side of the page. Sometimes I also start to make small models, arrows and diagrams, putting in references to other books etc. That is, I scribble. metaphorically speaking, the more scribble the better, because they show that a text has provoked thoughts. Sorry to say, most articles I read do not fulfil this criterion. They are plainly not provocative enough, not interesting, and leave the papers blank (cf. Davis, 1971).

I guess this goes for most of us; there are situations where we also cut out and share texts that have provoked us. We do not only find them useful we also use them to influence others. In my interpretation, that is the whole idea of open theory; that we collaborate on useful ideas and make them even better, more provocative and thus more influential by communicating them.

Turning to the collective level, the issue of validity and usability becomes more problematic. How do we aggregate knowledge from the individual level, ensure scientific quality and create some sort of stability in the theoretical construct? In this case, I believe we can find inspiration in Wikipedia. It builds on unlimited participation where everyone can contribute, but with time texts stabilizes although with no claims of being finished. People also take different roles inside the Wikipedia movement, where the collective text is the result of collaboration between people with different competences but also different interests. Knowledge is thus not so much accumulated as temporarily stabilized. This works well with an emancipatory knowledge interest, where we do not want ideas or texts to bind us, hindering us in our journey of becoming. It also resonates quite well with the idea of temporal truths in scientific output. If one at the same time can close the spatial and temporal gap between the collective experiences of a phenomenon and the imprint in theory, which is possible if you let all kinds of people contribute, the more valid (sic!) it will be. So, to cut it
short, the validity lies in the temporal stabilization of a construct in space and time, but the usefulness in the emancipating thoughts the text provokes.

On Contributions and References

In normal science, the main contribution can be found in the conclusion part, at the end of a paper. For open theory texts, this will not be the case. The linear structure of a text is rightfully a structure that binds us; whereas the provocations of a good text can be found everywhere. In this text you are reading, there are several arguments, definitions and examples from both science and business that I hope has and will provoke reflection, but they are not only to be found in the conclusion part. If the authors (sic!) in collaborative texts of open theory are good, an open theory text will appear as logical and interesting, with carefully chosen references that will provoke reflection in line with the present logic. These references also have to be balanced between business and science so that an open theory communicates with both worlds.

This argument should also make us reflect upon how we use references today. It seems to me that the number of references in scientific articles is increasing, but is that really making the claims more valid and the findings more usable? I do not think that is always the case. References in scientific articles are just what it is, reference points for our ideas and our reflection. Today’s massive referencing makes articles longer, sometimes more trustworthy, but maybe it also distort us from the main interesting ideas inherent in the article, or even prevents researchers from expressing ideas that are more controversial and/or based on speculation, lowering the provocative and interesting value of the article (cf. Babin et al., 2016; Gabriel, 2016). Today’s procedures are geared for conformity (Babin et al., 2016; Davis, 1971), where those more senior, with more invested in the present understanding of
things, as editors and reviewers, act as gate-keepers to academic domains where ideas can be expressed and then gain momentum for influencing our ways of thinking on specific topics.

**On Great Theories**

Some theories have had tremendous impact on business and society. Let us label them *great theories*. The different theories presented in the HBR *Must read on strategy* (1996) can be viewed as such examples. The researchers/authors have in these theories found ways of describing their ideas so they provoke *spreading reflection*. The theories are interesting and designed so that they easily communicate with people who can relate to them and find them useful. But, looking at these great theories, one might wonder if they really are that unique?

To me the basic ideas behind for instance a *Blue ocean strategy* and a *niche strategy* can also be detected in analytical models such as *VRIO*. They simply are different paths for businesses in thinking about uniqueness for staying viable, or more critically, signs of continuous redressing of older ideas (argued by e.g. Collins, 2004). Their contribution does not so much lie in a discovery of something hidden, but in a new way of approaching a question or a problem that is of penultimate interest for a company. They supply you with new ways of thinking about a problem. And when these theories spread, other people pick up the language and ideas expressed, helping us as a collective in discussing important organizational challenges but with a new language and new reference points. Unfortunately, they also become management fads where managers believe they need to (or must, according to new institutional theory) embrace popular concepts (in order to uphold legitimacy).

