In Search of Entrepreneurial Learning
Towards a Relational Perspective on Incubating Practices

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To both entrepreneurial learning processes and research journeys it is a condition that;
Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.

My deepest gratitude to everybody who has contributed to this research project
and encouraged me to continue.

After that -

"*I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier*
I'm gonna live like tomorrow doesn't exist
Like it doesn't exist
I'm gonna fly like a bird through the night, feel my tears as they dry
I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier"/ Sia

Christine Thalsgård Henriques
Copenhagen, June 2016

Executive summary

The world wants more entrepreneurs so badly, that it has become a major priority of governments all over the world trying to produce them. Based on Industrial PhD collaboration between the Danish Science Park, Symbion A/S and Copenhagen Business School, this dissertation presents a unique opportunity to study how the interactions between technology-based entrepreneurs and an Accelerator programme may lead to increased entrepreneurial capacity, learning and growth. The Industrial PhD setting offers privileged access to entrepreneurs, advisors, incubator management and investors, and we get to listen to stories seldom told in this field. As follows, the write-up of the ethnographic fieldwork is a narrative multi-voiced analysis in search of entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context.

The phenomenon of business incubation – in this dissertation referred to as incubating activities - is originally intended as a forum that is shielded off from the everydayness of things, with the purpose of adding resources and removing barriers to venture creation. The idea is that entrepreneuring actors will be offered complementary resources and forced to spend time on planning and strategies in a helicopter perspective, which in the end will benefit the process and make venture success more likely. Policy makers together with researchers of entrepreneurship policy and incubation, to a large degree assume that entrepreneurial actors somehow lack skills and resources and cannot easily acquire these themselves, and furthermore that it is possible to affect the resources, behaviour and skills of entrepreneurs. It has nevertheless been shown that enhancing entrepreneurial growth from support activities is not as easy, even if the intentions are good and the resources invested considerable (Blackburn and Schaper 2012, Bruneel et al. 2012, Mason and Brown 2013). It is also taken for granted that entrepreneurs are open to learning and foreign intervention (help and support). This study shows that this is not always the case. Hence, the dissertation explores a highly political and delicate matter touching upon the legitimacy of business incubation.

The research question of the dissertation asks; *what are the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context?* The research question is inductively derived from the researcher's preliminary experiences in the field, not being able to identify a satisfying language or actions to signal that entrepreneurial learning had happened. This means that it was difficult to show how the programme interaction led to increase in the entrepreneurial capacity of the participants, guiding the attention of the researcher towards barriers to learning. The dissertation regards entrepreneurial learning as a relational construction (Fletcher 2006, Hosking 2011) that happens from experiences and interactions, and the dissertation thoroughly investigates the barriers to

entrepreneurial learning from a relational constructionist thought style, and also why it makes sense to perceive entrepreneurial learning as the means and goals (value) of incubating activities.

The analysis and write-up of the substantial fieldwork material is constructed in the analysis as four Actor Narratives (an Advisor-Narrative, an Entrepreneurial-Narrative, a Policy-Narrative and a Critical Narrative) and three Action Narratives (A Best-Practice Narrative, a Blame-Game Narrative and a Silent-Relationship Narrative). The narratives sum up the beliefs and assumptions of four main actors of the field, and illustrate how the incubating actions - or lack of them – are performed in the field through a relational learning perspective. The dissertation uses these analytical constructions to show how the field actors understand support for entrepreneurs and how this support is expected to happen and make a difference to entrepreneurial processes.

From an entrepreneurial learning perspective (Stevenson 1985, Rae 2006) the analysis suggests that the existing narratives of the field are not entirely appropriate to an entrepreneurial learning situation, as neither the suppliers nor the recipients devote attention to the relational circumstances of learning and collaboration. The analysis shows how the Actor-Narratives 'clashes' in beliefs and assumption much more than we had expected, and that there is resistance towards listening and learning. This is especially destructive to the relationship between participants and advisors of the Accelerator programme, and the empirical material indicates that a collaborative relationship of support is only seldom established. Furthermore it is established that the existing methods and language driving incubating practices – constructed in the analysis as a Best-Practice Narrative – fail to incorporate important preconditions of entrepreneurial learning, as for example that '*learning starts from what the learner already understands, knows and internalises, not what the teacher knows*' (Gibb 1997, 15). In the analysis, especially management of expectations and relations, together with dialogue and space for collaboration is pointed to as needed.

It is the analysis of the researcher, and a central conclusion of the dissertation, that as a result of lack of learning and venture growth (identifiable output) the incubation field reacts by pointing fingers at each other and engages in what is constructed in the analysis as a Blame-Game Narrative. The Blame-Game Narrative of the field is highly problematic, since it criticizes incubating activities for being incompetent and entrepreneurs for being lazy, but it does not have a proper vocabulary for questioning the methods of the Best-Practice Narrative – and as such the two action-narratives construct a vicious circle of skepticism and lack of trust. The dissertation therefore claims, that it is a significant barrier to learning that actors of the field, not to take into account the relational and dynamic context that supports, drives and produces entrepreneurial processes (Steyaert 2007, Hjorth 2011). Another significant conclusion of the analysis is that it is not the exact service or activities and network (the ‘what’) that makes the difference to the participants of the Accelerator programme, but the way it is performed, the form of communication it is framed within, the credibility of the provider and amount of self-selection that the process allows (the ‘how’). The application of resources from support activities into a start-up, therefore seems to depend on the context of the resources and how relations are created in a shared community of practice.

The dissertation suggests that the clash of narratives and blame- game language used in the field, can be explained by the narratives of the incubation field lacking a vocabulary for relational construction and entrepreneurial learning – as they are taken for granted, and they contain only limited acknowledgement of the relational context of development and learning. For the same reason, the dissertation concludes that the Accelerator programme is not the learning laboratory we want it to be. Nonetheless, based on some of the rare cases of the fieldwork, the analysis also show that it is possible to speak an alternative language of incubating, and engage in constructive, mutual responsive and equal relationships, which in the end will create new ventures. Such language and actions are constructed in the analysis as a Future-Practice Narrative, to supplement the existing and avoid the clashes and blames games of the field, and as such it is contribution to incubation practice.

The dissertation predicts that incubating activities are here to stay as both a public and private phenomenon, and as it becomes a common part of the entrepreneurial praxis of entrepreneurs to explore the manifold offerings of services for entrepreneurs. As the entrepreneurs become more confident in their interactions with advisors and more critical about their expectations, the incubation industry will need to mature. Mason and Brown (2013) argue that policy makers have been looking for high-growth potentials in the wrong places! This dissertation suggests that the assumptions, methods and processes (relational co-constructions) for support need to be revisited and supplemented with a specific focus on the entrepreneurial learning task of all ventures aiming to grow. The dissertation recommends an entrepreneurial learning perspective to incubating activities as creative, contextual, relational, and processual. In the end the dissertation aims at contributing with a relational entrepreneurial learning perspective to the incubation field and to make policy makers, incubator managers and designers aware of the complex relational conditions at stake, empirically demonstrated by the dissertation, when trying to support and encourage entrepreneurship.

Dansk résumé

Verden længes efter flere iværksættere i en sådan grad, at det er blevet en vigtig prioritet for alverdens regeringer at forsøge at producere dem. Baseret på et ErhvervsPhD-samarbejde mellem Forskerparken, Symbion og Copenhagen Business School, belyser nærværende afhandling hvordan iværksætteres deltagelse i et accelerator program kan føre til øget entrepreneuriel kapacitet, læring og vækst. ErhvervsPhD-samarbejdet har givet unik adgang til feltets aktører (iværksættere, rådgivere, inkubatorledelse og investorer), og afhandlingens analyse er derfor en flerstemmig analyse af entrepreneurial læring i en inkubator kontekst.

Fænomenet ”Business Incubation” - i afhandlingen beskrevet som aktiviteter der understøtter entrepreneurielle handlinger - er oprindeligt tænkt som et forum afskærmet fra verdens besværligheder, med det formål at føje ressourcer til og fjerne hindringer for virksomhedsskabelse. Ideen er, at iværksættere bliver tilbudt komplementære ressourcer og tvunget til at bruge tid på planlægning og strategier i et helikopter perspektiv, som i sidste ende vil gavne processen og gøre succes mere sandsynlig. Politiske beslutningstagere, forskere inden for Business Incubation og entreprenuership, samt praktikere på området, arbejder udfra antagelser om, at iværksættervirksomheder mangler kompetencer og ressourcer, som de ikke umiddelbart selv kan erhverve, og at det er muligt at påvirke disse mangler hos iværksættere. Ikke desto mindre er det til stadig ikke ’faktuelt’ bevist, at erhvervsfremme initiativer skaber flere og bedre virksomheder. Realiseringen af flere succesfulde iværksættervirksomheder er ikke en nem ambition, selvom intentionerne er gode, og de ressourcer, der investeres betydelige (Blackburn and Schaper 2012, Bruneel et al. 2012, Mason og Brown 2013). En tredje antagelse er, at iværksættere som udgangspunkt er åbne for læring og motiverede for at modtage støtte og rådgivning. Denne afhandling viser empirisk at dette ikke nødvendigvis er tilfældet. Afhandlingen beskæftiger sig af samme årsag med et højprofileret politisk emne og dets legitimitet.

Afhandlingens forskningsspørgsmål lyder; *what are the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context?* Forskningsspørgsmålet er induktivt udledt fra forskerens tidlige studier i feltet, hvor det kun i mindre grad var muligt at identificere et sprog eller handlinger der kunne signalere entrepreneuriel læring, hverken som mål eller effekt i feltet. Afhandlingen arbejder med en forståelse af entrepreneuriel læring som en relationel konstruktion (Fletcher 2006 Hosking 2011), der sker ud fra erfaringer og interaktioner i en specifik kontekst, og afhandlingen undersøger derfor barrierer for entrepreneuriel læring i en inkubator kontekst fra et relationelt konstruktionistisk perspektiv. Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at det giver mening at have entrepreneuriel læring som både middel og mål for iværksætterfremmende initiativer.

Analysen af det betydelige empiriske materiale er opbygget af fire Aktør Narrativer (et Rådgiver-Narrativ, et Entrepreneurielt-Narrativ, et Policy Narrativ og et Kritisk Narrativ) og tre Handlings Narrativer (Et Best-Practice Narrative, et Blame-Game Narrative og et Silent-Relationship Narrativ). Narrativerne er afhandlingens analytiske konstruktioner, og er udtryk for overbevisninger og antagelser i feltet, og giver indsigt i hvordan rådgivende aktiviteter udføres i feltet. Afhandlingen bruger disse analytiske konstruktioner til at vise, hvordan feltets aktører opfatter iværksætterrådgivning, hvordan den forventes udført, konstrueret og gør en forskel for iværksætternes proces – og ikke mindst hvordan rådgivningen sker i praksis og hvilke effekter det er muligt at identificere.

Set fra et entrepreneurielt læringsperspektiv (Stevenson 1985, Rae 2006) er de eksisterende narrativer i feltet ikke fuldt tilpassede den nødvendige læringssituation for iværksættere, hvilket er en konsekvens af at leverandører og modtagere af rådgivning og støtte, kun i mindre grad er åbne for samarbejde. Analysen viser, at et 'sammenstød' mellem Aktør-Narrativene især er destruktivt for forholdet mellem deltagerne og rådgivere af Accelerator programmet, og at et stærkt, ligeværdigt samarbejde kun sjældent etableres. Desuden sandsynliggøres det, at de eksisterende metoder og det sprog der tegner praksis for iværksætterrådgivning - illustreret som et Best-Practice Narrativ - undlader at indarbejde vigtige forudsætninger for iværksætteres læring, hvilket ifølge Gibb blandt andet er, at; "*Learning starts from what the learner already understands, knows and internalises, not what the teacher knows*' (Gibb 1997,15). Afhandlingen peger på, at som følge af mangel på læring (og identificerbart output) reagerer feltets aktører ved at pege fingre ad hinandens fejl og mangler, hvilket udgør et Blame-Game Narrativ i feltet. Blame-Game Narrativet er yderst problematisk, da det udover at indeholde en del kritik af hinanden, som f. eks iværksætterrådgivere som inkompetente og iværksættere som dovne, ikke rummer et tilstrækkeligt sprog til at kunne sætte spørgsmålstegn ved metoderne og forklare den manglende læring. Således producerer de to Handlings-narrativer (Best-Practice og Blame-Game) både skepsis og mistillid og udgør en væsentlig barriere for læring. Afhandlingen viser, at aktørerne i feltet ikke tager tilstrækkelig højde for den relationelle og dynamiske kontekst, der understøtter, driver og producerer entrepreneurielle processer (Steyaert 2007, Hjorth 2011). En af de væsentligste konklusioner i afhandlingen er, at det ikke er den præcise ydelse, aktivitet eller netværk ('hvad'), der gør forskellen for deltagerne, men at måden rådgivningen udføres på, i form af kommunikation, troværdigheden af udbyderen og mængden af deltagelse som processen tillader ("hvordan"), er afgørende for læring. Anvendelsen af ressourcer i en iværksættervirksomhed afhænger af deres kontekst, og hvorvidt relationerne omkring dem er skabt i et praksisfællesskab der fordrer åbenhed og aktiv lytning.

Afhandlingen peger på, at feltet mangler et ordforråd for interaktion, læring, usikkerhed og vurderingen af relevans – som i stedet tages for givet, og at der er ringe erkendelse af den relationelle sammenhæng mellem udvikling og læring i et inkubator forløb. Af samme grund konkluderes det, at Accelerator programmet ikke er det læringslaboratorium, det kunne være. Ikke desto mindre, baseret på nogle få cases i feltarbejdet, viser analysen også, at det *er* muligt at tale et alternativt sprog i feltet, og indgå i konstruktive, gensidigt lydhøre og ligeværdige forhold. Et sådant sprog og handlinger er konstrueret i analysen som et Future-Practice Narrativ, som et bidrag til praksis, der med fordel kan supplerede eksisterende narrativer og derved undgå sammenstød og bebrejdelser.

Afhandlingen forudser, at iværksætterfremmende aktiviteter er kommet for at blive, både som et offentligt og privat fænomen, da empirien også peger på, at det i højere grad bliver en del af den entrepreneurielle praksis at udforske støtteordninger og iværksætterprogrammer. I takt med at iværksætterne bliver mere professionelle og kritiske i deres brug af rådgivning, har inkubationsindustrien brug for at modnes. Mason og Brown (2013) argumenterer for, at de politiske beslutningstagere har været på udkig efter høj vækst potentialer på de forkerte steder, som et argument for at der ikke findes bedre resultater på området. Denne afhandling argumenterer for, at de antagelser, metoder og processer (relationel samskabelse) der ligger til grund for iværksætterrådgivning bør gentænkes og suppleres med en anerkendelse af den 'læringsopgave' der uløseligt er knyttet til den individuelle iværksættervirksomheds vækst. Afhandlingen anbefaler et læringsperspektiv for iværksætterfremmende aktiviteter, som er kreativt, kontekstuelt, relationelt og dynamisk. I sidste ende bidrager afhandlingen med et relationelt læringsperspektiv til inkubationsfeltet, og med at gøre både initiativtagere og designere af iværksætterinitiativer opmærksomme på de komplekse relationelle forhold der er på spil, når de forsøger at støtte og fremme iværksættere, hvilket afhandlingen empirisk har demonstreret eksisterer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction – We are still looking for growth

1.1. Entrepreneuring – a fine line between vision and reality

> *'Entrepreneurs are people who are the first to see a crack or a flaw in a social construction of economic reality, and to interpret it as an opportunity to actualize their ideas of what the world should look like. As long as others do not share the vision, they have to live with the individually constructed reality, which is a heavy burden to bear. What seems to be anecdotal stories of mad inventors and innovators might be quite true, in the sense that the unsuccessful inventors are people whose reality did not become socially confirmed. Those who succeeded, though, are the makers of our worlds' (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff 1991, 534).*

Governments all over the world commonly accept that entrepreneurship and small businesses are important for the sustainability and development of an economy (Audretsch et al. 2007, OECD 2015). Nevertheless, the focus on entrepreneurial actors that has been an emerging trend over the past 30 years in most parts of the world is not only an economic matter. It reflects profound changes in attitudes in everything from commercial conduct and personal careers to the social contract and the purpose of social interactions. Every article, publication, book, propaganda text or application produced by international organisations, universities, foundations, business schools etc. in the fields of entrepreneurship, innovation and, regional development, points to the connection between entrepreneurship and growth and thus the wealth of society (Lundström and Stevenson 2007, Norrman and Bager-Sjögren 2010, Mason and Brown 2013). Everybody is looking for growth and entrepreneurial activity has become the answer to the current challenges of the world – and in many situations it is presented as an idea whose time has come (Steyaert and Katz 2004).

