



TWISTED FIELD WORKING

Fighting for the Relevance of Being Connected

Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl

Over the last three years I have been doing the most irregular ethnography ever, from a position as a non-researcher in a regional innovation program in Norway. There is reason to believe that the demand for so-called applied ethnography is rising, and that increasingly cultural researchers will be offered opportunities to apply their academic knowledge in different practical situations. This article presents experiences of applied work in one particular case, raising discussions on how this challenges the classic role of the researcher. What happens when one is not only dealing with analyzing discourses and structures (culture as text), how things happen or not (culture as praxis), but when one is actually part of *making* things happen? In conclusion, I examine how well classic ethnographic methods work toward establishing solid knowledge-based praxis, at the same time as finding it uncomplicated to address the applied praxis field through rather disconnected discourses.

Keywords: creative and cultural industries, innovation, researcher role, irregular ethnography

Contact us. Would you benefit from working with Research & Development? Do you need copartners? VRI can contribute as a sparring partner in developing projects, and we can finance anything from pre-projects to co-partner activities. We can put you in contact with other project partners. VRI is not bureaucratic and has no formal application regime. Our processes are based on dialog and connecting businesses, research resources and projects.

This is what it sounds like when VRI-Agder invites the private business sector to engage with Research & Development (R&D). VRI is an acronym for “Agencies for Regional Research & Development based Innovation”, and Agder is the most southern region of

Norway. The VRI program is designed to stimulate more and better cooperation between academia and business, as a means to strengthen innovation and economic growth. The program began in 2007, and if all goes according to plan it will continue for another ten years until 2017.

The Norwegian Research Council funds the VRI program together with regional counties in a 50/50 percent model. The regions identify themselves as to what areas of industry they want to focus on; in Agder there are three: oil, gas and process industries (OGP), digital industries (DI), and creative and cultural industries (CCIs). There is a tool box of agencies that is meant to meet the different kinds of challenges that each region has. The VRI-program is divided into two separate, but related, main categories:

- *VRI Cooperation*: Stimulate and finance cooperation activities between businesses and R&D institutions, such as knowledge mobility, knowledge brokering, and action research.
- *VRI Research*: A research team follows the regional VRI-programs, and conducts research that must be relevant for regional development, such as innovation and organization research.¹

There are several stakeholders within the VRI-program, based on the well known triple helix model: 1) private businesses and networks, 2) public organizations, and 3) the research and development actors.

After having a number of different roles within the regional VRI-Agder from 2007–2010, I feel that as a cultural researcher I have been on the most exciting and experimental three years of fieldwork ever. Yet none of my roles within the VRI-program has been related to my role as a researcher, at least in the traditional understanding of this role. For instance, I have been the project leader of the VRI-Agder CCIs, which is a part of *VRI Cooperation*. I am also the only researcher out of the three project leaders in VRI Cooperation, but I have not been a member of *VRI Research*.

Doing fieldwork from this non-researcher role has been the most irregular of ethnographies that I have been a part of. In a non-research, cultural business role, I have argued for the relevance of being connected and recognized: both concerning CCIs as a field for research and CCIs as a field of business. In this volume dealing with irregular ethnography, I will focus on how participation in such strategic networks as the VRI-Agder program offers opportunities and insight yet also challenges the role of the researcher. What happens when one is not only dealing with analyzing discourses and structures (culture as text), how things happen or not (culture as praxis), but when one is actually part of *making* things happen?

How to Measure Innovation within the CCIs

“What on earth are you thinking? How can you ask for the number of employees in a rock band?” One SMS message after another pinged in on my cell

phone, and made me aware that the researchers in *VRI-Agder Research* had started their work. They had sent surveys to a number of “companies” within the three business sectors of VRI-Agder: OGP, DI and CCIs. The purpose of the survey, as written on the first page, was to “get a status of the innovation activity and learning processes for the three chosen business sectors at the beginning of the VRI program in Agder.” The researchers did point out that although they had tried to design the questions to match the different sectors, some of the questions might appear less relevant for some of the companies. When trying to answer the survey questions, most of the CCIs did not even get beyond the first questions concerning “key information about the firm (the local entity) – answer in approximate numbers.” For example:

When was the firm established?

Expected turnover for 2007?

Average number of employees in 2007?

What percentage of total capital is own capital?

Share of export in percentage of total turnover in 2007?

Costs for research and development in percentage of turnover?

The rock band’s negative reaction to the survey was closely followed by others from the CCIs: “I am one person and a visual artist. This survey has no relevance to me, unfortunately. I don’t understand why I was chosen to answer this,” and “the questions are unfit for my wife’s and my work as painters and visual artists” were two e-mails entering the inbox. “I have been looking at these questions, and I think they are more directed toward larger businesses than independent business developers,” one of the region’s most internationally recognized innovators within composing, arranging, producing and performing music wrote in another e-mail. A Ltd-organized designer, which is often regarded as the most “mature” branch within the CCIs, reacted with reluctance: “I started filling in your survey, but think the questions have little relevance to my firm. The answers became too tendentious, and therefore

I refrain from answering.” Even a huge architectural practice with 20 offices and more than 500 employees found the survey irrelevant: “We have a matrix organization. Several of the questions were therefore not customized to the form of our organization and are outside my field of responsibility.”

“We are not responsible for this survey, the researchers in VRI-Agder are,” we rapidly underlined as one complaint after the other came our way. It was not easy to explain the difference. We are cultural researchers working as knowledge brokers within the VRI-Agder Cooperation on CCIs.² The members of the VRI-research team were innovation researchers, primarily with academic backgrounds in economics and social sciences, and all from Agder Research as well.

