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Partnering paradoxes

A case of constructing inter-organisational collaborations in infrastructure projects

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The positive nature of partnering to resolve adversarial relationships in the construction industry has been well-rehearsed. However, critics argued that espoused benefits of partnering have not materialised because business-as-usual prevails. Furthermore, scholars have insisted that more needs to be done to analyse emerging practices in inter-organisational collaborations. This study examines an emerging collaboration. Basically, the research sought to investigate effective knowledge sharing during the early stages of a real-life collaborative venture between three infrastructure companies. The case study was informed by participant observations and interviews with key people involved in forming the collaborative venture. Findings reveal a number of paradoxes that are perplexing on the one hand, yet generative in terms of actions on the other. These paradoxes relate to the three areas of sensemaking, formality and time synchronicity.

Introduction

Calls for reform of the construction industry have become, certainly in the Western world, a regular feature since the post-WWII era (see Murray and Langford, 2003). Such restructuring consistently points towards the need to move away from adversarial working relationships towards developing more effective forms of collaboration, encapsulated in the contemporary agenda of partnering (e.g. Latham, 1994; and Egan, 1998).

Advocates of partnering have often claimed that effective collaboration reaps benefits of improved productivity, waste reduction and better client satisfaction (see e.g. Loraine, 1993; Bennett and Jayes, 1998; Construction Industry Institute, 1998; Black et al., 2000; Proverbs et al., 2000; Naoum, 2003; and Wood and Ellis, 2005). At the same time, partnering promises the possibilities of bridging the age-old gap between the key social actors (i.e. clients, designers and contractors), as well as integrating ever more complex supply chains, in construction (see e.g. Latham, 1994; Egan, 1998; Akintoye et al., 2000; Vrijhoef and Koskela, 2000; and Saad et al., 2002).

Despite the somewhat intuitive claims of how the wonders of partnering can help arrest the problems associated with fragmented relations in construction, there are still gaps in understanding how inter-organisational collaboration in construction really works (see e.g. Wood and Ellis, 2005; Bresnen, 2007; Gadde and Dubois, 2010; and Bresnen, 2010). Critical scholars have highlighted how the realities of partnering practices are often detached from rhetorical claims of its positive nature (see e.g. Bresnen and Marshall, 2001; and Nyström, 2008); some question whether partnering really can deliver benefits for all (e.g. Green, 1999; and Dainty et al., 2001), whilst others argue that the status quo of adversarial working relationships persists (e.g. Briscoe and Dainty, 2005). There is greater acknowledgement of the limits of prescriptive notions of partnering (e.g. Beach et al., 2005; Phua, 2006; and Chan et al., 2006), and growing acceptance that partnering in construction

is simply elusive (e.g. Bresnen, 2009). Admittedly, supporters and critics of partnering in construction share one common feature. That is, the arguments rallied for and against the use of partnering have implicitly focussed on the essence of partnering (i.e. *being*), and rarely examined the process of how partnering comes into being (i.e. *becoming*). So, on the one hand, partnering is treated as a desired concept fiercely defended by its proponents, such that explaining the prerequisites, components and performative goals (see Nyström, 2005) appears to be their central mission. On the other hand, opponents tended to emphasise the failure of advocates to prove the existence of partnering arrangements and associated benefits in construction, so as to question the validity of the concept and its use. Both camps have thus taken the concept of 'partnering' for granted, and neglected a deeper understanding of how collaborative practices emerge to become 'partnering' as we know it in these debates.

In order to understand how collaboration can be a good thing for all involved, there is a requirement to shift the perspective of partnering in construction away from an essentialist view to one that is based on the *ontology of becoming* (see Chia, 1995). As Cousins (2002) assert, partnerships do not exist, and certainly not as cosy constructs! According to him, it is critical to refocus on the process of partnerships rather than its static, idealised form. Indeed, as Bresnen and Marshall (2001; 2010) argue, there is still a lot of scope to study the emerging practices of partnering in construction to understand how the process of partnering becomes accepted and applied in reality.

This article draws on the analysis of participant observations in a single case study. The study sought to make sense of emerging practices (see Bresnen, 2009) entailed in the formation of a new partnership through participant observations, primarily to better understand the processes of how partnerships come about. Through the observations, the dynamics of a number of paradoxes (see Bresnen, 2007 for a conceptual review of partnering paradoxes) have been detected in the ensuing collaboration. These paradoxes are manifest in three critical areas – the paradox of sensemaking, the paradox of formality, and the paradox of time synchronicity – that are particular to project partnering, which will be elaborated as the article unfolds.

Arguably, the early stages of forming collaborations are fraught with paradoxes and contradictions (see e.g. Smith and Berg, 1987); yet, the study of such paradoxes in the context of project partnering has hitherto been given relatively scant attention. Thus, the contribution of the present article is two-fold. Firstly, the study reported in this article adopts a practice-based approach to explain the process of early formation of partnering in a single ethnographic case study. In so doing, a number of paradoxes have been identified, and their manifestations observed. And so, the second contribution of this article is an analysis of the dynamics these paradoxes, which would help shed light on how tackling these paradoxes might go some way in affording better collaborations in practice. Following this introduction, the observational context and method will be outlined, before the key findings are discussed.