The above quote brilliantly describes why societies all over the world are eager to stimulate entrepreneurship, since entrepreneuring processes[1] of interaction and creation have the potential to produce both incremental and radical innovations to sustain and facilitate growth and (re)make our world. For the sake of growth and prosperity we need more (successful) entrepreneurs, is the refrain of our time! Some of the well-known arguments for entrepreneurship as a phenomenon to have gained increased interest over the last 30-40 years, both politically, academically, and also in the public are;

[1] The entrepreneuring process, referred to in the dissertation is the interactions of innovative and technology-based ventures, typically performed by one or few founders. This process refers to a transformative form-giving practice with the currently available resources (Stevenson 1985). Based on Steyaert's (2007) notion of entrepreneuring as a relational phenomenon of creative processes, *the entrepreneuring actor* is interpreted as a dynamic entity that may transform with time and resources (Steyaert 2007, 453). With this perspective, I embed my understanding of entrepreneuring as processes and interactions of organising (Steyaert 2007, 472). The arguments for and the consequences of this theoretical perspective are further explored in Chapter 4.

- Entrepreneurial ventures have the capacity to stimulate further economic growth and add to regional or national income
- Entrepreneurial ventures, which grows fast, create jobs for themselves and for other people in their community
- Entrepreneurial ventures foster new industries and new economic and social activities
- Entrepreneurial ventures pay taxes (start-ups and SMEs usually pay local taxes)
- Entrepreneurs introduce new products and services to the market, which encourages markets and industries to develop a healthy ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurs

These arguments illuminate why local and national government entities seek to promote and stimulate entrepreneurial activity as an engine for growth (Klofsten and Jones-Evans 2013, 307). Technology-based[2] entrepreneurship, which is the empirical background of the dissertation, has been receiving special attention, since it is anticipated to have the potential to grow more and make larger revenues than most other industries (Audretsch and Beckmann 2007)[3]. Denmark spends €0,52 billion[4] on support initiatives for innovation and entrepreneurship, as policy makers are eager to accelerate the creation of successful entrepreneurial companies. Business incubating activities that offer support to entrepreneurial projects are a key tool in this process. Such support is intended to develop new ventures into self-sustaining, viable companies (Bruneel et al. 2012).

One consequence of the *entrepreneurship-as-remedy-for-growth* idea is the creation of exceptional expectations for the possible role of the heroic entrepreneurial actor[5] and entrepreneurial processes (Olaison 2014). What the above quote also hints is an element of fragility and ambiguity to entrepreneuring – a fine line between (individually constructed) vision and (socially confirmed) reality. The entrepreneurial actors that serve as the medium of all this attention and the high expectations are faced with '*new or unique situations, where "experimentation" is required to question the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions, and reframe their understanding of the situation at hand*' (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 846). This might sound fun and intriguing –

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[2] Technology-based entrepreneurship is the innovative application of scientific and technical knowledge by one or several actors who start up and operate a business subject to systematic uncertainty and information asymmetry (Prodan 2007, 27). These industries imply; Internet technology, pharmacology, biotechnology, medical devices, energy, industry, Internet communication, health and welfare technologies.

[3] It is anticipated that many potential technology-based ideas/projects never reach the market, and that many established companies need support to survive or to become a high-growth company (Prodan 2007)

[4] €0,52 billion is 16% of the entire budget (€4,8 billion) for business encouragement and support in Denmark in 2014 (Report on business encouragement and support, Published by the Ministry of Business and Growth, Marts 2015).

[5] Related to the organising (Gartner 1988) perspective on entrepreneurship, the concept of 'the entrepreneur'changes into the concept of the concept of 'the entrepreneuring actor'. The dissertation is in line with Watson's (2013b) use of the concept; *'the concept of the 'entrepreneurial actors' is considerably broader than that of the 'entrepreneur'. Someone is an entrepreneurial actor if and when they are engaging in adventurous, creative and innovative business exchanges or deals'* (Watson 2013b, 408), hence someone is not "an entrepreneur" only by title, or because someone was previously acting entrepreneurially.

to disrupt the existing – but it is no easy task and many fail the attempt[6]. As follows, it is no easy task to support such processes. The burden of the entrepreneur (Weiskopf and Steyaert 2009, 187), which is also, to the outside world, the mysterious part of the entrepreneuring process, is the actual struggle of turning a constructed vision into a socially confirmed reality. It is within the difficult, ambiguous and unpredictable processes of *experimentation* and *dialogue* with the customers, partners and investors that most potential entrepreneuring actors (ideas, projects and ventures) come to an end, because it proved impossible with the given resources, to mobilise a proper number of followers around the project.

Another consequence of the *entrepreneurship-as-remedy-for-growth* idea is the occurrence of business incubating activities[7], which is the context of the dissertation. This phenomenon is society (public or private actors) trying to overcome the struggle between vision and reality and stimulate and support the potential makers of tomorrow in their dialogue with the environment and the development of ventures. Herein lays also the paradox of perceiving entrepreneurs as courageous, gifted heroes that need to be nurtured and supported in their entrepreneurial endeavours (Olaison 2014). Support and stimulation aim at increasing entrepreneurial know-how and thus entrepreneurial capacity to create value in society. Such stimulation varies from entrepreneurial education in primary school through to university level and a wide variety of local, national and transnational programmes and support units (Hjorth and Johannisson 2006). Decision-makers at all organisational levels of society seek to enable entrepreneurial activity as *'the development of entrepreneurial skills is prescribed as a panacea that seemingly cures everything'* (Weiskopf and Steyaert 2009, 186).

If we knew how to produce successful entrepreneurs on a regular basis we would have found the philosopher's stone, but of course, there is no such thing. Nevertheless, we (researchers, politicians, leaders and entrepreneurs) are searching for answers on *how to stimulate, facilitate and encourage successful entrepreneurial creations*. This dissertation is an effort to contribute with knowledge about how

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[6] 50% of all start-ups in the OECD countries fail with the first five years. (OECD 2015)

[7] There have been many attempts in the incubation literature to make a generic definition of *the incubator* and define what an incubator is, and what it is not (Lewis et al. 2011, 5). This has proven difficult, since few incubators are alike, and initiatives are always local to some degree. However, there are recurring elements and models, and the basic idea is to compensate for market failures, uncertainty and the challenges of contracting and maximising the entrepreneurial potential (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, 269-270, Auerswald 2007, 18). From a process perspective, this dissertation interprets business incubation initiatives as ongoing support processes of interaction and transformation, and I therefore use the term *business incubating activities*. This is to capture the dynamic aspects of entrepreneurial processes (Weiskopt and Steyaert 2009, 195), which incubating activities are intended to become part of. My central message about incubating activities is that they are local ongoing service processes aimed at supporting local entrepreneurial processes. *'Entrepreneurial processes are in this sense understood as forms of social creativity that are also opportunity-creating, not simply opportunity recognising/exploiting'* (Hjorth and Johannisson 2006). This is further elaborated in chapter 4.

entrepreneuring actors can be supported to become better at entrepreneuring, based on an ethnographic field study of an Accelerator programme for technology based entrepreneurs[8].

One of the strong assumptions driving incubating initiatives is that most growth potential or talent is not explored (stays a vision) to a satisfying degree due to structural or resource constraints in the local community. In an attempt to avoid a potential waste of capacity and opportunities by simply waiting for miracles, coincidence and luck to produce the much-wanted growth ventures, incubating activities are instruments that society can use to offer a helping hand. As it will become clear in the course of the dissertation, a key discussion within the field of incubation, innovation and entrepreneurship policy is whether and to what extent incubating activities make a positive impact to the speed and capacity of the individual start-up, to growth of the venture and to the entrepreneurial capacity and growth of society. In that sense, entrepreneurial support – as well – is a fine line between vision and reality.

1.2. The missing link between business incubating activities and growth

The philosophy of incubators is that incubators offer a rich environment for supporting the resource needs of entrepreneurs, but it is hard to find evidence as to how and to which extent technology-based entrepreneurs improve their skills during the incubation process (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, Warren et al. 2009). Considering the large, expensive and well-meaning initiatives for supporting entrepreneurship and SMEs that are launched by governmental institutions all over the world, it is remarkable how little actual scientific data exists to justify the resources spent in terms of verifiable growth, innovation, survival rate or financial wealth in targeted small companies (Westhead and Storey 1996, Gibb 1997, Phan et al. 2005, Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003, Hansson 2007, Bill et al. 2008, Murdock 2012, Fairlie et al. 2015).This means that despite huge investment in policy programmes aimed at increasing entrepreneurship, there is still little evidence of the impact of such programmes on actual entrepreneurship activity (Minetti 2008, Cowie 2012, Alexandersson 2015, Levinsohn 2015).

Many public entrepreneurship initiatives and programmes are widely criticised for their lack of results (Shane 2009), the way they are evaluated and for inadequate pedagogical methods (Gibb, 2009; Astbury and Leeuw 2010).

> *'Public advisory services towards SMEs represent a multi-billion pound industry. The impact, however reported by the receivers of these services and by independent evaluators, seems to*

[8] Technology-based entrepreneurship is the innovative application of scientific and technical knowledge by one or several actors who start up and operate a business subject to systematic uncertainty and information asymmetry (Prodan 2007, 27).

> *be comparably weak and insignificant. A lot of different measures are taken but the rationale behind is rarely considered. Consequently, the purposes of specific initiatives remain unclear'* (Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003, 94).

Such criticism comes from across the field – from entrepreneurs, politicians, the entrepreneur stakeholder community (industry, customers, and partners) and researchers. In all, this means that it is legitimate to question whether incubating activities for immature ventures create the sought-after positive impact on society and economies by creating growth companies (Phan et al. 2005). Bruneel et al. (2012) sum up the current state of the literature on business incubators (BIs) as follows:

> *'Practitioner publications often claim the benefits of BIs. There is, however, little systematic evidence of BI's efficacy in promoting job and wealth creation. Furthermore, research has found little or no evidence of BI's contribution to university-industry interaction, innovation activity, or firm performance'* (Bruneel et al. 2012, 110).

Articles from recent years discuss the question about how business-incubating activities could be structured, how they may be evaluated, and how they may support entrepreneurs and start-up firms (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005; Grimaldi and Grandi 2005; Aerts et al. 2007; Bergek and Norrman 2008; Aaboen 2009). Shane (2009) argued that policy makers should stop subsidising start-ups on a broad scale and only focus on the high-growth potential (Shane 2009, 145) but did not come any closer to how incubating managers in practice should locate and evaluate such ventures (Mason and Brown 2013, 212).

One of the problems, as Murdock presents it, is that

> *'Public policy is arguably the instrument that government can most easily manipulate as they try to stimulate entrepreneurship. The idea that entrepreneurship leads to economic growth has contributed to a plethora of public policy initiatives with the conviction that through policies, countries can increase their entrepreneurial capacity and achieve higher levels of economic growth (…) Despite huge investments in policy programmes aimed at increasing entrepreneurship, there is little evidence of the impact of such programmes on actual entrepreneurship activities' (Murdock 2012, 881).*

The missing link between business incubating activities and growth suggests a knowledge gap in terms of how entrepreneurship policies can be designed, i.e. how to work with the entrepreneurs and how to interact with them in a way that makes them strong and independent (Mason and Brown 2013, 222). It is important to stress that the lack of data demonstrating positive results from incubating activities, is likely to be influenced by the fact that it takes time to see the results of incubating activities, and that the term *business incubation* is used to refer to a variety of initiatives, which are not necessarily comparable (Westhead and Storey 1996, Norrman and Bager-Sjögren 2010). As for the question of whether the incubator support is effective in terms of creating strong growing ventures, is a question that needs a very longitudinal empirical study (over business cycles) and in various empirical contexts.

Despite the various types of critique and scepticism, entrepreneurial support is still a central focus of politicians, universities and leading actors in the private sector. Olaison (2014) nails this paradox well in her description of governmental fascination of entrepreneurship*;*

> *"The practical limits of entrepreneurship contrasts with the prevailing fascination with entrepreneurship; it is unequivocally good, and we need more of it. But we don't know what exactly this "it" is nor do we know how to get more of it"* (Olaison 2014, 13).

This dissertation confirms that there is a consensus in the field of the entrepreneurial support industry, which says that support should be provided, and that there is a demand for support. In most cases, such common ground is good starting point for an industry, and *'according to earlier studies of public support for new venture development, it is evident that these ventures are in need of support with regard to certain critical aspects, for example, networks, credibility and business development. Consequently, public initiatives should target these factors'* (Norrman and Klofsten 2009, 34). The premise that I put forward in this dissertation is that if resources continue to be spent on support initiatives, we should study how these resources can produce a difference (added value) to the actors of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Isenberg 2010). Shortcomings of incubating activities will *'entail a waste of resources, both in terms of taxpayers' money and in terms of time and money invested by the entrepreneurs'* (Norrman and Klofsten 2009, 37). Currently, policy makers, researchers and practitioners seem to be operating with a high level of uncertainty concerning *how* incubating activities move, facilitate and transform the start-up process of ventures, *how* entrepreneurs learn to organise the resources of the venture and attract new ones – also *beyond* the incubator, and also when it comes to *how* incubating activities are made relevant to entrepreneurs (Norrman 2008).

It is important to stress that this local-contextual study will not verify or falsify whether there is a tight link between incubating processes and entrepreneurial growth. The aim of this dissertation is rather to develop a better understanding of what goes on in an incubating context, how incubating practices with the purpose of enhancing entrepreneurial practices are carried out in praxis and what kind of impact we are able to identify from a learning perspective. This will be based on a longitudinal, multi-voice study with the possibility of looking into the relational in-betweens of support for entrepreneurs. I find such understanding to be a precondition for being able to re-design existing and future support initiatives. For the same reason, as I will return to in the following section, this study works with an entrepreneurial learning perspective – as the potential positive and effective impact on entrepreneuring actors derived from support activities

1.3. The timing, access and relevance of the Industrial PhD Project

Policy makers - often in close collaboration with university environments, science parks and incubators – have been experimenting with the design and performance of entrepreneurial support for the last 30-40 years (Gibb 2009). Furthermore, as outlined in the previous section - the last 10-15 years of research and evaluations has brought a lot of critique to the field.