Maybe because we were researchers, although working in the cooperative VRI, we did not find it difficult to challenge the *real* VRI-researchers: “Stop doing this. You are destroying the trust that we have within the CCIs and have built up toward the cultural actors; concerning the fact that we both know their field and that as cultural researchers we actually have relevant knowledge to offer.”

“You have to quit presenting the results as absolute truths, without discussing the margins of error of the empirical material of the survey,” VRI-Agder CCIs protested again when the VRI-researchers presented the results of their survey to the steering board of VRI-Agder.³ In this context the CCIs appear as, well, rather invisible.

The central questions within VRI-research are to find 1) how innovation happens internally within companies, in their cooperation with the regional innovation system and other regional agencies that support innovation; 2) how VRI works, to what degree and how it affects knowledge building, learning and innovation in the businesses; and 3) how VRI can improve in order for the agencies and cooperators to better adjust preconditions and bottlenecks for innovations.

Maybe the methodical approaches need to be re-examined, in order to provide more accurate knowledge for appropriate research questions. Certainly, 18 pages of survey do not seem to be the way in

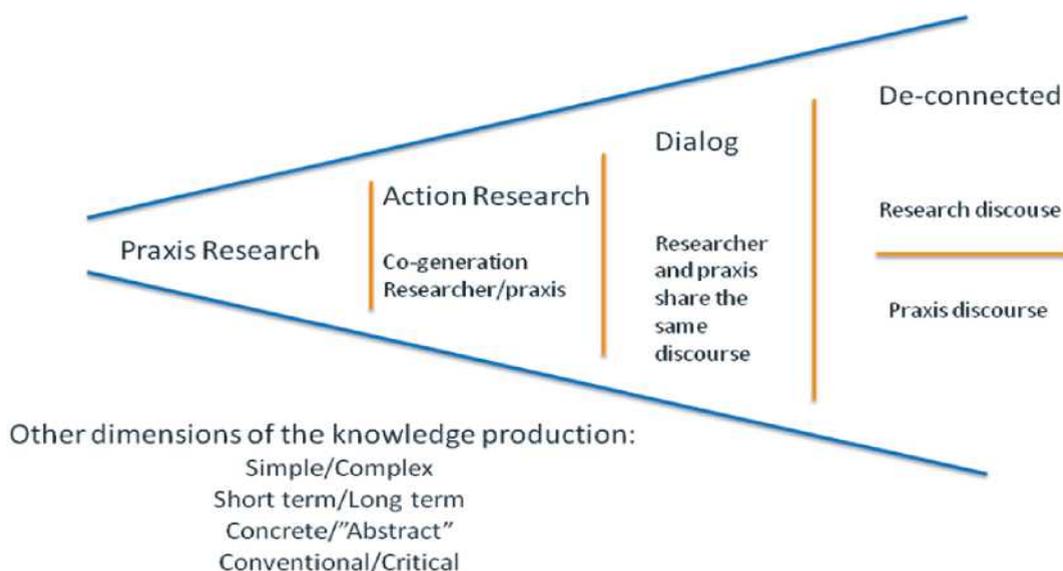
which to gain more knowledge about the CCIs. Then again, 18 pages of survey could seem challenging for the OGP or DI too. But with regard to these two other business sectors, the VRI-researchers might well have sufficient pre-knowledge to design a relevant survey. Toward the CCIs, they certainly do not.

As an ethnologist, it would not surprise me if a more fieldwork based approach – with qualitative interviews, observation, maybe even a phenomenologically inspired fieldwork of “following in the footsteps of” and trying to grasp the situated praxis – could generate valuable knowledge concerning, for instance, how innovation happens internally within companies. Such classic ethnographic methods often aim to provide insight from a so-called “insider’s perspective” of self-reflections, self-understandings and self-descriptions from the empirical material. In this case, this would require that the researcher actually visits the company, and probably spends time observing and talking to people, gaining trust and proving worth – and then maybe obtaining both the “right questions” and the “true answers”.

Connected or Disconnected Research?

Some time later the VRI-researchers once again presented VRI-research results, this time including a model for a degree of integration between research and praxis.⁴ At the narrow end of the model is “praxis research”, where the researchers and practitioners are practically as one. At the broader end of the model is the “de-connected”, where there is a clear separation between research discourse and praxis discourse. Even though it is not explicitly expressed through the model, one obtains an impression through the presentation that the “other dimensions of knowledge production” are connected to the different sides of the model: the simple, short term, concrete and conventional aspects represent the praxis research, while the more complex, long term, abstract and critical aspects represent the disconnected discourse.

“Originally we had a vision of moving along the whole scale of the model,” the VRI-researcher admitted, “but it turned out to be too broad. It is simply not possible to be present at both ends of the



Ill. 1: Degrees of Integration: Research and Praxis. (Source: Johnsen 2011)

scale, and do everything.” “I disagree,” VRI-Agder CCIs protested: “As an ethnologist it is quite common to move along the whole axis – from being close to the fields of praxis, to working in a more disconnected way. It is precisely the exchange between the dimensions of simple and complex, concrete and abstract, conventional and critical that is the force of ethnology and cultural studies.” In fact, discussions on balancing these different research positions and perspectives are constantly brought forward within cultural studies, as a reaction to the pendulum turning too much in one direction. “Culture as text” and “culture as praxis”, is one such ongoing and relevant discussion (see, e.g., Geertz 1973; Löfgren 1993; Ehn 1994; Jackson 1996; Hjemdahl 2003; Frykman & Gilje 2003).