Case Study Observations: Context and method

This case study arose out of the involvement of one of us – the last author – who was working as a project management support officer to a railway company known as RailCo1. RailCo1 is a local client organisation, governed as a quasi-public sector organisation, with a long history of providing railway infrastructure in London. As a client organisation, it is responsible for providing capacity enhancement to the railway infrastructure managed under its authority, which includes upgrading of existing stations. At the time of the research (between March and November 2009), an opportunity emerged that permitted her to engage in ethnographic research. She was involved in a project to build a new station facility (named as the 'Project'). This facility was to be constructed by RailCo3, a newly set-up railway client, also governed as a quasi-public sector organisation, charged with building new railway infrastructure in London. However, the 'Project' meant that infrastructure owned by RailCo2, a national railway client wholly owned and regulated by the government that is responsible for the ownership of the national railway infrastructure, had to be relocated to another part of the station. The relocated part of the station is to be built and owned by RailCo2 and operated by RailCo3. To complicate matters further, the relocated facility would then become adjacent to infrastructure owned by RailCo1, which in turn restricted RailCo1's ability to implement its strategy to enhance capacity. Concomitantly, RailCo1 had within the previous 12 months of the commencement of this research completed a long process of subsuming a loss-making public-private partnership responsible for upgrading stations within its network boundary. To coordinate the project across the three companies, it was decided that an integrated project team (named here as RailPro) involving members from each company was set up. This decision was also driven by senior officials at the governing authority of Greater London as a way to rationalise resources. One senior representative from each of the three companies – each were accountable to the board of directors of their respective companies – also formed a Liaison Group

(named here as RailLG) to facilitate strategic discussions around the formation of RailPro. As discussed above, it is critical to study how the process of partnering comes into being, especially in the context of the early phase of a project. Hence, this case study presented a unique opportunity to get rich and deep insights into the formation of a new partnership that happened during the early stage (i.e. concept design stage) of the 'Project'. A combination of data sources was used for this research, including interviews with key participants involved in the 'Project' and 'RailPro' (see Table 1 below), observational data, and documentary evidence.

Interviewee	Role	Organisation
A	Senior project manager (<i>operational</i>)	RailCo1
B	Sponsor and representative on RailLG (<i>strategic</i>)	RailCo1
C	Project management support (<i>operational</i>)	RailCo1
D	Sponsor and representative on RailLG (<i>strategic</i>)	RailCo2
E	Project engineer (<i>operational</i>)	RailCo2
F	Sponsor and representative on RailLG (<i>strategic</i>)	RailCo3
G	Building services engineer (<i>operational</i>)	These were design consultants involved in delivering the concept design for the 'project'.
H	Design lead for architecture (<i>operational</i>)	
J	Design lead for engineering (<i>operational</i>)	

Table 1. Profile of project participants interviewed for the research.

The research questions informing the data collection were initially concerned with identifying critical issues, enablers and barriers that contribute to effective knowledge sharing at the outset of the 'Project'. So interview questions included the role of the participant and their perspectives of notable events encountered in the 'Project'. Observations were recorded in the researcher's diary to make sense of the (visible and audible) social dynamics of participants during meetings and review workshops at the concept design stage of the 'Project'. Where appropriate, cross-references were made to minutes of meetings.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The findings will be discussed in the next section, including the detour made during the research to focus on emerging paradoxes that surfaced in the formation of the partnership RailPro.

Key findings

As mentioned in the preceding section, the initial inquiry sought to explain knowledge sharing behaviours of participants in this case study. The motivation came from previous "*show stopping*" experiences between the three RailCos in when undertaking site acquisitions and negotiations on land use. There was then an observed absence of effective knowledge sharing within and across each of the three companies, which led to the pursuit of this research project in the first instance. At the start of this research, high-level meetings that occurred at the RailLG level and 'Project' review meetings were concerned with two key issues, namely geographic and systematic integration of operations across the three RailCos into the formation of RailPro. Questions were raised about the possibility of co-location of staff and setting up of operating procedures for RailPro. Put simply, the procedural form and scope of the partnership were being developed (Loraine, 1993). It was also clear to the participant observer and interviewees that the formation of RailPro meant that resources were not only being shared, but rationalised as well since there were clearly duplicity in terms of roles and responsibilities (and there were redundancies that actually took place soon after the research).

Given this backdrop (and the history of difficult working relations in the past), participants had expected that the sharing of information would not be forthcoming. Surprisingly, this was not what the researcher observed at the initial stages of the formation of RailPro. Participants exceeded expectations in that they appeared to be very keen about sharing the information they had about the 'Project'. The observations also yielded another interesting finding; that is, as procedures were increasingly formalised, the openness observed at the outset of the research started to dwindle. This led us to take a detour to explore the dynamics of this paradox, explained in terms of sensemaking, formality, and time synchronicity.