A recent trend has been to create tighter and more targeted programmes for highly potential entrepreneurs to secure a better success rate of support initiatives for entrepreneurial projects. At such time it has been timely to launch a study like this – investigating what works to support entrepreneurs, as knowledge about the interactions between technology-based ideas and organizational skills is still rather underdeveloped (Baumol 2005, Alexandersson 2015) and knowledge and understanding of such processes is still badly needed in mature, innovation intense economy such as the Danish. In 2010 the present study was therefore initiated as an industrial PhD project between a large Danish Science Park and a large Danish Business School. The object of study was a high-profiled, ambitious and publicly funded Accelerator programme hosted by the Danish Science Park, which I return to in Chapter 4. The affiliation of the researcher, as an industrial PhD, has been regarded a unique opportunity of longitudinal access to the interactions of entrepreneurs, advisors, teachers, programme activities, support functions and investors, and therefore a great asset to the project as it secured a rich-data basis for the study. It has made it possible to carry out the study as an ethnographic inspired field study of the Accelerator programme and its context.

The theoretical framework and understanding of entrepreneurial actors and entrepreneuring, as it is presented throughout the dissertation, is a result of the intensive fieldwork, which will also be described in Chapter 4. The original project proposed to the Doctoral School of Organisation and Management studies at Copenhagen Business School in 2010 had a slightly different description of purpose than the present, which is important to delve upon, in order to understand the inductive nature of the dissertation. The title of the proposed PhD project was: *Looking for growth: understanding mechanisms for creating growth entrepreneurs*. The project approached incubation as positively related to the acceleration of entrepreneurs, and aimed at finding a design or method for training entrepreneurs, and through a generic process producing entrepreneurial learning as an outcome of participation in the Accelerator programme.

In the early fieldwork and preliminary pilot interviews it was a surprise to me, as a field worker, not to hear a stronger language for entrepreneurial learning in the field - neither as a process nor as an outcome. As many other researchers and evaluators of these kind of processes (Blackburn and Schaper 2012), I experienced that it was rather difficult to identify or measure the impact of incubating activities, and also that there were strong barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the field of the Accelerator programme. I was engaged in an attempt to stimulate and train immature ventures to become better ventures, but how entrepreneurial learning was expected to happen was tricky to identify.

As a result, entrepreneurial learning is primarily something the dissertation discusses, but mainly as a conceptual development, since it was very difficult for me to locate productive examples of entrepreneurial development (Rae 2007) as a direct outcome of the programme to be studied in the field, but mainly lack thereof. Instead I unexpectedly met a lot of resistance to participation, conflict and prejudices about the value of incubating activities, and the many voices in the field revealed that entrepreneurial support is a much more delicate and potent (personal, political, prestigious) matter than first anticipated, and as such highly dependent on the relational constructions in the field (Gergen 2009, 110). As I delved further into the fieldwork, it was my reading of the incubating programme that entrepreneurial development – in terms of increased capacity to act and network development - was not explicitly part of the programme purpose – but more or less implicitly expected to happen. I will return to this matter in chapter 4 and the analysis – together with the empirical finding that the needs of many participants of the accelerator programme were different than expected. Broadly speaking the participants of the programme were better equipped in terms of entrepreneurial experience and resources than I had expected[9]. As a result of these experiences and other observations in the field, I decided that the lack of an *entrepreneurial learning* focus and mindset, as a processual prerequisite for entrepreneurial development (and growth), and as a theme and a goal in the field, was the most important analysis to make based on the fieldwork. Arriving at this conclusion has been quite a journey, since I was not able to locate entrepreneurial learning as a dominating theme, goal or process in the practice of the incubating programme, the literature of incubation management or in policies for supporting entrepreneurship. I have found it taken for granted. My research strategy of following the *"unanticipated and unexpected that puzzles the researcher"* (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, 1266) is further explored in Chapter 4. This chapter also introduces the thought style of relational constructionism (Hosking 2007, 2011) as the epistemological framework of the dissertation and narrative method (Czarniawska 2004, 2008) for analysing the fieldwork material - based on the continuous creation of and dialogue with the field (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007).

1.4. Entrepreneurial learning as a parameter for success of incubating activities

Success is not a word with a simple or evident definition when it comes to incubating activities, like many other areas of life. At different stages of venturing and in different industries success may refer to very different

[9] Based on my reading of the incubation and entrepreneurship literature

measures[10]. Typical criteria for the evaluation of incubating activities include survival rates, improved sales and profits, creation of jobs and cost of public support per job created (OECD 2015). Such goals have shown to be very difficult to measure, especially in the short term, also because the impact of incubating activities may influence the venture in many other areas than the number of workplaces can describe. Consequently, the question of defining success has been widely discussed in the fields of entrepreneurship policy and incubation management and is sometimes left rather vague, and *'there seems to be little, if any, consensus about which definition of success to use for quality and efficiency measurement'* (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, 272). As incubating activities come in many forms and with many different targets, so do their goals and priorities. The stated goal of most incubating activities is the development of start-ups into sustainable businesses and at best into a stage of growth (Bruneel et al. 2012).

In my understanding of the concept of supporting entrepreneurial actors, the ambition is to strengthen and develop entrepreneurial actors (making them more economically successful) in order to increase the potential for growth in society. If we follow the theory on communities of practice (Wenger 1998) for learning, the incubator context as a community for entrepreneurial support must be a pervasive, integrated and influential force for learning and development (Wenger et al. 2002, 166). I argue that when the goal of incubating activities is to change and develop entrepreneuring actors, numerous disciplines such as learning, pedagogic, psychology and negotiation are added to the incubating process besides *the delivery* of business tools and models (Hackett and Dilts 2004a). When we strive to achieve a theoretical understanding of incubating processes, it becomes clear that the praxis of incubating, supporting the start-up phase of entrepreneurs, is as interdisciplinary as the interdisciplinary circumstances of entrepreneuring (Prodan 2007, 27). Besides the particular field of technology that an invention has sprung from, and which the founding actors are likely to master, the process of small-scale entrepreneuring relates to areas of economics, sales, management, human relations management, psychology, finance, sociology, political science and geography. We cannot say that entrepreneuring is solely either an economic discipline, or a psychological one – because it is both (Rae 2000, 147) and we have to remember that when we are trying to support it. Furthermore, when we study incubating activities the level of analysis is not easily defined, as the activity of commercialising inventions from entrepreneurial processes '*crosses the boundaries of multiple units of observation and analysis, such as the individual, groups, enterprises, cultures, geographic locations, industries, countries and particular episodes of time'* (Audretsch et al. 2007, 4). With this dissertation I interpret the search for growth as a societal need for *entrepreneurial learning and increased entrepreneurial capacity*, and as such the main goal of incubating

[10] As an example, the empirical material shows that success in the biotech industry is very often related to receiving funding, whereas success for an IT platform may be defined by reaching, for example, 1,000,000 subscribers, and success in the business of large clean-tech products may be defined by 10 sold units, as this is the break-even point.

activities is to facilitate and stimulate these – which means that the goal is both economic (jobs and growth), but also pedagogical and relational (Maritz and Brown 2013, 239).

A central dilemma is that too little is known about how entrepreneurs learn from incubating activities, how added knowledge and networks are embedded into the venture, and how the learning takes place (Gibb 1997, Cope 2005a).

> *'Too little is known of how the learning of stakeholder and SME actually takes place. Many programmes of assistance are therefore, arguably, designed in a vacuum. Little is known about the relationship between the counsellor or coach and the "learner". Little is known about the recipients preferred way of learning and little about how knowledge transfer takes place between counsellor and company and vice versa. Even less is known about how the knowledge subsequently becomes "embedded" in the company and in the counsellor behaviour. As a result there are no real benchmarks for what makes a good counsellor even though they are already written competency standards for the use by teachers and trainers' (Gibb 1997, 25).*

Even though huge efforts have been performed, both in academia and in practice, seeking to produce better knowledge about the advising of entrepreneurs since Gibb criticised incubating activities for being designed in a vacuum, it is still a paradox that entrepreneurship literature knows little about the *interaction processes* of incubating activities. From Gibb's (2009) historical overview we see that the recurring intuitive approach for politicians and incubating managers to design incubation activities, is to assume that entrepreneuring actors and their needs are known, and that services can delivered to fill out these needs. According to Blackburn and Schaper (2012), there is a poor connection between the parties interested in entrepreneurship policy; *'Whether or not the problem is a result of poorly focused academic research, as claimed by many policy makers, or the inability of policymakers to listen, as claimed by academics, is unclear'* (Blackburn and Schaper 2012, 3). This draws attention to a need for new perspectives on incubating activities that are able to produce knowledge about the phenomenon in different ways than research and practice have applied so far.

According to Pittaway and Thorpe (2012), existing entrepreneurship programmes have encountered a number of challenges in their efforts to support entrepreneurs, including;

- Problems of engagement (failure to engage entrepreneurs in the way they wish to learn),
- Problems of context (failure to accommodate different entrepreneurs' different needs)
- Problems of value (failure to legitimise the support as relevant and useful) (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 854-855).

Additionally, it is also pointed to by Gibb, they highlight the challenges to create relationships/networks by artificial means (Gibb 2000, 29). This is a significant point, as the artificial element of support, sets a very different and relationally contingent scene for making sense of collaboration and listening (Gergen 2009, 147) – and it forces us to think about what it really means to support and how it can be done! As a researcher, I cannot understand support processes and mechanisms without asking what it means 'to support' in the incubation industry. What counts as support in this industry is related to how support is understood in a local-social-historical construction (Hosking 2007, 3), and also what practices and narratives are being installed to maintain, legitimise and defend the construction (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009). The dissertation gives insights to what the existing understanding of support in the field does in terms of outcome.

It is argued that it is difficult to measure or identify learning as an effect of specific experiences or knowledge inputs (Wenger at al. 2002) – especially in entrepreneurial development processes, which goes on for years, and where the object of study (the venture) may vary in product and performing actors. For the same reason, I as a researcher have to ask myself - how I as a researcher decide upon whether I can identify progress in the entrepreneurial capacity of the entrepreneurs or not, as an outcome of participation in incubating activities?

Based on Rae's (2005, 2006, 2007) framework of entrepreneurial learning, I understand entrepreneurial learning as processes of personal and social emergence, contextual learning and the continuous interactions with and creation of markets. Rae's learning theory is developed within the tradition of situated learning (Wenger 1998) and entrepreneurial learning is a potential outcome of interactions within the local community of the venture (Wenger et al. 2002). The Wenger tradition[11] draws upon experimental and social theories, which combine action, conceptualisations, social practice, and the study of language – and understand learning through the stories and experiences of actors. This provides a conceptual foundation for understanding learning as derived from relational interactions and participation in local communities, and as such a suitable learning theory to be applied for entrepreneurship (Rae 2007).

The evaluation of learning in any context is not an easy task, and it is solved in many different ways depending on type and context. In many cases evaluators decide on relevant parameters for learning – as a test or a task to be solved within short time. For the sake of entrepreneurial processes, which are inherently uncertain and in which the learning cannot necessarily be determined by the creation of jobs or profit, it makes sense talk about a learning process that has potential and future value (Wenger et al. 2011) to the entrepreneurial process by increasing the entrepreneurial capacity of the entrepreneuring actors. The value depends on how effective knowledge and experiences is produced and how effectively they are applied. I will return to this matter in

[11] Foremost this refers to learning theorist as John Dewey, Oskar Negt and David A. Kolb, which bases their research on experience. Despite their differences, these theorists all stress that in order to learn – the learning has to be of significant subjective meaning to the learner – and that the learning is part of a coherent process of which the learner is actively involved (Illeris 2007).

chapter 5, but for now it is important to understand that my argument for claiming only to find entrepreneurial learning (as a goal, mindset, outcome) to a low extent in the field, is based on the lack of relational constructions (Hosking 2007), lack of relational organizing (Gartner 1988) or what we could call lack of shared community of practice (Wenger 1998) within the incubator context. The fieldwork material reveals a tendency of actors going into conflict mode instead of community construction, when confronted with questions about impact – which is demonstrated by the construction of the Blame Game Narrative in the analysis. According to Wenger et al. 2011 the establishment of a relationship or community, a learning partnership related to a common domain and based on shared commitment, is the prerequisite for creating a space in which participants and advisors can explore, experiment and learn, and I have only to a limited extent been able to identify this from my fieldwork. Obviously this is a huge paradox – as everybody agrees that we want more entrepreneurs and that entrepreneurial support for the same reason is a good idea.

1.5. Research question

By now, I have presented incubating activities as highly prioritized investments of both public and private actors all over the world – to solve the growth challenge of modern welfare economies. I have outlined several discussions in the field of incubation and entrepreneurship policy concerning impact and effect, and described how this study was initiated to provide knowledge on what works to stimulate and support growth entrepreneurs. I have also shortly described how the focus of research changed during my preliminary interactions in the field, and that I interpret the low occurrence of relational constructions, entrepreneurial organizing – and large resistance and scepticism towards advisory, public support and the will of entrepreneurs to listen in the field, as lack of future potential entrepreneurial learning. My research question therefore has arrived at investigating the following;

Research question: What are the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context?

As outlined, the purpose of this dissertation is to produce knowledge on how to support entrepreneuring actors to become better at entrepreneuring – meaning how incubating activities can encourage them to behave entrepreneurially and learn through entrepreneuring (Hjorth 2007). It is important to stress that the empirical material is based on an accelerator context, which in my way of working with entrepreneurial support – as an organizational study of relational transactions – is relevant in an incubator context as well. The research question has been adjusted to fit the purpose of the study, which has not changed, but in the process of analysing the empirical material, I had to take a step backwards and ask the question about what are the barriers to learning in an incubator context in the first place. The process of taking advice, giving advice, evaluating relevance, being in a competition and letting others help in the development of a venture project is immensely complex. We have to answer questions about resistance towards advisors, scepticism about potential and general difficulties in accepting the value of complementary competencies (Gergen 2009). We also need to look at the assumptions incubating activities is based upon - about how needs of entrepreneurs can be fulfilled and what these needs are in the first place (Norrman 2008). In the design of incubating activities a number of assumptions about entrepreneurs, advisors and technology development is made, and in the understanding of why it so difficult to get actors to listen, share their challenges and resources, we need to ask the question about whether the existing assumptions about entrepreneurial support is appropriate to the task.

We, as researchers and policy makers, should ask ourselves whether we have appropriate expectations about success in terms of what the incubating process may produce. At least we can say that there is a research gap about understanding the outcome or impact – or lack of it – of incubating activities. The research question is therefore about the sources of resistance and conflict that both entrepreneuring actors and their advisors and investors are restrained by for truly and openly engaging in the learning processes that incubating activities offers.

1.6. A relational constructionist study of a multi-disciplinary field

Supporting and enhancing entrepreneurship initiatives are a global industry, which I return to in Chapter 3. This industry is constructed from political attempts at sustaining/creating prosperous economies and corporate/private[12] attempts at sustaining/creating a favourable position in the market. The incubation industry is represented by many actors and stakeholders such as entrepreneurs, investors, customers, universities, politicians, municipalities, business angels, science parks and public and private institutions, all concerned with influencing technological change and profit making from their own perspective (Norrman 2008, 69; Rip 2010, 204). These actors represent different tasks (search, motivation, learning, development, capital) of a supply-chain system, and can be referred to as an *ecosystem of entrepreneurship* (Isenberg 2010). For the same reason they also represent a wide spectrum of interests that may be similar, complementary and sometimes contradictory in their effort to strengthen dynamic, growth-oriented ventures.