For a phenomenologically inspired cultural researcher it does not feel strange to work that closely to the praxis in the field; particularly during the fieldwork phase, where the phenomenological approach is very much about researching “descriptively, creatively, intuitive in a concrete manner,” as the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer puts it (in Frykman & Gilje 2003: 3). To be able to put oneself

in the place of the other, to even connect through practical mimesis, is to follow in the footsteps of the other, as the social anthropologist Michael Jackson has developed into a phenomenologically inspired ethnographic method (Jackson 1983). Later, when analyzing the fieldwork material, one also moves to the disconnected side of the model, able to juggle both the discourses of research and praxis (such as Jackson 1996; Stewart 1996; Frykman 2007; Frykman & Hjemdahl 2011).

One condition is very unusual, though, within the VRI-Agder context: the praxis field is not only for researching how innovation happens or does not happen, but also has a clear mandate to spur development. With the aim to stimulate innovation, and not only to observe and analyze, this approach goes beyond the traditional aspects of the role of a cultural researcher. Another irregularity is that through the role as project leader for VRI-Agder CCIs, the researcher has a yearly budget of approximately 2 to 3 million Norwegian crowns at their disposal to spur potential innovation processes. It is obvious that this gives new content to the researcher’s role, making it both challenging and exciting and opening up new

possibilities. At the same time it can be frustrating, and sometimes too removed from the classic role and more like that of a consultant or sales person, sometimes even a spy, and often a bureaucrat, a peace negotiator or a missionary.⁵

The Cultural Missionary in the Strategic Partnership

I hear that you have started to name the CCIs as “the difficult CCIs” and that you wonder if and how it is possible to address this field of business within VRI-Agder. The CCIs are not that difficult, even though it is easy to understand why one can find them as such. This is a sector where we haven’t even managed to agree on what businesses should be defined as CCIs. But that doesn’t make it difficult, only incredibly exciting and full of possibilities.

This is what the project leader of VRI-Agder CCIs claimed, without expressing any doubts or reservations, in front of an extended VRI-Agder Program Board at the beginning of 2008.

The CCIs were far from finding their form within the VRI-Agder system, and already six months into the program period one entered a phase of determining if they should be eliminated as a separate sector in VRI-Agder altogether. Instead of having a CCI program, the budget for this sector could be transferred over to the two other more familiar and mature business sectors of OGP and DI. This development would most likely represent a much lower risk, and therefore it would be both easier and safer for VRI-Agder to do as such.

In the funding bid to the Norwegian Research Council for the VRI-Agder project, the CCIs were described as a sector of which next to nothing was known. It was acknowledged as a fast and growing industry globally, but how the CCIs came to play a regional role was highly uncertain. In contrast to the regional knowledge of the OGP and DI, one did not know who the central regional actors were, what their challenges or status were, or how to unlock the potential of the sectors. This is why VRI-Agder argued the need for starting the project with a map-



Ill. 2: The Creative Industries: A Stylized Typology. (Source: Hutton and the Work Foundation 2007)

ping of the current status for the CCIs. This mapping was the afore mentioned survey, which did not help much at all. On the contrary, it contributed to further confusion. Therefore I was invited to give a presentation on why the CCIs would still be worth proceeding with as a prioritized sector for the VRI-Agder project. I was glad to be invited, and did not hesitate in presenting solutions. In a shortened version, the “preaching” went something like this:

There is a point in not sticking to the definitions that the Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry has chosen for the creative industries. They have chosen nine business areas, which are so narrow that one of the conclusions is, for example: “CCIs are in their character urban” (Haraldsen et al. 2004). Within a Norwegian context that means Oslo. As seen from the regions this should be challenged, and an essential element in VRI-Agder should be to contribute toward stimulating the specifics of the regional creative businesses.

The solution to these challenges of defining the CCI sector is not to further focus on it, but to establish a so-called “chain of value” perspective. There is reason to believe that unlocking the potential of the sector is about connecting the fields of creative industries with the cultural industries, the core crea-

tive fields and with the more traditional industries. A survey from the UK that examined the destiny of so-called creative jobs showed, for instance, that more than 50 percent were outside of the CCIs – in the “the rest of the economy” (Higgs, Cunningham & Bakshi 2008).

In my presentation I showed models in order to explain what I meant, and deliberately chose models that I knew worked well in relation to business but were not necessarily of an academic interest. One of these models was the so called “sun model” from Sweden. I had previously explained this model in a report about the experience industries’ potential in southern Norway (Hjemdahl 2004), which led to a significant CEO within the industry reusing the model over several years in numerous presentations regionally and nationally. He rewrote the model in his own way, using the capital letters of each aspect of the spin-offs one would have from acknowledging the CCIs as a source and engine for innovation – both regarding specific companies and whole regions. In the end, he demonstrated how this was highly profitable financially, but “hush, we don’t talk much about money within the CCIs – as it is not *comme il faut*.”²⁶ His seven letters to explain the sun model worked so much better than my pages and pages of explanations. Sometimes words can conceal more than they clarify, which is certainly the case outside academia.