Paradox of sensemaking

It is widely known that as projects progress in time, participants travel from a phase of relative uncertainty towards producing outcomes that are more certain. Therefore, sensemaking (Weick, 1995) plays a significant role in this process. Admittedly, the need for participants across the three companies to make sense of what this 'Project' was about and what setting up RailPro means for their work accounted for the relative openness observed in the initial stage of the research. Yet, this was not simply a cosy, emergent process. Rather, the keenness shown in terms of sharing information about their thoughts of the 'Project' was a means to assert one's authority in framing the scope of what the 'Project' was seeking to do. As Participant A suggests, when people were introduced to RailPro from each of the three companies, some still needed persuading as to why RailPro was necessary. He added that they clearly "*had their own objectives and goals*" to articulate. In some respects, the sharing of their perspectives of what the foundations of the cooperation should look like is more of a *sensegiving* (see Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), rather than a *sensemaking*, process. Thus, as Cousins (2002) aptly pointed out, the process of forming partnerships is often rooted in a hard-nosed reality than many Utopian enthusiasts would believe. As the shape of the collaboration takes a more structured form, participants tend to shift their positions to make statements like "*this is not how we would do things in [our respective companies]*", indicating dissatisfaction with how the partnership arrangements are being articulated, and creating an impression of *sense-hiding* (see Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) instead.

Paradox of formality

Proponents of partnering in construction place much emphasis on formal tools and procedures. Yet, when RailPro was first conceived, participants at both strategic and operational levels were 'doing' collaboration designing the 'Project'. Formal contracts were only signed and agreed between the design consultants (Participants G, H and J) and RailCo1. Yet, discussions were observed to continue fairly openly between the consultants and members of RailCo2 and RailCo3 as well. It would seem that delivering the 'Project' mattered more than the formal rights and responsibilities articulated in the contract document, even though the 'Project' – at least for RailPro – was still being reified (see Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Contracts have been known to invoke communicative acts and social interactions in projects (e.g. Marshall, 2006; and Bresnen and Harty, 2010). It would seem that the absence of contracts also have the power to stimulate, in this case, information sharing between participants, as a typical comment suggests that the "*lack of contractual arrangements did make for more openness*". Paradoxically, for Participant E, the finalising of contracts did prohibit him from "*getting pally*" with some of the other participants, and he stressed that "*informal arrangements definitely broke down the barriers normally found in communications between the two organisations*".

Paradox of time synchronicity

Time is an important dimension in projects. Yet, the partnering literature has rather ignored this critical aspect. In prescribing often-linear stages of the partnering life cycle, time is often treated as synchronous, and that partners necessarily know where and when they fit in within such a framework. Moreover, partnering in project-based environments normally downplays the idea that members have shared histories and futures. This is certainly not the case here, where Participant E observed that members do recollect "*their experiences and know whether they hold knowledge that is of use*". Typically, the construction industry is known to be "*an incestuous industry*". Therefore, as seen in the formation of partnership in RailPro, members have come into this arrangement with some sense of a shared history. Yet, as Participant A pointed out, not all the members are willing and able to go along with this arrangement. Participant A remarked, "*it was tricky to do what was best for the 'Project' and still protect the interests of respective companies*". This would suggest that not everyone abided by the 'programme' of this partnership formation.

Bresnen (2009) coined the phrase “living the dream” to stress the lived realities of partnering in construction. Perhaps the participants in this case study are *chasing the dream*, burdened with past histories and passing through time, however asynchronously, into a possible shared future? Yet, the notion of time and how it shapes partnering practices, and the paradox of time synchronicity, deserves more attention.

Conclusions

“Personalities played a key role in the [partnering] success (Participant A)”. At a very basic level, human relations do matter in achieving effective collaborations. But this is not the full picture. This case study research contributes to a more holistic view of how the process of partnering could potentially (and simultaneously) be driven and hampered by a range of paradoxical issues. Yet, paradoxes are rarely examined in detail in the construction management literature. Here, sensemaking, formality and time synchronicity have been exposed as paradoxical constructs in the start of a new collaboration, albeit with ‘old’ partners. These paradoxes raise a perplexing, if interesting, question to advocates of formal and prescriptive tools used in partnering (and in project-based working more generally). How did the absence of formal mechanisms lead to the observation that members were actually ‘doing’ the collaboration and the ‘Project’? Clearly, the station facility was still being designed and planned for construction, despite members being clear where they stood with the relationship between their respective organisations and newly-formed one. Of course, human agency still prevails in this situation, afforded no less by the emergence of these paradoxes. Whilst the contradictions may have disrupted the idea of formal, prescriptive methods, they were also found to be generative in terms of social interactions and dialogue. What is clear from the case study is that conversations and arguments happen as individual agendas become articulated and legitimised. The only certain conclusion is that the members involved have, by living through these paradoxes and chasing the dream of more effective coordination between partners, legitimated the form of partnering that eventually makes sense (see Oliver, 1997; and Vaara and Monin, 2009). Such narratives gained through ethnographic research are therefore required to explore fully the process of how partnering comes into being. Whether the outcomes are positive or negative (or even coherent with the intended strategy) does not matter so much!

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