Delving into the field of entrepreneuring processes and incubating activities in the search for entrepreneurial learning, I have found it necessary to try to move beyond some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about

[12] This reference also implies venture capitalists and business angels with philanthropic ambitions. Private initiatives may also be private incubators founded by successful entrepreneurs, VC's and BA's and can be interpreted as the field's own reaction to the need for complementary resources but also as a business opportunity.

entrepreneurs, advisors, investors, institutions, organisations, communities and environments in order to see what is interpreted as a narrative reality and what is the construction of relational engagement in the field (McNamee and Hosking 2012, xv). Entrepreneurial processes in most cases require complementary resources and are thus fundamentally interdisciplinary and complex in construction (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 181). In some cases, entrepreneurial actors are not capable of formulating their needs outside the areas of their own core competences, which is one of the reasons why governmental institutions are on a reasonable track when they claim that there is a need for incubating activities. The skill set needed for making inventions profitable or valuable means that few human actors master the entire cross-disciplinary activity of entrepreneuring, which includes technological problem-solving, management, practical actions, industry-specific knowledge, social actions, economic management, creative thinking, strategic thinking, persistence, negotiating and communicating with various human and non-human actors.

This means that the dissertation perceives incubating activities as multidisciplinary, which is reflected in the dissertation's theoretical and methodological choices. A study of start-up processes in the incubating setting deals with a particular analytical unit of observation and requires a particular frame of reference. In dialogue with the empirical material I have chosen to study incubating activities in a relational world and looked at a form of impact, understood as a process that makes a difference to the potentiality of future actions; this makes the learning process of incubated ventures my analytical focus. Similar to Hick (2010), I have found that *'relational constructionism brings the focus closer to participants and consultants in particular, to how we might get along better together in addressing issues and problems'* (Hicks 2010) which emphasises a relational focus as appropriate to the study of barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context. The relational perspective brings insights on the possibilities and barriers of incubating praxis. Thus, I present incubating praxis as a relational praxis in the incubator community and as participative organising processes (Bouwen 2010) and as such - barriers to learning as unfulfilled participative organizing.

Engaging in the field – in the organising of the Accelerator programme, I have applied ethnographic methods for fieldwork dialogue, interviews, observations, and participation (Spradley 1979) over a three-year period, which form a unique collection of empirical material. This has been combined with the access and involvement of my employee position, in the organisation under investigation, which makes the study deviate slightly from traditional ethnographic studies, in which the researcher may be less attached to the field (Ybema et al. 2009). Nevertheless, it is extraordinary to have this kind of unlimited access to entrepreneurs, advisors, incubator managers and investors and furthermore participate in incubation activities and have opportunity for interacting and communicating with a multitude of these actors in the field (Alvesson 2003). The fieldwork material is constructed from this large and multifaceted set of interactions, participation, qualitative formal and informal interviews and observations, and has served as a basis and guide for the present writing, indicating an inductive approach to inquiry and analysis (Cope 2005a, 171). The opportunity to interview participants two or three times over a period of two years, and before and after programme participation, enables a dialogical process during the interviews, in which the respondents are able to reject or broaden pervious viewpoints and understandings. As such, research may be practised in a way that constructs the researcher and the respondent as co-creators (Hosking and Pluut 2010, 68). The field work material is interesting in terms of process studies and entrepreneurial development over time, as the longitudinal study has allowed me continuously to reflect on my field work material and my interactions and to let the already existing material inform and sometimes challenge, the subsequent stages of research. A relationally informed study of entrepreneurial construction does not aim to provide an exact description of what incubating activities should be, and in what sequence they are supposed to happen; instead, it is much more *'concerned with "How things go on" and come about as a result of relational processes rather than "what is"'* (Fletcher 2006, 437).

It is the assumption of this study that immature ventures, organisations and actors in general are formed and characterised by certain capabilities as a result of their relations to other actors. When a venture is perceived as stable and reliable, that is due to its connections and actions. Why then, do some actors achieve momentarily stability to a larger extent, while others never make it past the launch stage? A Latourian answer would be that the ones that fail are the ones that are not able to attract enough powerful actors to support them – as in the case of Aramis (Latour 1996). It is difficult to determine the techniques used for maintaining such supporting actors and to borrow their strength, but some relational mechanisms can be said to be at stake – as for example persuasion in the form of a sales pitch or advertisements (Gergen 2009). In line with the European School of entrepreneurship (Steyaert 2007, Watson 2013b) the perspective of the dissertation is therefore that creation of entrepreneurial start-ups is about creative organising of relations and resources from the level of mundane activities to strategic storytelling in order to persuade the world (Fletcher 2003). This is challenging and as such, teaching or facilitating entrepreneuring actors into such learning experiences is as well.

1.7. A narrative analysis of field engagements

I have chosen a relational constructionist language to describe and demonstrate the processual character and dynamics of entrepreneuring and incubating activities, and refer to narrative theory in writing about the experiences as well as the impact of incubating activities designed for entrepreneuring actors[13]. Narrative theory suggest that our world is constituted by narratives, and that we as researchers through the construction of narratives can find new or alternative ways of understanding how *'agency is negotiated, identities constructed, and social action mediated'* (Somers 1994, 620). Both Czarniawska (1997, 2004) and Brown (2006) have demonstrated that organizations (communities, fields) can be interpreted as made of a variety of different narratives that are constructed in response or in relation to each other. That makes a field a *"polyphonic, socially constructed verbal system, characterized by multiple, simultaneous and sequential narratives that variously interact, harmonize and clash*" (Currie and Brown 2003; 566). As entrepreneurial learning – in the form of an increased capacity to act – is very difficult to measure in quantitative terms, a narrative approach makes it possible for me as a researcher to evaluate whether any change has occurred in (inter) actions, mindset or the stories being told. Wenger et al. (2002) refers to stories as anecdotal evidence and explains well why learning cannot be counted in traditional sense, but can be listened through descriptions of how resources (knowledge, capital, network) is produced and applied. They state that

> *"Stories are the best way to traverse a knowledge system in a way that explains the linkages between community activities, knowledge resources, and performance outcomes. Only a story can describe these complex causal relations while incorporating implicit contextual factors that may be crucial to appreciate, but hard to codify or generalize. Such stories depend on practitioners involvement, because only practitioners can tell how knowledge was put into action" (Wenger et al. 2002, 168).*

Thus, during my process of inquiry I have not evaluated entrepreneurial learning quantitatively, but applied a narrative form for interpreting and making sense of the entrepreneurial process and the potential entrepreneurial learning. By entering into dialogue with many different actors and listen to their stories, the narrative method offers insights into a diverse number of themes and events that actors in the field make sense of (Czarniawska 1997). The main argument for applying a narrative form to analysis is that *'it is through narrativity that we come to know, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities'* (Somers 1994, 606).

The choice of narrative constructions as an analytical strategy and way of presenting the empirical material is my way of solving the classical task to delimit the study's focus. It is not simply a matter of saying – here is the object of analysis. Instead, in qualitative studies, the choice of how to see and present the empirical, in this case as narratives, means the 'object' of analysis is formed as narratives and will be delimited as such, in that form. That is – narratives are not simply found in the field. I have chosen to investigate what is said and done in the field as narrative forms of knowledge that describes the collective sense making of actors in the

[13] These choices and their implication are further elaborated in Chapter 4

fieldwork (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 1997, Czarniawska 2004 Brown 2006). I elaborate on the narrative method for analysis of the dissertation in Chapter 4.

1.8. A need for a better understanding of the 'how' of incubating activities

The well-known argument for business incubating activities found both in policy reports and academia is that they provide support for immature ventures in finding and utilising resources to minimise risk and maximise survival and growth. *What to provide* is described instrumentally as support services, network, prestige, advice, opportunities, mentoring and physical space. I find that the deliverables and instruments listed are rarely followed by descriptions of *how to perform* the support for growth, how to interact with the entrepreneurs and how to create strong and viable ventures. When it comes to the performative choices and practical advice of how incubating activities are to be operated, policy makers and researchers leave incubating practitioners virtually on their own with the money and the ambitions of society (Mason and Brown 2013, 212). How do the incubating actors identify relevant resources? How are potential entrepreneurial ventures selected? Based on which criteria are the incubator staffs chosen? How are meetings designed? How do incubating actors communicate and collaborate? How are resources evaluated and prioritised? How are resources transferred to entrepreneurs, and how do the entrepreneurs utilise and act upon the resources made available to them? These questions are rarely answered and are perhaps not even discussed (Gibb 1997, Cope 2003). Without considering and handling these questions, the design and performance of incubating activities follow a trial-and-error course, which might explain the recurring poor evaluations in terms of profit and the number of growth companies.

This study shows is that if we do not ask the right questions, we might end up solving the wrong problems. One way of approaching this uncertainty is to ask 'how' questions in addition to 'what' questions. With this, I seek to extend the study of incubating activities beyond the what-to-provide (a supply perspective) and what-do-entrepreneurs-need/want (a demand perspective) towards a how-to-facilitate-entrepreneurial-learning framework (a co-construction perspective).

Qualitative studies may uncover the sometimes silent assumptions that generate tangible structures and interactions within a field (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, 553). During my engagement with the field of the incubating programme, I experienced, as it is common in fieldwork studies, a variety of voices telling different stories about the same processes. Some inconsistencies of contradicting languages and practices did not make sense to a newcomer, but became understandable and to some extent legitimised in light of the underlying values and beliefs of the organisations and actors during the fieldwork. For example, the success of incubating activities is often measured on the survival of the ventures, which cannot be said to equal growth (Rehn et al. 2013) or even entrepreneurial learning (Rae 2006). However, if we perceive incubating activities as political tools, the survival factor is a concrete number that can be reported back to the State to document that something is being done to create growth, and in that light, the criterion makes sense. Other inconsistencies stayed strange to me and in order to make sense of these and find plausible explanations, such experiences from the fieldwork opened up the study as a narrative study of relational constructions and the lack of impact in the field of incubating activities.

1.9. Entrepreneurial processes challenges Best Practice thinking

Most incubator studies have focussed on the structures and content of incubation. *'The aspect of social construction is often marginalized or ignored, particularly in entrepreneurship enquiry'* (Fletcher 2006, 426), and few studies accurately represent the views of incubatees, as Rice 2002, McAdam and Marlow 2011 did, and as this study intended to do, with the opportunity of improving our knowledge about how to collaborate, negotiate and communicate with prospering entrepreneurs.

Many researchers, along with incubation managers and politicians, have looked for best practice approaches to entrepreneurial support (Hackett and Dilts 2004b). Best practice approaches are linked to stories/ documentation of existing organisations that have performed a process successfully and to the belief that organisations with different actors, history, products and context will be able to copy this success story. The underlying understanding of best practice is that science produces objective and truthful knowledge and that society and its actors are coherent and stables entities, ideally differentiated into well-known demographic groups. Consequently, many incubator studies have neglected to differentiate between initiatives that are in fact very different, in order to make nice categories for programme types, programme offerings and entrepreneurs. It has implications for the design of incubating activities, if the understanding of entrepreneurship is limited to a single perspective, and a Best Practice approach to support that fails to embrace the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity of the phenomenon (Audretsch et al 2007, 3). A best practice approach to incubating activities may ignore that entrepreneurial ventures and processes are about variation. As Gartner suggests, *'each emerging organization is different from all previous organizations. These differences, no matter how subtle, need to be considered'* (Gartner 1993, 236). For the same reason it seems difficult to define beforehand what entrepreneurs in general need to learn, who they are, how they should behave or what they are going to receive from a programme – as *"there is no average in entrepreneurship'* (Gartner 1993, 236). An explanation for the lack of constructive research is suggested by the following quote, which indicates how the approach to evaluating and conceptualising support has been misleading:

> *'The quest for definitive "laws", "theories" and "models" which characterizes entitative thinking, based on identifying fixed characteristics and traits, has paid little attention to exploring the human processes of how people actually learn and work in entrepreneurial ways, partly because it forces the researcher to play the role and use the language of "objective scientist" in measuring and analysing an external, factual reality"* (Rae 2000, 148)

Categories of entrepreneurs are good for customisation to specify services to specific industry - and incubating activities offered from a delivery perspective (Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, 119). The issue is, however, related to a more generic problem of science, as pointed out by John Law (2004). He posits that contemporary paradigms for capturing categories such as individuals, business and science, might restrict our ability to see other potential categories, for example narratives, and how they perform in the field of the incubation industry. Although contemporary paradigms and categories may make it easier for us to grasp and talk about concepts and understand each other, it *'also hides its underlying complexities'* (Cooper 2005, 1689) about what incubating activities really intend to do – namely change the ways of action and make entrepreneurs reflect upon and learn from their own experiences to increase their capacity to act. The potential problem is that most people seek to avoid uncertainty and simplify their decision-making by choosing between two or three models and thus ignoring other potential and integrative solutions (Hill et al. 2010, 619).

1.10. Contribution - a relational learning perspective on incubating activities

I have extended the argument about the everydayness of entrepreneuring from Steyaert (2004) to the processes of incubating, as it principally involves the same start-up process within a context of targeted support and with additional actors. The peculiar aspect of the everyday practices is that the closer we get to the processes, the messier it is, which contradicts traditional perceptions of organisational studies as an activity that we engage in to optimise planning and performance (Czarniawska 2008). Classical management and organisation theory is concerned with existing organisations, not with organisational actors striving to be something else, as entrepreneurial ventures do (Hjorth 2007, 715). Understanding incubating activities is from this perspective not about model building or one specific order to rule them all; it is about accepting organisational (venture) creation as relational, messy and local and accepting that it is in this mess of interactions and dialogues that potentiality is created (Steyaert 2004, 13). The reason for embracing the mess and pointing towards other stories of the field instead of looking the other way, although it may at times seem easier, is that understanding processes in their local setting makes it possible to change them, which is the ultimate ambition of this dissertation. As a result, the study is a close analysis of some of the intertwined, challenging and complex processes of *making* the makers of the world that usually are not told in incubation literature.

The relationship between the entrepreneurial learning perspective and the empirical fieldwork has brought a tension to light – a tension that suggests that impact in the form of learning is taken for granted or silent[14] in the field. This interaction has given me insights into the many barriers to collaboration and openness – in this dissertation referred to as clashes between narratives in the field. To some degree these clashes seem to inhibit entrepreneurial learning as a potential or outcome of incubating activities, and answering the research question is an attempt to understand and explain barriers to entrepreneurial learning, and suggest an alternative language - narratives for interacting in and changing some of the existing practices in the field.

A relational study of entrepreneurial interactions with a focus on experiences and learning contributes with much needed knowledge about how value is created for entrepreneurial actors in the context of incubating activity. This kind of knowledge helps us to explore the paradox of entrepreneurial actors in need of support met by educators and advisors who do not know how to effect actual change (Johansson 1997, 12) by offering a learning perspective and asking how entrepreneurs learn and how they make decisions based on previous experience. One way we can investigate this empirically and achieve this understanding is through narratives (Wenger et al 2002). With this kind of knowledge, practitioners may be able to design and perform incubating activities with a relational focus on how to enable entrepreneurial actors to co-construct and gain experience with organising entrepreneurial ventures, to reflect on experience as a day-to-day practice and to learn.

This dissertation will not advocate that business incubating initiatives are to be closed down or praise the governmental/private/corporate efforts to create a stronger entrepreneurial community. Instead, the dissertation argues that historical overviews of business incubation studies show that despite the lack of knowledge of what works to support entrepreneurship, business incubating activities, understood as public and private initiatives to enhance and support entrepreneurship and create growth, are here to stay (Gibb 1997, Norrman 2008, Gibb 2009, Lewis et al. 2011, Bruneel et al. 2012), and that we might as well make the most of the resources spent. The dissertation therefore contributes with much needed insights into how to collaborate with entrepreneuring actors for the sake of entrepreneurial learning, as both a process and an outcome.