I gave a few examples of concrete CCI projects to start with for VRI-Agder, and stated that the dif-

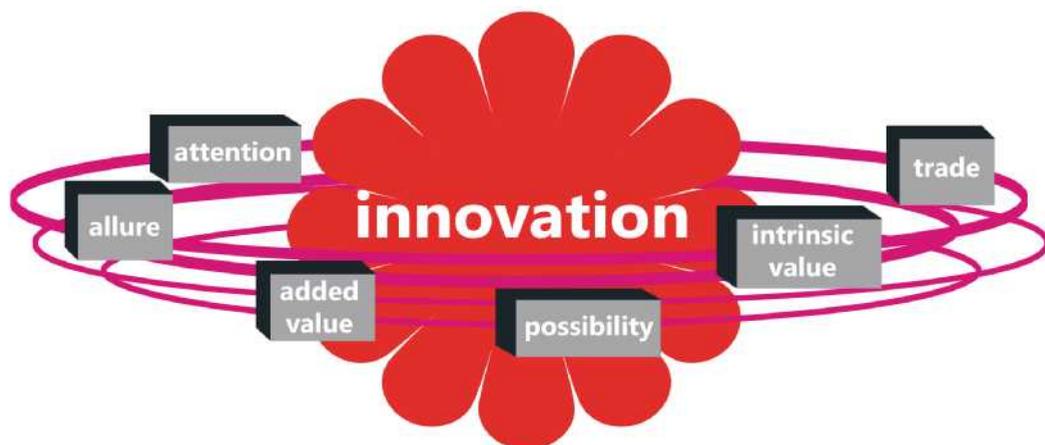
ficulty with this business sector was in prioritizing amid the crowd of possibilities. I pointed out a few challenges, such as the differences in knowledge, actors and structure that are relevant when CCIs are on the agenda. But I did not dwell on this.

I ended the 20 minute presentation – a time sequence that I am getting quite used to after extensive communication outside universities over the last ten years – with a firm conclusion:

The mandate from the VRI program nationally is that it should be business driven, and it should cooperate with and complement other agencies. The need for systematization doesn’t necessarily bring innovation, and the core of VRI is to be an experimental program. This fits the CCIs, which are more immature as a business sector than the other sectors of OGP and DI. This willingness to experiment is probably why VRI has a better chance of unlocking the potential of CCIs, than most other agencies trying to do the same.

What is a Researcher with no Questions but all Answers?

This was the main essence of the message that I brought to the VRI-Agder Program board, on why the region should continue keeping a focus on the CCIs. I was invited as a researcher with competence in the field, and as head of the department of CCIs at Agder Research. Some of the common endeavors



Ill. 3: The Sun Model. (Source: Nielsen 2003)

within regular ethnography are the ability to listen, to raise questions and to stay curious; to wait for the nuance that turns what is said upside down, and to understand what is being told through silence. How can a researcher take a stand, like I did, preaching a future with such certainty? There was not much doubt or nuance, or counter argument and critical analysis taken into consideration. There were not many questions raised, other than rhetorically, and I held most of the answers in my own hand. There was nothing from the great book on cultural analysis that has been read by most Nordic ethnologists since early 1980: dispute your own analysis, seek weak links and logical inconsistencies, neglect central ideas and look for arguments that go totally against the conclusions that are drawn (Ehn & Löfgren 1982).

That afternoon I was asked to take the position as project manager for VRI-Agder CCIs. During the next few months I hammered out a strategy and a budget that the board could accept. During this process the strategy also came back to me on numerous occasions. With a steering board where no one actually had their field of competence within the CCIs, there were still more answers than questions and more counter arguments than wonderings. “No, my expertise is within totally different sectors, but I frequently go to cinemas and theaters,” one member explained, when being challenged on turning down design and arguing forward festivals as a strategic path to follow within the VRI-Agder CCIs. This demonstrates one of the main challenges of the CCIs, namely that much of the politics and decision making in the sector are based on the decision makers’ experiences of being a consumer – but at the same time, this actually points toward a strength as most people do actually care because of their personal experiences of the deliverances of the CCIs.

The tone at the meetings was tough: “Well, now you have a binding program for VRI-Agder CCIs, which we expect you to deliver on.” The project leaders of other business sectors reacted: “Why are these demands for delivering results not expected from our fields?” they asked, wondering if it was because these business sectors are more accepted than the CCIs. Sometimes the comments toward a strategy

for the CCIs were even delivered at a personal level: “I am glad that I am not married to her,” one of the board members whispered through the corner of his mouth, while I was trying to argue the importance of choosing one direction instead of the other. But there were also positive touches during the process, as one of the board members reflects: “This has been a thorough process, maybe too thorough. But these rounds have also lead to a further understanding of what these CCIs are – and might be – about. I sure didn’t know the CCIs before we started.”

At the end of the first year, the results were reported with my usual conviction: “I claimed that these different tools would work in order to meet the different needs of the field. The results show that it worked.” The discussion for next year’s budget was no longer about whether to keep the CCIs as a strategic focus area within VRI-Agder or not. The questions now focused on how much to raise the budget for the CCIs by. At the end of the first year, it doubled. At the end of the second year, the budgets for all three business sectors were equal. In the second phase of VRI-Agder – the three-year period 2011–2013 – the principal of equal budgets for the three business sectors that VRI-Agder considers important to stimulate was maintained. The CCIs remained as one of these three.