The argument I would like to make here is that in an open theory perspective great theories becomes great through the communication they trigger; the authors have found new ways of approaching vital issues for a company by provoking strategic reflection. But in some aspects, many of these theories also become problematic, and that is when authors (and users)
start to be normative, by for instance describing a specific programmatic path towards a goal. When they do this, they immediately decrease the value of the theory as they limit it to a specific structure, unnecessarily circumscribing what kinds of reflections and actions are allowed or even possible. As this happens, great theories start to close. Instead, if great theories stayed open, where described programs were mere suggestions and open to alterations by both other theorists and practitioners they would be better, more transparent and could eventually become open theories. Of course, readers do adapt the theories anyway in their implementation, but it becomes problematic when business leaders and others think they have to obey specifics of theories, prohibiting the adaption to context and time.

Take Balanced score cards (BSC) as an example. Kaplan and Norton’s idea is great in many respects. We have to acknowledge the existence of complementary aspects of an organization that make it viable. The described interrelationships between these aspects also qualify BSC as a theory. Unfortunately, companies experience problems in the implementation and design of programs that should support the use of BSC-idea, where the tangible and measurable becomes more important than the idea itself (Cândido & Santos, 2015; Neely & Bourne, 2000). If we instead could open the collective description of the concept of BSC to a multitude of practitioners and theorists that together contributed to make the theory better, this would surely be most welcome; especially by those companies and employees that struggle to fulfil implementation programs that obscure the theory and reasons behind the program. In order to do so, we must free us from the structure of BSC as it originally was described and use it as a tool for provoking reflection that in turn can guide the adapted implementation of any kind of scorecard program. Thinking better about the relationships of BSC and designing the organization accordingly is of much more importance than the implementation of any program, or as Kaplan and Norton (1992) write themselves: BSC is just a tool for helping managers “understand, at least implicitly, many
interrelationships” (p.79). In fact, adding BSC without taking other structures away will just burden the company more, making it less flexible and less adaptable to changes in society, which also Kaplan and Norton (1992) discuss.

BSC is still a great theory (here used as an example) but we have to learn how to deal with this theory, as any great theory, in a constructive way, where open theory might be a useful path for the future. Maybe in the new forms to come it would not appear as easily deployed as it does in current theory, but it would probably create better results in line with the goals behind BSC. Doing that, we would most certainly also strengthen BSC as an institution as it becomes more like for instance Linux.

**Ending the Discussion**

Open theory, as outlined here, is part of a change in society where we adapt a lot of practices to the possibilities of modern technology and modern ways of collaborating. It can be interpreted in several ways in relation to already existing initiatives for bridging the divide between scholars and practitioners. It can be viewed as an extension of action research, opening up the collaboration on theories to a bigger group (cf. Coghlan, 2011). It can viewed as an extension of Mode 2 by elongating the collaboration period and adding ideas on collaborative tools (cf. Bartunek, 2011). It can also be viewed as part of a research program for utilizing research in management practices, as presented by Kieser et al. (2015). It might even be viewed as part of an evidence-based management program (cf. Madhavan & Niranjan, 2015), even though I doubt it. Finally, it can also be seen as a suggestion to build on the examples of great theories by adding critical and developmental perspectives.

If one would like to see open theory as something new or an extension of existing ideas on how to bridge the gap, is mostly a matter of perspective and opinion than anything else.
What it does have though, compared to other suggested paths described above, is great scalability due to the openness of the concept (open theory) and the process (open theorizing).

**Conclusions**

I started out with the aim to provoke reflection on how we (as a society) through an open approach can make better use of theory. I hope it has, where I start with a first sketch of the open theory logic and its advantages. Thereafter I add my concluding reflections on the logic presented in the article.

**A First Sketch of the Open Theory Logic**

Open theory rest on a logic as follows.