Economic and institutional theories do not capture incubating activities as processes and as a social phenomenon consisting of inter-related and interacting entities seeking to collaborate in a specific time and context (culture, values, markets, environment, and competition). Such theories miss out on how new ventures

[14] The concept of silent or silenced (Hjorth 2003, Hjorth 2005) is used throughout the dissertation to present a silent relationship narrative that become visible when I look at the field from a different perspective than the managerial – in this case the perspective of relational constructionism. Hjorth (2003) discusses what is silenced and what is silent. Something can be silenced (as an active intervention), and something can remain silent (which is passive; something remains unsaid without being actively silenced).

are created from relations (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 36), which therefore constitutes a gap in the literature. The research side of incubation and entrepreneurship support tends to rely on quantitative methods and calculations, which leaves less room for researchers to ask relevant questions for understanding the input-output mechanisms of support.

The relational aspect of incubating practice and everyday activities, the interaction about co-construction, is to a large degree marginalised or ignored, both in the incubation literature and in practice (Fletcher 2006, 425). I posit that the field of incubation studies and policy practice can benefit from greater knowledge about how entrepreneurs can learn from incubating processes in order to become self-managed growth firms. The relational focus on entrepreneurial learning is one possible way of constructing realities and relations from the empirical material, which gives voice to entrepreneurial learning in an incubating setting through the lenses of relational constructionism (Hosking 2011, 59) and the European tradition of entrepreneurship research (Gartner 2013). The analytical and methodological approaches applied to the empirical conduct constitute a theoretical and methodological contribution for understanding, designing and performing business incubating activities. The motivation of relational constructionism – and, thus, of this inquiry – is *'to explore processes that could enable and support multiple local forms of life rather than imposing one dominant rationality of others'* (Hosking 2011, 60).

The study centres on business assistance targeted at start-up processes of entrepreneuring actors and in the *interactions* (how they work together to create value to the venture) between the support provider (advisors and incubation managers) and the recipient (entrepreneuring actors). Both entrepreneurship policy and the incubation literature have little to say about how the relationship (how they perceive each other and what they expect from each other) and interaction between incubator and incubatee are supposed to be initiated, constructed and maintained. This means that there is a risk that the supply side actors, who are also the designers of incubating activities do not articulate the (relational) mechanisms they expect to drive the relationship and collaboration or what elements the interaction consists of. I acknowledge that even though the physical space facilities, camps and educational material are important as a setting and frame of incubating activities, it is the assumption of this study that the impact of incubating activities is achieved through activities, relationships, expectations, learning and different levels and types of interactions and collective experiences – emphasising the relational focus of the study.

It is anticipated by the researcher that the importance of (inter)action and relationship are generic to the incubating processes of incubation in general, and I therefore claim that the dynamics and mechanisms of relationship and interaction are relevant to a variety of incubating activities – both programmes, investments, events and conferences and office subsidies. This is another way of arguing for the relevance of my empirical findings at a general level of business incubating activities and not only yo the specific context of my field study. With this dissertation about incubating initiatives as an empirical field, I aim to contribute to the knowledge about how incubating practices are performed by actors of the incubation industry and the barriers to entrepreneurial learning - by interacting with and observing both the development of entrepreneuring actors and the work of advisors, investors and processes of incubating activities.

1.11. Delimitations

Working in a cross-disciplinary field it is important to stress that a study like this cannot cover all of the academic fields that might seem relevant. The dissertation bridges fields as economics, innovation studies, psychology, pedagogic, and apply ethnographic and sociological methods, but the primary theoretical scope remains to reflect the academic background of the researcher, coming from management and organisation studies.

The theoretical approach to entrepreneurship of the dissertation differs from the classical idea of entrepreneurship as a trait or specific personality that some people and others not (Gartner 2013). With this perspective I do not study the personality of the entrepreneurs nor heroic actions that some successful entrepreneurs perform – rather I look into what can be said to be entrepreneurial actions that drives a venture forward and how they can be encouraged and facilitated (Steyaert 2007, Hjorth et al. 2008). It is my understanding that the entrepreneurial actions that *make* a new venture are specific to the venture, its context, time and product – but still that all kind of human beings can perform entrepreneuring activities.

The focus of the dissertation is the relational interactions of incubating activities, which means that I assume that if solid and sound relationships are constructed, entrepreneurial learning as increased capacity for entrepreneuring from the incubating process is likely to happen. I do not evaluate the concrete ideas, projects or teams of the empirical material – even though it obviously is a barrier to learning if the idea is poor, the technology does not work or the team incompetent. The taken for granted assumption of the researcher is therefore that the entrepreneurial idea/ project is potential and qualified for entrepreneuring.

It fell outside the framework of this dissertation to go into the various fields of social and psychological theories about how to enter into, manage, organise or facilitate dialogue, such as appreciative inquiry, active listening, collaborative consulting, team building, transformative dialogues (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 68). However, one of the key points for designers and performers of incubating activities to take away from the dissertation could be the acknowledgement of entrepreneuring activities, and thus also incubating activities, as cross-disciplinary and hence as much a social, relational and psychological process as an economical and managerial endeavour.

As an industrial PhD student I had to follow the different rounds of participants. I did not choose or select participants, as the total population of participants had to be involved in the study.

The fieldwork material contains an almost endless series of great quotes, fragments of events and stories about incubating activities, entrepreneurs, technologies and advisors – and the in-betweens of business incubating processes. However, it is not possible to give all stories a voice within the frame of this text, and I have chosen to present an analysis of barriers to entrepreneurial learning from a relational perspective through narratives. I have chosen this focus because I find that the most important analysis to present is the lack of attention towards relations and entrepreneurial learning. I have structured my presentation of the fieldwork as narratives, as a method for writing up the large amount of interviews, observations, field notes and material from the Accelerator programme, but the dissertation does not aim at contributing to narrative theory or method. Nor is the dissertation an attempt of an evaluation of what has happened and whether the customers are satisfied – but rather a study of how things happened and why it did not happen. I am aware that many things (relational constructions) can happen outside my range as a fieldworker, but I can only study and analyse what I have seen, listened to and been part of.

1.12. Organisation of the dissertation

After the introduction chapter the dissertation is structured in three parts - followed by a concluding chapter;

Part I Context of the dissertation

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the phenomenon of entrepreneurship policy and its raison être. Entrepreneurship policy is presented as based on a political demand for growth, good intentions and assumptions about entrepreneurial needs and how to satisfy them (Norrman 2008). The chapter also contains an empirical demonstration to show a straight line from entrepreneurship policy and political visions to the birth of the Accelerator programme of the fieldwork.

In chapter 3 I introduce the history of the Incubation industry and its services, in order to present the large, multi-facetted and influential industry of support for entrepreneurs. A literature overview of incubator studies and what incubating activities are is also given, together with a discussion of what it means to support, which focuses on the specific relationship between advisor and entrepreneur.

Part II Methodology and entrepreneurial learning

Chapter 4 presents the methodological approach of the dissertation. It clarifies the rationale for studying incubating practices through the lens of relational constructionism (Hosking 2011) and applying an ethnographic inspired approach to a social science study. A narrative approach (Czarniawska 2004) to analysis is presented as the outcome of seeing incubating practices as local-social-historical constructions. The industrial PhD framework and the case of the Accelerator programme are presented before the characteristics of organizational ethnography and fieldwork is discussed as suitable to this industrial PhD project. The fieldwork work is inspired by organizational ethnography, as the set-up of the industrial PhD programme allows for this type of access and rich and nuanced material collection.

Chapter 5 presents theories of entrepreneuring (Steyaert 2007) an entrepreneurial learning framework, primarily inspired by Rae (2006, 2007), but also building upon the field of entrepreneurial learning in general. I present theories on what entrepreneurial learning to develop an entrepreneurial learning definition, to be explicit about the kind of actions and progress that I have been searching for in my fieldwork. Entrepreneurial learning is presented as relational, dynamic and contextual – and with regard to the learning task and goal of incubating activities it is argued that; *Entrepreneurial learning is a capacity change in the variety of ways to perform the pursuit of opportunities and organising and managing these opportunities - without regard to the resources currently controlled*. This is a theoretically and empirically based definition by the researcher, relevant to the incubator context.

Part III Analysis – a field of narratives

Chapter 6 – Actor Narratives and their interrelatedness - is the first of four analytical chapters, all together presenting a multi-voiced analysis constructed from a narrative approach to write-up of the empirical material. The main actors of the field are introduced as four different narratives interacting in the field. It is shown that despite many similarities and agreement on the support purpose, these narratives clash in a manner, which acts as barrier to entrepreneurial learning

Chapter 7 – Action Narratives: from Best Practice to Blame games. Through the constructions of Action Narratives this chapter presents the main arguments, stories and justifications in the field for methods and performance – meaning why actors are acting as they do. The chapter seeks to demonstrate and explain some of the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the field.

Chapter 8 presents two empirical demonstrations, which show that it is possible to act outside the established Actor and Action Narratives in the field, and collaborate and learn from incubating activities in a way that strengthens the venture and the entrepreneur. These demonstrations inspire my suggestions for alternative narratives in the field – a Future Practice Narrative – that also serves as recommendation for alternative ways of thinking about support and designing initiatives for entrepreneurial acceleration the incubating field.

Chapter 9 presents a Silent Relationship Narrative, and suggestions for a relational learning approach to incubating activities. Based on a relational reading of the field, in search for entrepreneurial learning, this chapter seeks to show what the field is not talking about – the silent stories – which still have a huge influence on actual performance of incubating activities

The dissertation is ended with a concluding chapter 10, which also contains the main contribution of the research journey – five barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context

PART I Context of the dissertation

The purpose of Part I of the dissertation is to present the context of business incubating activities as the theoretical, historical and local context of the fieldwork. Chapter 2 is an introduction to entrepreneurship policy and chapter 3 an introduction to business incubation and advisory of entrepreneurial ventures.

I find that the implications of being a highly prioritized policy object, entrepreneurship policy is seldom part of articles and research publications on incubating activities besides the acknowledged importance of and huge interest in promoting entrepreneurship. To understand the narrative reality, construction and resulting form of incubating activities, I have found it useful to look into the intentionality and ambitions behind entrepreneurship policy, as a relatively new policy domain (Dahlstrand and Stevenson 2010) and also to understand the kind knowledge and resources that often characterises their foundations.

It is valuable to this study to see incubating activities as part of a sector or rather an industry, what I refer to as the incubation industry. The incubation industry is a relational setting (Somers 1994, 624), a community with numerous actors, institutions, narratives and practices, but still with a variety of interests that influence the way support is interpreted and designed. The relational constructionist perspective of the dissertation means that I perceive the rationales for interaction in the field of entrepreneurial support, to form a foundation of a narrative reality and hence actions of the field (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 33), because it is perceived as reality by the actors of the field.

Chapter 2: Entrepreneurship policy – and the birth of the Accelerator programme

2.1. Abstract

This chapter contains an introduction to entrepreneurship policy theory – its purpose, rationality and what guides the actions of policy makers and therefore also the designers and managers of various incubating activities. Entrepreneurship policy is here positioned as a political tool rather than a specific theory, guided by political intentions and goals and some of the established 'truths' in the field. This forms the basis for a discussion of the kind of knowledge – or the lack of it – that informs and drives entrepreneurship policy. The chapter also includes fieldwork material, to exemplify how the intentions and assumptions of policy writings and spoken language can be said to mirror the praxis of the Accelerator programme. I have chosen to tell this story from the fieldwork, because it may give the reader a sense of the interesting correlation between intentional entrepreneurship policy theory and the practical and experimental construction of incubating activities. This is particularly interesting with regard to the common frustration in the field – of not being able to explain why programmes, initiatives and offerings do not 'make effect' as expected.

2.2. Policy level – compensating for market failures

Every now and then during the last 50 years, it has been part of the political agenda in the Western world to boost innovation and entrepreneurship (Michael and Pearce 2009). Entrepreneurship policy is a relatively new phenomenon, but stems from previous SME policy – also focused on how to create a fruitful environment and support system for young/ immature/ small ventures, even though the perspective was more about protecting and strengthening the existing (Dahlstrand and Stevenson 2010). Despite problems with producing hard data to prove that training or other types of incubating activities pays, initiating incubating activities remained an important political tool (Murdock 2012). Policymakers in large parts of the world and their development partners have invested in a range of initiatives to create favourable conditions for growth companies, and incubating activities belong in the landscape of interventions that link innovation and entrepreneurship. In 2007, based on Lundström and Stevenson's work, Hoffmann identified 24 different policy areas[15] that

[15] 24 policy areas: Entry barriers/deregulation, Access to foreign markets, Technology transfer, Private demand conditions, Procurement regulation, Loans, Wealth and bequest tax, Business angels, Venture capital, Capital taxes, Stock markets, Traditional business education, Entrepreneurship education, Restart possibilities, Entrepreneurship infrastructure (public), Entrepreneurship infrastructure (private), Personal income tax, Business tax and fiscal

influenced entrepreneurship in Denmark and formed the basis of the Danish entrepreneurship policy (Hoffman 2007, 152). Such categorisation of entrepreneurship facilitation is an example of how much effort is being put into the area, but also how many influencing factors entrepreneurial activities are anticipated to have. It is not all policy areas that relate to the kind of entrepreneurial support – incubating activities –, which this dissertation focuses on. I regard incubating activities to be related to the areas of public entrepreneurship infrastructure and also to entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial motivation. Lundström and Stevenson (2005) conclude that although there is agreement about which conditions are important to entrepreneurial activity, there is little knowledge about which precise combination will produce a desired result in any particular region (Lundström and Stevenson 2005, 7).

Even though it is important to distinguish between entrepreneurship and innovation, the policy thinking of entrepreneurship support is often linked to terms of innovation, innovation systems and innovation-based regional development (Auerswald 2007, 23). Innovation in particular is seen as the trigger of the virtuous development circle of;

- **Creativity** - that develops into
- **New products and services** - which are in demand from customers and thus increase
- **Industry competitiveness, create workplaces, incomes and tax revenues** to be reinvested for societal gains (Lundström and Stevenson 2005, 11-13).

It is the actions that we designate as entrepreneuring that makes innovation actionable; indicating that innovation in itself is not enough to realize the much wanted growth and workplaces (Hjorth 2013).
'*Government and policy makers often see the SME community as the source of tiny acorns from which large oak trees can grow*' (Thorpe et al. 2009, 201), but as mentioned, previous SME policy have had a less focus on encouraging the new. Recent entrepreneurship policies are created to alter existing, narrow focussed institutional agendas and create environments and ecosystems, which in generate more opportunities and greater incentive to follow them (Murdock 2012, 884).
According to Auerswald (2007), the role for government intervention only exists if market failures that impede the ability to pursue opportunities exist. Low barriers to entry and exit are often mentioned as necessary conditions for economic development, and for these reasons barriers to business entry and exit is an important policy task (Hoffman 2007, 150). For instance, compared to the United States and Japan, the European region is said to have an inferior entrepreneurial culture and to suffer from an *'innovation deficit'* because of the lack

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initiatives, Societal security discrimination, Administrative burdens, Labour market regulation, Bankruptcy regulation, Entrepreneurial motivation, Incentives for specific groups and Communication about heroes (Hoffman 2007, 152).

of collaboration between industry and academic institutions; hence, it has become an explicit policy task to modify this culture (Looy et al. 2003, 180; Dahlstrand and Stevenson 2010). According to Henrekson and Roine (2007) the awareness of entrepreneurship as a career option has been low in Europe, as the fear of failure is high. Policy initiatives concerning entrepreneurial education therefore aim to change these cultural barriers to entrepreneurship by changing the new generation's attitude and skills and increase their inclination to pursuing an entrepreneurial career (Henrekson and Roine 2007, 64). Today good governance is widely accepted as a prerequisite for supporting and stimulating entrepreneurship activity with a positive impact on economic growth (Méndez-Picazo et al. 2012).