Research and “Preaching”

“Preaching researchers want us to believe that the CCIs are going to secure us all a happy ever after. As if,” thundered the cultural researcher George Arnestad in his usual polemic feature article in the paper *Bergens Tidende* (February 25, 2007). He was angry after reading an “excited preaching report” on the CCIs. It was not a report written by VRI-Agder, but the same critique could easily have been transferred in our direction by the angry Arnestad. The guilty researcher this time was “consultant and BI-experience researcher dr.oecon” Donatella de Paoli. Among the numerous things that offended Arnestad in her report was:

Here she explains with beautiful, if maybe somewhat big, words how we through more – preferably much more – research can obtain a creative

and value growing development of the CCIs. We have such an economy when “experiences, in addition to raw material, ready made and services, drive the economic growth.” And “experiences”, well, that is music, books, film, theater, festivals, events, food, media, bungee jumping, literature, games, architecture, travel industry, tourism, design, use of nature, art and so forth ... Subtract or add, as you like. De Paoli wants more research on the topic. If we look closer, it is not really research she wants. What she calls for is documentation, “facts” that will prove that the adventurous “experience economy” constitutes the future for us all. But luckily the Norwegian Research Department does not lend its ear to modish and exciting prophets. The Research Department claims more than an uncritical preaching in order to establish a research program focusing on the CCIs. De Paoli and her colleagues should rather turn to Statistics Norway (SSB). Documentation is their domain. (Arnestad, *Bergens Tidende* February 27, 2007)

“Now it is time to stop and rethink,” Arnestad says and argues for a cleanup in the definitions and terms, in perspectives and appraisal, as well as for distinguishing the descriptive and the normative, and to get on board with critical research. Who is included and who is excluded in this new experience economy? Exactly what is epochal with the CCIs? Does it really contribute to any development? Are we building upon a too narrow, too positive, and too naive understanding?

Arnestad puts forward the person he names as the first modern cultural entrepreneur in Norway, Lidvin M. Osland, who had a profound understanding that the public priorities of culture had huge economical effects. He therefore initiated a research program with the aim of documenting this, some 15–20 years ago. But, as Arnestad puts it: “Only a few Norwegian (cultural) researchers would vouch for the claims.” Osland established a research department at the Norwegian Arts Council, where he was director, because “he wanted critical research, not ear whispers. Today everything seems to be turned

totally upside down. Now the researchers stand up as right believers and evangelists.”

By all means, we might develop a good, critical and multidisciplinary research on the complex and comprehensive new CCIs. The Norwegian Research Department may of course join. But no one gains from documenting “research” that stands up like an unrestrained tribute to a grey zone characterizing experience economy. Let the emissaries do the preaching. The serious researcher can deal with the experience research. (Arnestad, *Bergens Tidende* February 27, 2007)

Arnestad is in good company. Several serious researchers have called for more critical studies of the CCIs, and some have performed exactly that in a variety of different contexts and perspectives (see, e.g., Löfgren & Willim 2005; O’Dell & Billing 2005; Lovink & Rossiter 2007; Kramvig & Fossli Olsen 2009). In Norway there is not much critical research in this field, probably for several reasons. One might be that the field of CCIs is not closely attached to any area of study at universities and colleges. Another might be that the subjects between culture and business still cross both institute and faculty borders. A third is probably because it has not yet been established as a research field followed up with funding from the Norwegian Research Foundation.

But there are also quite a number of cultural researchers who want to get away from this narrow position, where critical analysis is the only possibility, and who find using the competence they gain after several years at university in order to affect developments both important and rewarding. There are researchers who acknowledge that precisely because they have academic competence within cultural studies, they also have the opportunity to make significant contributions, and they do not want to be disconnected through a research discourse which might turn so introverted and impermeable that only research communities find it interesting and relevant. These are researchers who do not want to run the risk of becoming so disconnected that they no longer are able to get a grasp of what happens in

the praxis field, and who therefore ask a rock band for their number of employees, whilst also trying to understand innovation processes within the CCIs.

The choice of moving into a “preaching” position, as Arnestad puts it, and predicting possibilities for a future that no one is in yet is a special situation to forecast, but this should not deter us from “preaching” the importance of also including critical perspectives. Young cultural researchers do not necessarily feel that they have to choose between seemingly opposite positions of being a “consultant” or a “critical researcher”, but find it relatively unproblematic to hold an either/or position. The most challenging situation, which can easily turn problematic, is when one does not manage to balance these positions.

An Uneven Balance

There is an uneven balance within this field today, at least in Norway. Out in the field of praxis are the “preachers”, and inside the office are the researchers with their discourse and the disconnected critics. Before financial sources such as the Norwegian Research Foundation enter the field, there are probably few reasons to believe that critical research in the field will explode. Therefore it is quite strange to read how relieved a cultural researcher as Arnestad is by the fact that the Research Foundation will not establish a dedicated program for the CCIs.

The dominating interest for investing in the field seems to come out of business development arguments, whether it is from Innovation Norway, regional agencies and foundations, or from the companies themselves. All of these bodies have one thing in common: they demand, partly insist on, applied research. This business development basis of being interested in the field is probably also why the “preaching” position has a good breeding ground.

Why, then, do some of us find it so exciting to be “out there” in the praxis field that it is of no importance to be dismissed of all sense and competence by certain research environments? Maybe because it offers an efficient way of influencing a development in a direction one believes in? Maybe because the

experience of having relevant, important and complementary competence in strategic partnerships helps set the agenda? Maybe because many cultural actors within the CCIs request sparring partners with cultural academic competence to help their own maneuvers in new contexts? In addition to the fact that the experience and lessons learned by being invited into the praxis field are of high value for the grounding research discourses that the “preachers” are also interested in developing.