- An open theory consists of a mutable collaborative text (open theory) on a theme constructed through a transparent process (open theorizing).
- An open theory includes open references, directly accessible to the reader, making it possible to critically examine the foundations for the text.
- An open theory is constructed in order to be useful to the reader by provoking reflection on how to think in relation to a problem.
- An open theory becomes useful if it liberates individual and collective knowledge constructs from restraints inherent in existing structures.
- An open theory is constantly refining itself for the purpose of moving knowledge forward, liberating itself from constraints of the past, which give it direction.
- An open theory is bound to the limitations of human artefacts, differentiating it from personal insights.

There are also several possible advantages with open theory approaches compared to existing dominating research traditions.
• Open theory will increase the usefulness of theories as
  o a) resources will be automatically allocated to those problems that provoke most reflection and attention,
  o b) theories built are the result from collaborations between people with complementary competences and perspectives (they will become richer), and
  o c) with the process of open theorizing a mutual language will emerge, enhancing exchanges of ideas between scholars, practitioners and other stakeholders.

• Open theory will increase innovativeness in theory building as it
  o a) opens up for effectuation with fast feedback loops,
  o b) allows people with different perspectives and competences to collaborate on an equal basis, and
  o c) builds on a continuous change perspective.

• Open theory will increase mutuality in theorizing and theory as it
  o a) supports knowledge activism without scrutinizing between different perspectives and interests, and
  o b) does not give any part a final say in the theoretical constructs produced.

• Open theory might enhance the trustfulness of theory as it
  o a) rests on a transparent procedure for theory building,
  o b) allows for better alignment with continuous change in the unit of study, and
  o c) has an internal dynamic for emancipation from binding structures.

• Open theory is aligned with a complex and rapidly changing society, with great scalability and adaptability potential.

• Open theory is aligned with the knowledge interests of critical social science, diminishing the detrimental influence from other knowledge interests.
With this logic and these advantages open theory and open theorizing appears as a feasible approach for closing the gap between theories used in business and theories used in research on business.

**Closing Reflections on the Open Theory Logic**

This is just a starting point, where I hope I leave you with more questions than answers. The main objective has been to trigger a discussion on how we in academia and business can work together in the construction of the concepts and knowledge we use for solving problems related to business. The innovative character of open theory will be specifically beneficial for business problems concerning inabilities to change.

Following ideas from Habermas, practitioners must help scholars to free themselves from the mental cages that normal science and existing theories constitute. Scholars on the other hand must help practitioners with their mental cages of for instance normative theories, best practices or even *normal practice* (to paraphrase Kuhns normal science). Maybe, the path suggested here will not work, but it should at least trigger some alternative thoughts on how to work with open innovation in creating more useful theories.

Whether the ideas and concepts I suggest here will contribute to our understanding of the knowledge paradigms guiding business and science, or if it can be part of a new great theory, I do not know. But what I do know is that we need a language to discuss new ideas, where my given suggestions of concepts and logics are not bound to previous contexts that unnecessary would confine us in achieving this. I quite like the taste of the word ‘open theory’ and the idea of not closing but opening up the construction of theory to anybody who has something to add.
It is also a possibility that open theory, as it is outlined in this article, is a dead end for closing the gap through reviving collaborative theorising between academia and business. But then the most pressing question remains; can we do something about it?

*Further Research and a Business Opportunity*

Open theory is knowledge in motion. Its purpose is to provoke reflection that will enhance both individual and collective knowledge. If successful it will be used, meaning that each reader will create his or her own ideas that will influence his or her further reasoning and actions. Some readers will also reflect on the claims, logic and ideas expressed in this theory to be, building complementary ideas of how it can be changed and developed. As this article is just a first sketch, an outline of a way towards better theories for business/social sciences; of course, there are a multitude of changes and additions to be made. There is one question though that I find more important than others to start working with and that is how we, as a community, can start organize our knowledge creation processes in a productive way?

In answering that question, there ought to be a good business opportunity for someone who has the means and ability for building the infrastructure necessary for open theory. It could be as an offspring from existing companies and institutions, with names like Google Theory, WikiTheory, or why not LinuxOpen. But it could also be as a local initiative that in time might gain momentum and grow to become something we cannot even imagine today.

*References*