A general perception in the institutional entrepreneurship literature is that environment/ structure/ culture discourages entrepreneurs from bringing inventions to market (Sørensen 2007). It is furthermore anticipated that many inventions at universities, in large organisations and in the garages of the citizens, are not utilised and explored because they are not discovered or adequately tailored to local capabilities and resources. Regional policymakers therefore face the challenge of motivating, identifying and adapting inventions in the region and creating conditions that allow inventions and ideas to be coupled with entrepreneurship (Aernoudt 2004, 128). This approach is based on the assumption that (entrepreneurial) opportunities do not present themselves as ready-made business concepts but need to be developed further (Korsgaard 2011, 664), and that public policy is capable of removing obstacles to development and creating conditions for profitable entrepreneuring (Murdock 2012). All these arguments about unexplored opportunities and barriers to entrepreneurial adventures legitimize the actions of policy makers.

The economic rationale for public intervention relies on an existence of distortions and market failures (Aldrich and Kim 2007, 8) and a consistent belief that '*there is a connection between high-growth firms and productivity growth*' (Hoffman 2007, 143). However, it is difficult to find a simple correlation between the level of entrepreneurial activity, the number of workplaces and the degree of economic growth (Lundström and Stevenson 2005, 267, Henrekson and Johansson 2010, 240), nor has it been made clear how incubators are capable of compensating for market failures when it comes to innovation and technology-based entrepreneurship (Phan et al. 2005, 166).

2.3. Entrepreneurs are made, not simply born

Incubating activities are most often designed as structural and facilitating initiatives aimed at supporting entrepreneurial activity and growth. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this dissertation operates with a broad definition that understands incubating activities as local and global, virtual and physical, scheduled and non-scheduled, planned and less planned. In the previous section it was described how public interventions are based on political and economic assumptions about market failure[16]. This implies that there is a supply of entrepreneuring actors ready to take advantage of opportunities, if only barriers were removed and resources made available (Storey 2003). Hjorth (2003, 2007) finds such assumptions to be rooted in a traditional managerial and dispositional (traits) approach to entrepreneurship studies, described by Gartner (1988) as anticipating that stable individual traits lead to entrepreneurial activity, independent of context, and the anticipation that there are potentially successful entrepreneurs out there to be found (Gartner 1988, Sørensen 2007). The dispositional stance has met much criticism from the behavioural and contextual approaches to entrepreneurship, which argues that *structures* are the driving factors of entrepreneurial activity (Gartner 1988, Aldrich 1999). Another reason why the traits approach of trying to characterise a variety of personal attributes to successful entrepreneurship and the idea of entrepreneurs as natural born has been criticised, is that it underestimates the potential of actors to acquire entrepreneurial skills through learning from experience (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, 266). If entrepreneurial skills are part of some individuals' DNA and not others, there is little policy makers can do to stimulate entrepreneurial activity, unless they really want to interfere with their citizens' privacy!

In his comprehensive study of the Danish population, from 1980-1997, on how bureaucratic structures influence entrepreneurial activity, Sørensen (2007) concludes, '*While dispositional factors may also drive entrepreneurial activity, context matters. Entrepreneurs are made, not simply born*' (Sørensen 2007, 409). From a policy view, this finding is fundamental to the traits vs. behaviour discussion as it makes room for a Schumpeterian approach that views opportunities as created, implying that entrepreneuring actors are co-creators of opportunities. Thus, creating a stimulating environment for entrepreneurial activity does matter, and structural features of the population affect the supply of entrepreneurs, not only the availability of opportunities, as would be implied by a Kirznerian approach. That something can and should be done to stimulate entrepreneurial activity is the general raison étre of entrepreneurship policy makers.

2.4. Policy level favours technology-based entrepreneurship

The fieldwork of the dissertation is based on incubating activities targeted technology-based entrepreneurs, and for the same reason it might be worth noting why technology-based types of entrepreneuring, in opposition to service- or art-based types of entrepreneuring, very often have been favoured by policy makers. As mentioned in the introducing chapter technology-based firms are seen as a highly potential force for

[16] This is also what encourage private organisations to create entrepreneurship programmes and offerings

economic development and significant contributors to competitive advantages and GDP growth, and it is anticipated to have potential for higher scalability and make larger revenues than most other industries (Audretsch and Beckmann 2007). Hence, many policy makers all over the world view the technology sector as the main generator of growth companies (Warren et al. 2009, 482). Consequently, there has been great interest in identifying factors, variables and conditions that foster technology-based entrepreneurial processes and contribute to their success (Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, 111). This strategy has been applied in the most of the OECD countries (OECD 2010). Just recently this strategy is up for debate, as new research shows that technology-based companies are not over-represented in statistics of growth companies (Mason and Brown 2013).

Nevertheless, some efforts have also gone into identifying special barriers to entrepreneurial success based on development of technology. It is anticipated that many potential technology-based ideas/projects never reach the market, and that many established companies need support to survive or to become a high-growth company – for reasons as lack business acumen and interest (Prodan 2007). Auerswald makes a strong point about the barriers to *technological* entrepreneuring, as it is not the market failure of competition and knowledge spillover's that matter but the market failures related to information asymmetry and uncertainty (Auerswald 2007, 25). What is suggested here is that *favourable conditions* for technology-based entrepreneurial actors are not necessarily created by the introduction of new rules, tax regulations or funding opportunities but have to do with the challenge of contracting, entering into collaboration and connecting with other resourceful actors.

Technology-based innovation and entrepreneurship are subject to systematic uncertainties and information asymmetries that make communication difficult and contracting costly. Auerswald stresses that technology-based entrepreneurs have weaknesses with regard to communicating and organising to acquire customers and funding. This can be formulated as the challenge of communicating across different communities of practice (Bouwen 2001) or, in an economic language, of tech-based entrepreneurs being burdened with *'solving complex coordination problems of contracting'* (Auerswald 2007, 23). From a relational constructionist perspective, which I return to in chapter 4, this is yet another way of saying that how to organise the entrepreneurial process of making the company real to the world - is one of the most important learning tasks of entrepreneuring actors (Gartner and Carter 2003, 198), whether it is tech-based or not. Related to the challenges of creating impact of incubating activities, Auerswald's finding are interesting, as it questions whether existing policy initiatives are targeting the relevant needs of technology-based entrepreneurs.

2.5. Policy intentions and assumptions

Entrepreneurship policy wording on business incubation is loaded promises of growth and related to expected outcomes that will occur - provided the right structures/surroundings/resources are available. The assumptions of policy makers are that adding capital is necessarily good and that adding knowledge is relevant (Murdock 2012, 883). However, '*there is little hard evidence that growth companies need assistance over and above what they can find via their normal commercial and transactional social networks. Indeed it can be argued that such characteristics of growth companies are such that they will be excellent in seeking these services out within the marketplace'… 'Overall there is very little evidence that growth businesses need public support*' (Gibb 2000, 27). In the analysis I will return to this matter of 'the needs' of entrepreneurs as taken for granted by the actors who are trying to support them. Gibb (2000) explains his critique by arguing that academia has contributed to the idea that certain actors such as advisors, accountants, bankers and even large companies are suitable sources of advice for entrepreneuring actors, although little is known about the direction and quality of the advice (Gibb 2000, 29).

According to Norrman (2008), reading through entrepreneurship policy literature gives the impression that policy initiatives are expressions of goals rather than based on scientific knowledge. In her dissertation Norrman (2008) stresses that the concept of entrepreneurship policy theory '*does not represent a research-based theory, but rather the intention upon which a policy or programme is funded*' (Norrman 2008, 27). The field of entrepreneurial support in the sense of incubating activities for innovative start-ups is still rather young (10-20 years), and the understanding of what incubating activities are, and how they are capable of encouraging and facilitating processes of entrepreneurial development, has been rather blurry. It therefore seems likely that some policy initiatives could have been based on incorrect assumptions, because the politicians and planners of incubating activities lacked a more solid knowledge base for their decisions (Norrman 2008). This has, as previously described in chapter 1, led to widespread criticism and debate about whether incubating activities do any good at all. Some researchers, including Shane (2009), have argued that encouraging more people to become entrepreneurs is bad public policy, because only the high-quality start-ups really generate economic value. In a recent article, Mason and Brown (2013) argue that Shane's criticism is too simplistic, because he fails to offer any instructions for *how* to achieve quality start-ups, and also that that some of his recommendations for tearing down public policies are misguided. Mason and Brown aim to side-step the discussion about what is most effective in terms of promoting growth and work places and instead '*focus on the policies that governments, rightly or wrongly, are actually implementing*.' Their basic assumption follows Shane (2009): that entrepreneurship policies need to focus more explicitly on generating high-growth potentials, but like the present dissertation, they seek to '*engage in a much more detailed discussion of how this objective might actually be achieved and implemented*' (Mason and Brown 2013, 212).

Mason and Brown's article is a good example that the field of entrepreneurship support is still learning, and based on their empirical research they formulate an interesting critique of existing policy approaches, which I will briefly summarise;

- First, with reference to Henrekson and Johansson (2010) and Harrison and Leitch (2008), they reject the assumption that technology-based companies are the main source of growth.
- Second, with reference to Acs et al. (2008) and Anyadike-Danes et al. (2009), Mason and Brown state that high-growth firms are not, as often assumed by policy makers, young companies; hence, older and more established companies are more likely to produce jobs than the gazelles. '*The presumption that support for early-stage technology firms will create significant numbers of High-Growth firms therefore goes against the empirical evidence*' (Mason and Brown 2013, 214).
- Third, with reference to Bryson et al. (2004) and Tuli et al. (2007), they suggest that it is no longer appropriate to focus on the manufacturing sector as a specific source of high-growth companies, as the lines between products and services is growing increasingly blurry. Mason and Brown thus outline a line of argumentation, which claims that policy makers have been focussing too narrowly, looking for high-growth companies in the wrong places (Mason and Brown 2013, 222).

These findings suggests that entrepreneurship policy development is still a work in progress, and also that markets, technologies and customers are continually changing in a way that makes it hard to state definitively which industries or what kind of ventures should be targeted, or at which stage in their life cycle. Thus it is my understanding that there is still a need for discussing and testing appropriate forms of entrepreneurial support in the attempts to strengthen the entrepreneurial capacity and ecosystems around the world.

2.6. Traditional perceptions of needs and entrepreneuring actors prevail in policy

As entrepreneurship research has developed over the last century, attention has followed several leads ranging from traits, personality, cultural background, family structure, structural features, environment, processes, motivation etc. (Gartner 1988, Fletcher 2006). Entrepreneurship policy theory obviously has been informed by the shifts and movements in entrepreneurship literature, but for some reasons the assumptions about the entrepreneur or the entrepreneurial team have remained relatively static. The result is that economic theory and entrepreneurship policy strategies, incubation theory presents the individual actor as either the rational decision-maker (who will act if the structure, resources and facilities are available to him/her), or the incapable (with regard to monetisation) inventor who needs help to succeed. As a consequence, the entrepreneur is viewed as a static (a known character in terms of skills and personality) and passive recipient of support. This means that the interest of political decision-makers and incubator managers has been focussed on a certain structure, network and context that are likely to create growth based on successful entrepreneurship. In such a framework, the recipient of access to resources and the actions produced from support interactions is taken for granted or left unquestioned. Policy makers, designers of entrepreneurial support and incubating managers act as if they already know the needs of entrepreneurial actors – and how to satisfy them. The mentality seems to be that there is no need to ask people questions they cannot answer – as entrepreneurial actors do not know what is best for them.

It is important to stress that this is not an argument for only studying the individual level of incubating activities. It is equally problematic to focus solely on the individual level, typically the founding entrepreneur or the entrepreneurial team as isolated agents, as much entrepreneurship literature does with an emphasis on prior experience and decision-making capabilities (Drakopoulou and Anderson 2007, 342). The individual level is just as important as geographic specifics and context-dependent resources, making entrepreneurship and incubation of entrepreneurs a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Cooper and Park 2008, 28). '*The process of knowledge-driven entrepreneurship, i.e. the genesis and development of high-tech entrepreneurial activities cannot be confined to individual entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurship finds its origins and growth in a multitude of interactions, which unfold among a variety of actors*' (Looy et al. 2003, 191).

The lack of interest in the individual level of incubation, both from a political and a scientific perspective might reflect the fact that most design and evaluation of programmes for entrepreneurs are *supply-led* and not necessarily a product of explicit entrepreneur needs, values and learning requirements (Leitch et al. 2012, 738). The problem with such a distinction, as pointed out by Fletcher (2006), '*is that they encourage dualism and polarity, rather than inter-related understandings of how things are in the world*' (Fletcher 2006, 425). On the other side, advisors for example are also subject of static academic assumptions from researchers in the field. Gibb (2000) points out that certain key stakeholders in the support system are taken for granted by both activity providers and academics - as effective sources of advice to immature ventures at all times (Gibb 2000, 28). He furthermore criticises academic research for being ignorant and points to a set of assumptions, which he calls myths, about how the world works, which have served as the basis for policy actions (Gibb 2000, 14).

In line with this critique, we may say that incubation practice is influenced by the ontological and epistemological starting point of the supply side of incubation – which means that policy makers and incubating managers operate within a managerial understanding of entrepreneurship (Hjorth 2005, 387). It may be a problem if we forget that there is a distinction between entrepreneurial and managerial functions of business processes. Traditional institutionalism is preoccupied with existing organisations – not with those that have a need to be something else. The implication of traditional management thinking seems to be that '*soon enough creation processes are taken over by the strategic concepts and a definitions of what a start-up is and how it should be managed, efficiently circulated in most capitalist economies*' (Hjorth 2007, 718). Hjorth (2005) argues that entrepreneuring activities have both a strategic (managerial and theoretical) and a tactical (organising and local) side, and that the field delimits themselves from the tactical interplays of local creation by only favouring the reductionist and simplistic view on entrepreneurship that the management literature traditionally represents. The epistemological stances of institutional, economic and network theory are dominant in policy documents, takes certain interdependencies for granted (such as what an expected outcome will be), being normative (with regard to what actors are like, and how they should behave) and goal-oriented (rather than process-oriented) and risk overlooking that the initiatives are based on intentions and not research-based theory (Norrman 2008). Similarly, Gibb argues that much management and business education is designed for large corporate businesses, which impacts the use and effects – or the lack of it – of such education in entrepreneurial processes aimed at creating new ventures (Gibb 2009, 210). Both Gibb and Hjorth suggest that the traditional approaches to incubating activities, both in practice and academia, could benefit from perspectives that take in the processual, tactical and educational aspects of entrepreneurial support.

In his article about technological entrepreneurship from 2007, Prodan writes about entrepreneurship support in a way that I find to be symptomatic of the way in which policy writings and entrepreneurship theory present incubating activities. Although the description is some kind of defining ideal, it does not question whether the incubator is capable of delivering the service, or whether that is indeed the ambition of the incubating actors (management).

Prodan states about the incubator that;

> '*It **provides** entrepreneurs with expertise, networks and tools they need to make their ventures successful. Incubation is defined as a business support process that **accelerates** the successful development of start-up and fledging companies by **providing** entrepreneurs with an array of target resources and services. These services are usually **developed or orchestrated by incubation management** and **offered** both in the incubator and through its networks of contacts. An incubator's main goal is **to produce** successful firms that will leave the programme financially viable and freestanding*' (Prodan 2007, 29; my emphasis).