“What is the social contract of the humanities, besides the knowledge and competence these subjects can offer today?” asks the cultural editor of *Aftenposten*, Knut Olav Åmås. He answers:

They have to contribute and form people who are capable to resist in a society dominated by systems that build down resistance – a society that removes sand in the machinery and introduces commercial thinking in fields that cannot or should not be commercial, and create a brutal society of sorting that does not pay attention to the ones who are and want to be radically different. (*Aftenposten* December 27, 2010)

The context for this text was a concern for the lack of influence and engagement that the humanities have in Norway today, where reports show that four out of ten humanities graduates are in inappropriate employment in Norway and are not in any central positions within the power structures of politics, administration or business. “Before humanists can sprinkle sand in the machinery, more of them must want to board more machines and change systems from within,” Åmås acknowledges (*Aftenposten* December 27, 2010).

Only a few days later a comment is linked on Twitter, to the blog of a Ph.D. candidate in literature at the University of Oslo, Kjartan Muller, who believes that Åmås is wrong in suggesting “sand in the machinery” as a medicine for the humanities. Many of the challenges that we are facing today call for someone to contribute with methods and analysis that are oriented toward solutions, Muller says:

To put it bluntly, humanities educate on-lookers rather than practitioners, and no matter if your aim is to maximize profit or provide resistance, the challenge is to establish a solid knowledge-based praxis. I think the lack of engagement within the society for humanities today is based on problems in transforming humanistic knowledge and long-term perspectives to everyday decisions and practical action in ways that are able to compete with other bases for decisions. To resist is therefore very, very poor advice. (<http://www.muller.no/kjartan/?p=770>)

I recognize this situation of being rather unattached to any career planning outside of the university, from the time I was a Ph.D. student of cultural studies in Bergen. When working on my dissertation I gave a lecture about Nordic theme parks for a seminar, together with the director of one of these parks. I was rather critical in my approach, at least in contrast to his presentation, and some days later he called me with a challenge: is your retrospective academic analysis able to transform into practical knowledge, and be of use in developing this theme park? If yes, will you work for us? I must admit that I had to call my supervisor first, to check if it was ok to be employed by one's empirical material in a Ph.D. thesis. He answered wisely, something like: I do understand why you ask, because this kind of instinct corresponds with a state of mind within the humanities – but we actually want people to go to universities in order to be able to contribute to society afterwards. So, yes, you can work for your empirical material (Hjemdahl 2005). I learnt much from working with this theme park; most relevant were two things in particular: firstly, that it is about establishing a knowledge-based praxis, as Muller says; and secondly, that the transformation of a specialized knowledge base into the development of a competence-in-between is important.

Developing Competence-in-Between

Many cultural actors experience the development toward the CCI as just such an unfamiliar field to maneuver within as many researchers do. When

CCIs are increasingly required for, and are challenged by and connected to business development, many of the actors within the core creative fields experience that they have to relate to a row of actors and instances that seem unfamiliar, irrelevant or uninteresting. As for the researchers, cultural actors are divided in two categories: those who really do not want to walk down the line of CCIs, and who argue that the value of culture is its own value and therefore should continue to be acknowledged as autonomous; and those who claim that understanding culture in a wider economic context can contribute to renewing the field of culture. Both positions should be legitimate and acknowledged.

VRI-Agder CCIs is an experimental program that allows a high degree of variety within the project portfolio, and I believe that is also the main reason why VRI has been redemptive in the cooperation between research and business. Before entering a new program period, VRI-Agder CCIs have nine different institutes from four faculties at the University of Agder working together on different cultural projects under the frame of innovation. Nearly fifty cultural businesses have joined different projects, and their reports reveal both commercial effects and the development of new methods and knowledge. There is little doubt that there is a success rate regarding the numbers of participants seeking business development, professionalism and innovation in cooperating with other businesses and through contact with R&D. It would seem that VRI has taken a form that inspires trust; trust that one is met by respect, that there are no claims to change the projects to fit the tools, but rather that the experimental and flexible character of the VRIs allows a high degree of freedom to define oneself for what is needed in order to “take the next step”.

According to the social anthropologists Kramvig and Fosseli Olsen (2009) this is rather rare, at least when seen from the cultural entrepreneur's perspective. More often than not meetings between culture and business turn into “non-meetings, non-innovations”, and innovative culture as a result easily turns into mediocre business. The authors describe how “the new” develops in 4 different phases:

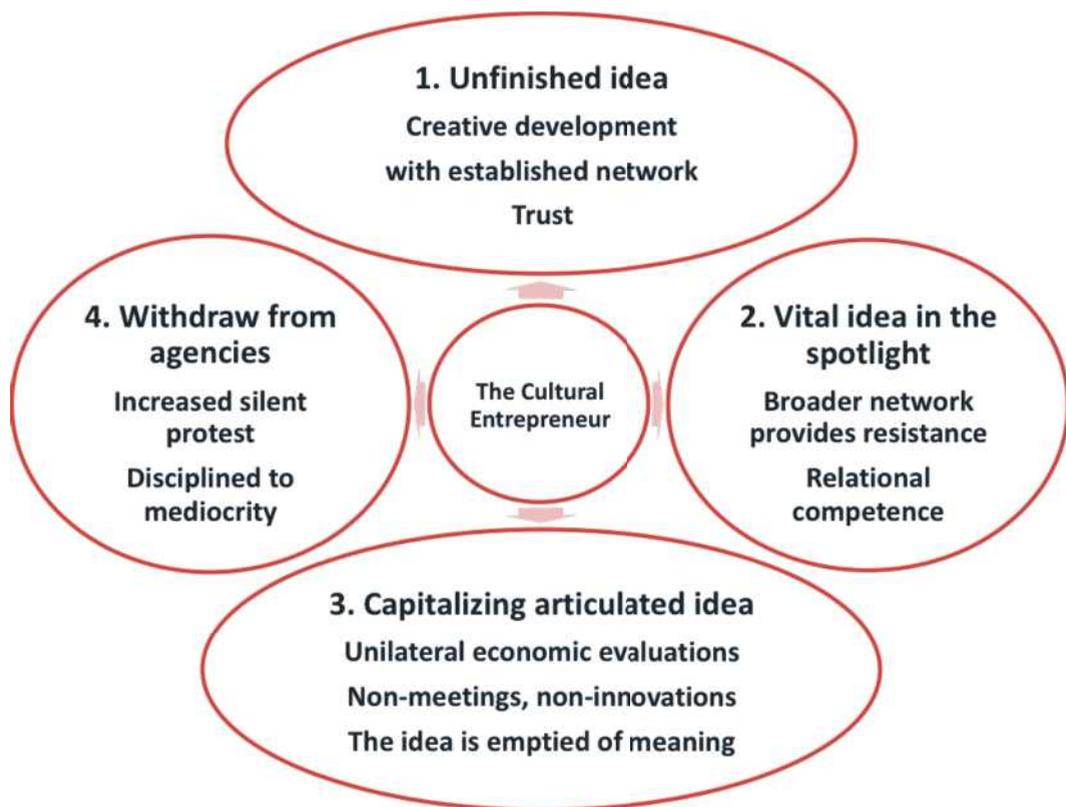
1) The first phase is when a cultural entrepreneur has an idea; it can be the seed of something new, but it is still too premature to know. The entrepreneur seeks an established network as a sparring partner in the creative development of this possible idea. Trust between the actors involved is essential.

2) The second phase is when it turns out that the idea has a certain substance, and can be developed into a more vital idea that withstands the spotlight. Here a broader network is engaged, not only to contribute toward creative development, but also to give the idea resistance. The broader network is often actors that one would like to continue working with if the idea actually stands – a strategic development toward future business partners. It is vital in this phase that the partners have a high degree of relational competence.

3) The third phase is when the idea has been so articulated that it is ready for capitalizing on, and funding agencies and/or other investors are sought that have prioritized CCIs. What is often encountered at this phase is unilateral economic evaluations of the idea, and the meetings turn into non-meetings with non-innovations. At this phase, many of the cultural entrepreneurs experience their vital, articulated idea becoming emptied of meaning.

4) The fourth phase has two main directions: firstly, the cultural entrepreneur accepts being disciplined into mediocrity, with the result that innovative culture is easily turned into mediocre business; secondly, the entrepreneur withdraws from the system, in an often silent protest.

Who then withdraws and who stays to be disciplined? I believe that the actors with the most po-



Ill. 4: The Cultural Entrepreneur Developing the New. (Source: Kramvig & Fosseli Olsen 2010)

tential, and with the strongest drive, go on to develop the still meaningful, vital idea on their own terms, even if it takes a considerably longer time. This is also a line of reasoning that I share with the rest of the VRI-team of Agder. I am also certain that the regular ethnographic methods and actions one learns within the discipline of cultural studies are vital assets in relating to, understanding and acknowledging the first two phases when performing irregular ethnography later. The idea of “putting oneself in the position of the other,” knowing how to go further when “only talk” will not provide enough answers, is precious when suddenly finding oneself in the position of being able to finance the development of projects.

Making Things Happen In-between

Even if VRI-Agder CCIs spur development and point to different horizons of possibilities, will that mean that the projects continue beyond public investment? There are more commercial effects with the program so far than profound research projects, even if some so-called user-driven projects have been realized as main projects.

“This allows the region to frame itself as in the leading position, which with predominant certainty will produce new knowledge of significant value for the academic development within the areas this project represents,” is how the project leader of VRI-Agder CCIs sold an argument for a user-driven project exploring the “professionalization of CCIs” in Agder. It is, indeed, an interesting crossover project with companies from OGP and DI working together with tourism and festivals and investing in developing the region through the means of culture. But is it reasonable enough for the Norwegian Research Foundation to believe the sales jargon? Or is it, rather, another “preaching” exercise aimed at the Foundation, which this time was led to believe it was correct?

Maybe the position of pushing processes into development instead of analyzing retrospectively is the biggest challenge as seen from the perspective of the researcher. This is not that strange from a business development perspective. As the leader of one of Norway’s most successful cultural businesses expressed:

Of course I listen to relevant information before making a decision, but when the decision is made I give full speed ahead. Then there is no room for doubt. All focus is on implementing and convincing others to get on board. It might turn out later that it was a wrong choice, but we have at least then tried out a direction.

The same goes for VRI-Agder CCIs and the role of the researcher. When one as researcher wants to join the field where the agenda is set, one has to be willing to also play away from home. When the aim is to convince a regional VRI-partnership that neither knows of, nor believes in the significance of CCIs, there is no use in bringing on board all other doubts and reservations, all critical possibilities and nuanced disclaimers. There is no room for formulating a long-winded academic vocabulary that has to start by discussing terms and definitions. If this is done, the risk is high for being sidelined and regarded irrelevant before even having the chance to make one’s arguments.