The bold-face words highlight how the language positions the entrepreneurial venture as the receiving, passive actor (the bird in the nest) that will be raised to success. It seems implicit that it is possible to *deliver* the needed resources, that the resources *provided* are relevant and useful, and that the entrepreneurial actors will explore them. I claim that this kind of language produces certain kind of expectations on both sides of the relationship between incubator (as providing and accelerating) and incubatee (as being a passive recipient that is accelerated). Gartner argues that *'the vocabulary used to talk about entrepreneurship is critical to the development of a theory about this phenomenon'* (Gartner 1993, 232) and points to this as relevant as we go from the narrative reality of policy to the narrative reality of incubating activities. This means that it matters how we speak about purpose and goal, and which tools we imagine to use to get there – and also, who or what is suppose to act – and who is suppose to receive? I argue that a large part of the written and spoken language of entrepreneurship policy implies that the needs of entrepreneurs are well known and it is a central argument of this dissertation that assumptions and language at policy level have considerable influence on policy priorities and the design, performance and management of entrepreneurship policy. That is also an argument for my choice of the narrative approach, as it allows us to get into the complex details of needs and the practice of incubating activities (Hjorth 2007, 713).

I demonstrate this in the following section in which I present quotes from two interviews with actors from the fieldwork. It illustrates how the entrepreneurship policy intentions and assumptions I have just described in the previous sections are quite similar to the stated intentions and assumptions of the incubator management and programme consultants of the Accelerator programme. With this demonstration I aim to show how the assumptions and stories in the field, about how the world looks like and entrepreneurial needs are strong and well-established.

2.6.1. Empirical demonstration: The design and creation of the Accelerator programme

In 2006, the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science announced a call for a programme that was different from the traditional standardised public support packages, and which was to target Danish elite entrepreneurs. The programme was intended to be more instructive (hands-on) with regards to making a business grow and not only focussed on good ideas. I the autumn of 2010, six months into the fieldwork period, I interviewed two different actors involved in designing and carrying out that particular policy programme, who told me their story of the birth of the Accelerator programme. These interviews were made as expert interviews and had duration of two hours – see Appendix B) for interview guide and preliminary reflections. The interviews offer insights into some of the assumptions the Accelerator programme was created from; a need for more entrepreneuring growth ventures and product differentiation as the main focus for the selection of companies. As the quotes show, the programme design and execution was, and continues to be, a well-planned trial-and-error experiment, similar to creating a new company – a start-up!

The respondent of the following excerpt was one of the first advisors to work for the Accelerator programme. By the time of the interview he had been part of the programme for three years and had recently announced that he was leaving the programme for another job.

Interviewer: *This idea from the Ministry about something that needs to be turned upside down or be something different, did that came from a notion that the existing approach wasn't working or…?*

Advisor: *I think that what really triggered the process was that somebody discovered that if you looked statistically at entrepreneurs in Denmark, we had a very, very big share of entrepreneurs and nascent entrepreneurs per capita actually just as big as the great innovation hubs in the world, like Silicon Valley and Israel. The observation was that these small entrepreneurs grew to a size of 10-15 people, and then they hit some kind of glass ceiling. This meant that very few of these entrepreneurs became internationally based. The Ministry thought that this indicated that we [Denmark] are really good at getting ideas, good at founding small companies but less proficient in taking them abroad, and a need for some kind of push for internationalisation was identified (…) For that reason it was decided to do something else with an emphasis on internationalisation. At that point in time, I think only the Danish Trade Council did any kind of support with that purpose, and the Ministry made a call saying, 'Give us a shot on how to spend 32 million kroner on making a focussed push for a specific group of companies, and not a broad initiative for everybody.'*

Interviewer: *Do you remember 1, 2, 3 or 4 assumptions or lines that you kept repeating during the work designing the programme, as a form of 'this is how we perceive the world?'*

Advisor: *I don't think we knew it at that time. But I can tell you now, in retrospect, about the set of values that has been driving the programme for the last three years, and I would actually say that there haven't been any major changes in this set of values. There are some key philosophies, or one key philosophy, behind the programme, which has not changed. The way we have been running the programme has been changing a lot, but not the way we understand the programme or how we decide what's important. I don't think we knew back then. One could say that the foundation is that we emphasise the product to a very high degree. Product differentiation is more important than anything when you run a programme like this, because there isn't enough time to change the product in a programme like this. For that reason, we assessed and picked companies based on what we called the international differentiation of the product, and not whether they had just sold this or that or had other proofs-of-market. You could say that the VCs primarily value team, market and product, but we value product, market, and team – in order of priority. We said that if we can identify a product that in competition terms differentiates from the market, if they have some preliminary proof-of-market, then we don't care about the team being hopeless, we'll take them anyway.* ***We believe that we can handle that, and that it must be possible to fix that team – saying that the thing with wanting an A-team with a B-product, rather than a B-team with an A-product, we did not agree. And this was one of the cornerstones of the programme design****. Next, you could say that all along, our starting point has been very ambitious; we really wanted to move these companies – also more than we had to with regard to the frame of evaluation that was put forward by the Ministry. We have been in the peculiar situation of finding ourselves more ambitious about the companies than the companies themselves, which is strange, because we have nothing invested in the companies. But we have tried to raise the bar by saying 'Why don't you do this and why can't you do these two things in parallel?' And then the companies say 'But I can't – I don't have the time or the resources.' All along, we have been very conscious about taking on an idealistic role in relation to the companies, always saying that we will not accept any excuses for not doing this and that – 'No – let's go do it!' And we do it the right way. Companies are mad at us because of that. I guess it has been a style, maybe not a set of values, but a style of saying 'take the high ground,' and we won't accept all those excuses. If you don't have the money – then we have to go find some, and if you can't do that – then we have to handle that.* (SM2010N7)

The assumptions of the Ministry call and the programme design involve finding the right customer in the right market, based on a series of beliefs as for example that it is possible to a) find and attract potential growth ventures, b) define their core application, c) get them in contact with the right customer and d) sell the product to this customer. Neither the Ministry nor the incubator management knew ahead of time whether these assumptions about a new Accelerator programme would prove useful to entrepreneurial actors in Denmark. It is interesting that the programme designers were favouring product over team in their evaluations of potential participants – challenging a well-established Venture Capitalist-truth that team is the most important criteria for selection. Thus, the advisor does not say very much in the interview about *how* they were to evaluate the great products or who were to judge potential? In that sense the programme was an experiment, deeply dependent on the individuals working with and for the programme and their personal experience, network and personal assumptions about how to identify an A-product and how to encourage a B-team.

The following interview excerpt is from a conversation with a former head of the programme, which was part of the consortium that designed the call for the Ministry, and who also worked as a programme advisor. Based on his former professional success (in terms of growth and profits) as an entrepreneur, his ideas and experiences about entrepreneurial needs were used in the design of the Accelerator programme. At the time of the interview he had recently left the programme, and I contacted him to get his reflections on entrepreneurial needs in the start-up phase, but also to get his reflections on the process of working three years with designing and performing the accelerator programme.

Interviewer: *What was it that was missing in Denmark that you [the consortium] were to create?*

Advisor: *Actually, I don't really think we knew at the time, other than we knew that a hands-on professional programme was needed. That was kind of our main concept.* ***All along, our guideline was to take this company and strategically work it towards the first sale, in the right way. This means that you have uncovered your application and cleared it with the market.*** *When you have done that you have to ask yourself, 'Where I am, who are my people, and how much capital do I have?' Well, I will go this way to get to the market, and whether the right 20 customers are in Japan or in Denmark – doesn't make a difference. It was the idea that just because you are Danish you don't necessarily has to sell in Denmark. One has to be where the best, right customers are. To be international was part of the main concept from the beginning.*

Interviewer: *Hands-on – what does that mean? What does it mean to focus on hands-on?*

Advisor: *Well, hands-on is that is it accurate.*

Interviewer: *And what do you understand by accurate?*

Advisor: *It means that you go to the right people in the right way, without dreaming something up, and that was one of the things we wanted to avoid. From the beginning, and when I say in the beginning, this is I looking back and in retrospect sorting out all the mistakes we did, and we did make a lot of mistakes in the beginning.*

Interviewer: *Tell me more about that.*

Advisor: *It was just like trial and error, but from the beginning we had one thing right, and that was this thing about finding the first, right customer, through the right channels and with the right value proposition – all the way. We knew that from the beginning.* ***But also that we would do something individualised, because there just isn't something for all – 'no size fits all;' it doesn't exist. If I look at the big picture of what it is this that all the public programmes aren't getting.*** *There are too many people that have never tried to take a company all the way, have never succeeded in understanding the complexity, which means that you change all the time, and you can't make a plan from the beginning. You can make the right application for the right customer, and that is your strategy. But it's a strategy that makes you able to go out and say, 'This is what I'm about,' and that's where you have to be accurate. This is where you can't afford to go out and make the expensive mistakes that you can't afford as a small venture. You might afford two shots, and as soon as you get money on board, you can only afford one shot, because you have already walked the plank. Many people go there for the wrong reasons, because they are inexperienced, incapable and driven by PowerPoint's, venture and two-hour strategies.*

Interviewer: *What you are saying now – that things change all the time, and that it isn't possible to make a plan and all that – surprises me a little. It was not my impression that the programme was built on this kind of insight. The programme introduced to me has very much been about making a business plan from the beginning and start executing on that plan. Is what you are saying now,* *isn't that a little bit of retrospective sense-making – or is it just very difficult to get those flexible and complex elements into the programme?*

Advisor: *Well, as I say – it is about making it an individualized process – to get this very accurate application delivered to the right customer in the right way.* ***The programme offering has to be individualized and it has to be driven by people that knows what entrepreneurship is about and has walked this road a couple of times before – because there are so many opportunities, so many variables, and somebody has to help them see through all the mess and give directions and ask the right questions.*** *Maybe the right thing to do would be to put me in as CEO in each of these companies – or find some more of me – and then we would run with these companies – it would be an option! Nevertheless, these people are hard to find because a programme like this cannot pay them enough, it is hard to make them leave what they are already doing and they are not getting 25% of the company as the programme looks now. It is hard to get people of that capacity in without them getting something.*

Interviewer: *All right – but what has happened if you do not have that kind of people attached*

Respondent: *Of course it is a combination of what is possible and what is not. One of the things we have done, recognising that this mentor model was not possible, is to focus on what is most important to the elite ventures – and that is this product application/segment-thing. The application thing is crucial, and many of the ventures come here with way to broad ideas about which customers to target. To be very specific on the application is hard work – and they cannot do it on their own. Besides that – it is also very difficult.*

I find these quotes insightful and reflective, as they reveal how the Accelerator programme was designed from experiences of qualified entrepreneurs and advisors – giving it their best shot at what could be a successful programme making a difference to new, high-potential start-ups. These two conversation excepts illustrate many of the assumptions that the programme team was working with in the beginning. Some of these assumptions were:

- Promising entrepreneurs need help for getting their applications to market
- The target of the programme is superior products – not necessarily superior people, as superior people in terms of experience can be attached to the venture as mentors
- The programme support has to be hands-on, individualized and have international focus
- The support has to focus on the first right customer, the right value proposition and the right sales channels

The former programme manager respondent speaks a strong and convincing language of *what* the programme has to be, but when he comes to *how* the interactions between the programme and the entrepreneuring venture should be performed, he repeats that the individualised process is essential and goes back to talking about the importance of accurate product applications. During the interview it becomes clear that there is a difference between what the programme team wanted to deliver to a certain kind of promising companies that they thought were out there –waiting to be helped, and the reality they met when bringing the programme to live!

In his line of speech, the former programme manager goes into his troubles with finding the right advisors with relevant and sufficient experience and networks, who are going to be dedicated in working with the participants, even though they do not hold a share of the venture and work for a low salary (in venture industry terms). He says that it is important to note that the skills of the advisors in the existing programme are thus a combination of what is possible and what is not possible. The consequence of not being able to attract experienced and successful advisors is that the ambition of drawing upon an international network became much harder. Later on in the interview, the respondent also refers to the situation of not being able to find the right kind of entrepreneur candidates for the programme as they had expected;

Interviewer: Has it been a challenge to get the right kind of companies for the ambitions set out?

Advisor: Yes – we didn't have them at all for the first two or three rounds.

Interviewer: Okay! (Surprised)

Advisor: It got better and better because the word got out that we were actually working in a different way. We were sometimes even more ambitious than the companies. And we told them that! It came to arguments with many of the participants, since they're not used to getting that kind of stuff!

Interviewer: They saw themselves as growth companies already – and you told them otherwise?

Advisor: Yes, and then they are used to officials and advisors being nice, 'because they are here for us,' but we were not. **We were there if they were learning something, and many of them obviously didn't.**

Interviewer: No, and why didn't they? (Surprised)

Advisor: I don't know. Many of them were … (silence). I don't know … and then there were the ones that didn't have anything (silence).

Interviewer: True – you have to have something! Then I have to ask you the annoying question about whether you were good enough at motivating them. Or is that not your job?

Advisor: No – I don't think that is my job, and of course it is! To motivate them is to agree about what needs to be done, and that should motivate people to work – Saturdays and Sundays too. It created an outcry when I suggested that the camps should be held on the weekends.

Interviewer: Yes, I heard about that. (Laughs)

Advisor: Nobody was ready for that. And that tells you that we didn't have the right companies. You own the night, and that's what it's like in companies that grow and grow fast. People don't go home at 4pm.

As it is clear from this except – as with experienced mentors, it was not as easy to find promising, elite ventures with need for support as expected, and even more surprising to the respondent – the ventures they did take into the programme was not as ambitious as the programme manager had expected. Maybe this is part of his personal explanation for the companies not progressing as expected, which is interesting in from an entrepreneurial learning perspective. Why did they not learn – he does not know! I will return to this matter of how the field works with this paradox in chapter 7. Also important to the research question of the dissertation is that he indicates that the participants are use to be treated nicely by officials and not ready to be challenged on their basic assumptions. In my interpretation this hints that some participants do not come with a learning mindset, they expect passively to get something. The programme manager, who also acted, as advisor had not expected that it was his job to motivate them into a learning mode – he expected them to be there already!

In terms of Norrman's (2008) argument about policy initiatives being based on expectations and assumptions, it is remarkable that the respondent was unable to find the right advisors or the ones he had assumed to be relevant. He also could not find the dedicated, high-potential entrepreneurs he had expected to find. He could not find the potential products that he had expected to be out there, and it proved even more difficult to find the first right customers. He wanted the process to be individualised and aimed at elite entrepreneurs with an international potential, and he wanted it to be stage-gated, as a 20 becomes 10 becomes 2 models, which would make it possible to find the really potential candidates for successful venturing.

Based on the various surprises of what kind of programme it was possible to perform, the Accelerator programme structure has changed during the years, both in terms of the advisor profile and the participant profile, as the original programme design was not feasible in real life. After failing to find the expected advisors, the proper international network and the expected entrepreneurs/projects, which indicated difficulties in finding the right, first customers, the programme was changed again to a more investment-oriented angle. Together with VCs and other actors from the Danish investment industry a new head of programme developed eight criteria for testing projects with the declared goal of securing funding. Now, a successful outcome was if the participating venture secured some form of funding, thus making the programme into a sub-supplier of investors rather than a developing environment for fostering strong and independent entrepreneurs. The eight criteria were similar to the ones many investors use, a kind of diagnostic device for identifying strengths and weaknesses as a basis for evaluating potential.