One of the best feedbacks I received throughout the VRI-project was when the manager of a “cutting edge” festival said:

This is pretty wild. I am talking festival development with other festival genres, business people from totally different branches, and they all show a sincere interest that my festival should be prosperous. They also provide good tips on how I can do things differently. But the weirdest of all, which I never ever thought that I would experience, is that it was researchers who were the bridge builders in this insanely crazy landscape.

I find it equally uplifting when different actors experience that one reduces the different spaces-in-between, and help translate contexts that were never even regarded as relevant. What the disconnected researcher might bear in mind is that within the praxis field, mediocrity is not enough. People expect to be challenged, also to criticize their own standing. In order to contribute toward developing competence-in-between, the other position cannot sol-

emply be challenged. On the contrary, the opposite position needs to be met with respect and with an understanding of being equal partners – where the challenges might go both ways. It is never the case that only one part holds all the answers.

What about the Classical Researcher Role?

Is there no value in all the academic nuances, pre-conditions and critical reflections; in someone saying “stop, we need to rethink”? By all means, there is. That is also a mission for the “preaching” researcher to be persuasive: why is it important not only to invest in applied research, but also in basic research that can pose totally different questions, look into other directions, bring along what is considered to be a reactionary, irrelevant or totally useless analysis? Why is it essential to be given the opportunity to switch between being in the praxis field and a research discourse?

This “preaching” researcher has hammered through this message in the same manner toward accepting CCI as an equal business sector of VRI-Agder. If all we learn in the praxis field stays there without the possibility of being played back into the research discourses of the academy, it means that the “consultancy” role within the VRI-Agder CCIs is overrated competence only used half way. Admittedly it has contributed to proving the relevance of cultural study outside of academia. But it is equally important to bring the empirical material “back to the academy”: to challenge a disconnected research discourse about the value of being connected, and

confirming that the field of praxis actually has relevance for contributing to developments for both research and its discourses.

It is within this span that I give regard to the highest significance for cultural research, in the wake of VRI. Even if the projects do not necessarily turn out as successful based on innovation parameters, or do not continue without public investments, they might still have significance in building new knowledge. As underlined time and time again within VRI-Agder, it is of equal importance to highlight the failed projects as they are probably the ones we learn the most from. But then it is also vital that they are given the opportunity to be highlighted, discussed and analyzed in different contexts and within academia also.

This “preaching” and hammering points home have given results: in contradiction to the Norwegian Research Council, both regional communities at Agder – together with the regional Competence Foundation – have financed a five year research program on CCIs. This program has the purpose of participating in “useless” academic gatherings such as conferences and workshops, initiating Ph.D.’s in fields that need strengthening and more research, writing research articles with no claim of relevance outside of the academic’s own discourses, and seeking more internationalization in both research projects and in recruiting researchers. Put simply, to be given the opportunity to play on the home field. This article is such an example of this, financed as it is through the five-year program of KULNÆR (2009–2013⁷).



Ill. 5: Experimental Co-Research. (Source: Hjemdahl 2010)

As with the second phase of VRI-Agder, which lasts from 2011–2013, there are even further possibilities to participate in more classical academic fields. VRI-Agder has extended the research team, and cultural research competence has been included as a vital entrance to be able to grasp research questions within the CCIs. In the mutual research application the multidisciplinary differences became clear during presentation of research methods. All connections to the relatively classic fieldwork of cultural studies – such as observation and the so-called practical mimesis of walking in the footsteps (Jackson 1983, 1996) – were marked and underlined as the experimental part of the project.

Another experimental part is a new tool that VRI-Agder has suggested, in order to diminish the distance between the VRI-research and VRI-cooperative: namely VRI Co-research. Here, we try to bridge the interests and aims of both the business actors and the academics by regularly meeting on equal terms. The VRI-cooperative team brings interesting empirical findings from “out there” onto the table and the VRI-researcher sees if and how they can contribute to develop the findings further. In an ideal world where things add up, they can even meet in mutual coproductions to secure what they both obtain through their different aims: commercial, competitive and increasing effects for the businesses, and scientific publications for the researchers.

I cannot wait to start researching “properly” on the incredibly exciting fieldwork that I have been doing these last years while being a non-researcher member of the VRI-program. But I suspect that I will do more research together with the business actors, than on them. My goal of being “accepted” in the VRI-research is not to turn critical, abstract or complex or to focus on the long term. It is to create even firmer and solid knowledge-based praxis.

Notes

- 1 www.forskningsradet.no/servlet/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1224529235249&p=1224529235249&pagename=vri%2FHovedsidemal.
- 2 One of which was Sarah Holst Kjær, who is contribut-

ing in this volume with the article “Designing a Waterworld” which was part of a VRI-project from the Co-operative VRI-Agder.

- 3 VRI-Agder CCIs are voiced by its project leader, which is me.
- 4 Project leader of VRI-research, Hans Christian Garman Johnsen, 2009 presents VRI research to the VRI-Agder operative steering board.
- 5 As written in a project description to the KULVER-program at the Norwegian Research Council in 2008, by Emma Lind, Sarah Holst Kjær and Per Strømberg. All three were researchers at Agder Research and working as competence brokers at VRI-Agder CCIs.
- 6 Reidar Fuglestad, CEO of Dyreparken Utvikling AS, which is a significant theme park in Norway.
- 7 KULNÆR 2009–2013 is a five-year program financed by the Competence Development Fund of Southern Norway and the two regional counties Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder. The aim is to develop the Agder school, representing a user-driven cultural research.

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