One of the really interesting aspects about this story about the birth of the Accelerator programme is that the programme was supposed to deliver something new, fill a market gap in the support industry by delivering and performing entrepreneurial support differently than existing initiatives and programmes. The above story shows constructing such programme is very difficult as policy makers and incubator managers are still unsure on whom to target, how to do it and with which kind of resources – and so far have been left with few experiences and a lot of intentions and assumptions to base their support on. It leaves room for investigating incubating practices and the assumptions they are based from alternative perspectives and ask new questions about how we are able to support entrepreneuring actors – their needs, and what we might expect from incubating initiatives. These interviews contributed to the relational perspective of the dissertation; since my interpretation of the above referred two interviews were also that entrepreneurial support is a mutual responsibility and task.

2.7. Concluding

Entrepreneurship policy initiatives are political tools. Even though the field is maturing and policy makers and researchers attain new and better knowledge on what works to make an impact on the entrepreneurial capacity of society, entrepreneurship policy remains at the level of intentions and assumptions. In Goffman's ethnographic study of asylums from 1961, he writes that almost all contemporary literature on mental illness was written from the psychiatrist's point of view. Similarly, I find that both incubation and entrepreneurship policy literature primarily are framed by an assumption that the needs of the entrepreneur are already known, and that the methods used for satisfying '*the needs of business*' (Klofsten and Jones-Evans 2013) are commonly known and unnecessary to mention. Despite differences in design and local and historical factors, it seems that the narrative realities (rationality and purpose) that go into constructing the initiatives are fairly similar across regions and industries: encouraging and supporting entrepreneurial activity in seizing local and global opportunities, job creation and creating a strong and healthy economy and society (Blackburn and Schaper 2012). The chapter presents an empirical demonstration of how the incubating programme of the fieldwork was based on assumptions and expectations about what kind of ventures existed out there in the real world to receive support – and what kind of support they needed. The demonstration points towards some of the challenges that follow when designers of incubating activities often act in blindness of how to support entrepreneuring actors, and rely on a management language of goals, tools, numbers and personal best practice stories to legitimise their actions.

Chapter 3: The Incubation industry and its services

3.1. Abstract

There are two purposes of this chapter; first to better understand the context of business incubating activities and what it is – and second to direct attention the advice function of the incubator. The chapter contains a short historic overview of the *Incubation Industry*. This is a phrase I find useful to signal that *business incubation* is not only one-way support; it is also an industry with various interests interacting, nevertheless with the shared goal of profit and prosperity. Next, I introduce what Business Incubation is according to existing theory and the services typically offered by incubators and programmes. This is further developed in the sections about the facilitating actor of incubating activities, the advisor; these sections discusses the complexities of having a supply side of public and private institutions that aim to support unpredictable actors and uncertain processes with pre-described tools and expertise for what is likely to happen in the future! As with the language and assumptions of entrepreneurship policy, described in previous chapter, my relational constructionist perspective makes me understand the language and assumptions of incubation and consultancy theory as active actors in the constructions of expectations, performances and communication in the incubation industry. This perspective makes me point towards some of the challenges that entrepreneurship policy makers and incubator managers face - implicitly framing entrepreneurial support as expert advice and services on a shelf.

3.2. Short overview of the incubation industry history

The incubation industry dates back more than 50 years and has developed and matured in its attempts at compensating for insufficient marketing expertise, lack of managerial expertise and insufficient access to capital in the global markets (Allen 1985, Aerts et al. 2007). The business incubation industry should be understood within the context of its local or regional surroundings, and on the global level, the financial and economic conditions faced by the industrialised countries are crucial factors. Originally, a business incubator was a controlled environment that offered care, protection and growth for an early stage venture – and it was primarily about creating an environment of office spaces and shared resources (Hackett and Dilts 2004a). The incubators were originally part of a geographical and regional development concept of creating growth by copying the successful areas, such as Oxford-Cambridge. The creation of space for academic or high-tech entrepreneurs, however, was not enough to boost development, and both public and private institutions began to develop other activities and programmes designed to support high-potential entrepreneurs.

The traditional conditions of venturing in terms of time (duration of processes, production and communication) cost and place for technological innovations have changed dramatically over the past 50 years (Aerts et al. 2007). We have seen the emergence of a venture capital industry, and large corporations have focussed on innovation and, increasingly, on entrepreneurial strategies following widespread job losses in the 1970s, all of which has contributed to the shape and design of incubating activities (Bruneel et al. 2012). Allen and McCluskey (1990) illustrated the development of the industry by developing a business incubator continuum, to be able '*to point out the spectrum from a focus on real estate to the capitalisation of investment opportunities and the fostering of new enterprises*' (Aerts et al. 2007, 256). This empirical case of this dissertation is an example of this development in the industry.

Until the late 1990s, most of the world's incubating activities were publicly funded, but at this time many for-profit or private incubating activities were launched by investors to hatch businesses quickly and bring in large returns. The model involved offering an attractive office space for new companies in exchange for equity (Lalkaka 2010, 169). The maturation of the Internet changed the conditions for incubating activities, just as it changed many other things. It forced most venturing actors to reduce time-to-market, engage in partnerships and embed their products and services into existing value chains and led to the emergence of a consultancy sector for start-ups who could not afford to pay for these services. That is why networks and networking activities became such important concepts, and why the concept of business incubators and their potential for aggregated networks saw increased attention at the beginning of the 21st century (Kemp and Weber 2012, 149). The incremental development of IT and new technologies changed the incubation industry and created the concept of virtual incubators and business accelerators (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005). Again, as with incubating services from physical service providers, no one really knows what works to create an impact, but business accelerators are appearing all over the world, with a few, primarily U.S.-based, providers as the main pioneers in the field including Y Combinator, TechStars, 500 Start-ups, DreamIt Ventures and the Danish providers StartUp Bootcamp, Accelerace and Founders House. These players have significantly changed the reputation of incubating activities from being public, slow and irrelevant to really serious entrepreneurs into being able to attract 'high potentials' and serial entrepreneurs, and as a consequence the design of incubating activities has broadened considerably (Lalkaka 2010, 175).

The following quote from the web-magazine Entrepreneur.com sums up the expected benefits of incubating initiatives – as for example accelerators;

> '*For many start-ups, the initial draw to an accelerator is the potential for securing capital to refine their concept or get their business up and running. Companies can expect to receive some funding to get started or gain traction, but the amount of the stipend varies, as does the*

amount of equity the accelerator receives in return. The money is certainly a boost, but the real draw for start-ups is the exposure--to knowledge, experts and funding--accelerators can provide. One of the marquee benefits is access to mentors who can offer experienced insight and advice in a concentrated amount of time (Entrepreneur.com 30 January 2013).

Remark the emphasis on the mentor relationship and advices – the belief that experienced insights can make a difference to the success of the entrepreneurial process – which is very much the core motivation and hope of entrepreneurs. Being part of an incubator (broadly defined to include incubators, incubator programmes, accelerators and seed starter funds) has become part of a possible bootstrapping strategy of start-ups, and the booming market indicates a demand for the services provided by the incubation industry.

Hence, the entrepreneurship support arena contains a variety of actors and activities, all looking to make a living and a career from supporting entrepreneurs in incubators, accelerators, living labs, student incubators, maker factories, co-working spaces, start-up competitions and programmes, technology parks, science parks, chambers of commerce, growth houses and the management of industrial zones/clusters. These actors make up a kind of supply chain and are interdependent of each other in the effort to produce and sustain new clients (start-ups) to move through the chain[17]. In practice, the terms *incubator* and *accelerator* are often used interchangeably, but by the definition, the accelerator is something new – even though it could be argued that training programmes for owner-managers, which Gibb studied in the 80s and 90s, resemble the accelerator idea. There are more and more of these initiatives, which are supported by regional authorities and recognised as a necessary element to generate high-potential start-ups.

The course of development of the incubation industry indicates that incubating activities are no longer just a tool for policymakers; by now, it has become a tool for private companies too (from Novo Nordisk and Nike to Disney), private universities, and private investors, although these actors frequently use it in collaboration with public institutions. Many of the non-public incubator models have not yet been thoroughly investigated by researchers but can be categorised as;

[17] To illustrate, the supply chain of the incubation industry of the fieldwork consists of universities (CBS, DTU, RUC, AAU, SDU, KU), student incubators (Copenhagen School of Entrepreneurship, Katapult), start-up competitions (Venture Cup, Børsens Gazelle), incubators (Symbion, Incuba, 5th) innovation environments (DTU innovation, RUC, AAU), springboard competitions (Connect Danmark), pre-seed investors (Syddansk Innovation, Midjysk Innovation, CAT Science), accelerator programmes (Accelerace, Start-up Bootcamp), regional development initiatives (Vækstfabrikkerne), corporate seed funds (Novo Seeds), private/public venture capitalists (SEED Capital, Sunstone, Northcap), business angels, Vækstfonden, EU, The Danish Business Authority (The Danish Ministry of Business and Growth), the trade council (Eksportrådet under the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and a few international VCs and corporate funds including Merck Global Health Innovation Fund and Wellington Management Company, LLC.

- *Corporate business incubating activities*, which is the conceptualisation of incubating activities and application to corporate needs for continuous innovation – or another marketing activity
- *Corporate incubating and seed activities*, which is the attempt to support and control one's own industry by nurturing, investing in and supporting it
- *Private VC incubators*, which are usually funded by venture capital organisations or set up by multidisciplinary consultancies. The latter type is often virtual and profit-driven and does not focus on job creation

The business incubating industry has matured into supporting almost all industries on all levels of venturing, and although it is discussed whether high-growth ventures are young technology start-ups (Mason and Brown 2013, 215), technology based start-ups are still the main target group.

3.3. Defining Business Incubation

Since the turn of the century, more and more reviews have attempted to define and evaluate the models and content of business incubators worldwide (Hansen et al. 2000; Rice 2002; Hackett and Dills 2004a+b; Grimaldi and Grandi 2005; Aerts et al.2007; Bergek and Norrman 2008; Hansson 2007; Lewis et al.2011, McAdam and Marlow 2011). Business incubating activities are attempts and initiatives carried out by public and private organisations to encourage, support and motivate entrepreneurial actors in their venturing endeavours (Blackburn and Schaper 2012). The most important discussions in the business incubation field concern the *intervention purpose, relevance, structure, content, tools, legitimacy* and *definition of incubation*. As a central element of entrepreneurship policy introduced in the previous chapter, incubation theory is influenced by economic development theory and transaction cost economics and has to be considered a political and socio-economic phenomenon and instrument (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, 56). A classical overview of the incubation literature will not be presented in the following, but can be found in other sources (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, Aernoudt 2004, Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, Aerts et al. 2007, Norrman 2008, McAdam and Marlow 2011, Kemp and Weber 2012).

It is the *offering of access* to advice and resources that underpins the incubation philosophy (Aernoudt 2004, 127). Business incubating activities are concerned with applying *something*[18] to the entrepreneur/team/venture that will influence the performance of actions and processes; assuming that the way actions are performed before the incubation efforts are insufficient for creating a venture or achieving growth. Most business

[18] Business theory and models, strategy, physical location, capital, advice, legal/technical/mental support, network and industry expertise etc.

incubating activities target the early-stage entrepreneurial activity. At this stage, the entrepreneurial venture is more than an idea, depending on industry important milestones has already been accomplished – as the first sales, development of functional prototype, biotechnological testing making it to phase 2 etc., and the entrepreneurial actors have decided to invest considerable time and resources into realising the venture (O'Connor 2004). The rationality of the supply side of incubating activities (entrepreneurship policy and incubator management) is that that there is a gap of knowledge, competences and resources that can and should be closed with tools and deliverables. If this gap is closed the entrepreneurial process will become more productive/ faster/ cheaper etc. (Lewis et al. 2011). Incubating activities are therefore often targeted at the early-stage entrepreneurial activity - typically referred to as the start-up phase, but can also be associated with a stage of immaturity[19] (Norrman 2008). I find the word *immature* suitable for the vocabulary related to incubating activities, as it captures the need for support in terms of reaching a mature and independent stage of venturing for the particular venture. Entrepreneuring ventures may be immature even though they have overcome a start-up phase and are more than three years old, and they may experience new needs that make them enter into new phases of immaturity. Furthermore, the word immaturity allows us to talk about the productive outcome of incubating activities as the maturing of ventures in terms of a short-term learning outcome, instead of in terms of workplaces and revenue, which have only proved to be relevant measures in long-term (5-10 years) studies.

Many different words have been used for the concept of incubators, such as Science Park, Entrepreneurship School and Innovations Centre, and the emergence of incubators-without-walls, the so-called virtual incubators have further blurred the picture of the size, form and content of incubators (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, 59, Lewis et al. 2011). There have been many attempts at identifying best practice models of incubating activities that have the greatest impact on creating high-growth, innovative ventures. None of these studies have been entirely successful. One problem is that incubating practice and conditions for venturing vary with time, industry, market, regulations, resources, region, entrepreneur and project.

The majority incubators or accelerator programmes are specific on some variables – with reference to the kind of companies, the kind of industry, the selection process, the maturity of the ventures, revenue streams of the incubator etc. which the incubator is designed around. Most incubator overview studies tend to operate with a rather narrow definition of the incubator to be able to draw some general conclusions about it, even though that approach excludes a variety of attempts and initiatives established to encourage entrepreneurship around

[19] Klofsten use the word *immature* instead of new, early-stage or nascent. Being in an early phase and being young are often correlated, but since entrepreneurial ventures are heterogeneous, the time span of immaturity may differ substantially (Klofsten 1992).

the world. Since no two incubators or accelerators are alike, most studies have focused on a few common variables, such as co-location of business, shared services, management assistance and networking (Peters, Rice and Sundararajan 2004, Grimaldi and Grandi 2005) to define the activities that can be expected.

If policymakers and researchers want to understand a specific incubator initiative or compare several, I find the following variables identified by Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) useful - to tell us what kind of services, ventures and goals we may expect from the specific incubating process;

- Institutional mission/strategy for the incubator/ programme
- Industrial sector and market of the entrepreneurial venture
- Location and form of the incubator/ programme
- Origin of entrepreneurial idea (university, garage, spin-off)
- Phase of venturing in terms of external intervention
- Sources of revenue for the incubator/ programme
- Services offered
- Management team (Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, 115)

For the purpose of supporting entrepreneurial ventures, I have found it difficult and also of limited usefulness to make a general definition about the target of attention, the entrepreneurs, and their skills, experience, knowledge and other characteristics of tech-based entrepreneurial actors due to the heterogeneity of entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial projects and entrepreneurial processes. For this reason, planners of supporting activities must be cautious about defining their target 'client', as needs and preferences of participants in incubating activities seem to vary with time, context and relational setting. The variance between entrepreneuring cases may be small, but it is essential for providing relevant support (Gartner 1993, 236).

In their systematic review of business incubation research, Hackett and Dilts (2004a) define a business incubator as '*a shared office-space facility that seeks to provide its incubatees (i.e. "portfolio-" or "participant" or "tenant-companies") with a strategic, value-adding intervention system (i.e. business incubation) or monitoring and business assistance*' (p.57). This definition stresses the physical location (shared office facility) of an incubator and entails a form of one-way providing of deliverables/services to the incubatees from the incubator. Besides the deliverables, most incubators have been created with assumptions about networking activities that would occur, as entrepreneuring actors would automatically be networking with each other due to their proximity and the similarity of the challenges they face. One of the problems with emphasizing the physical aspects is that '*despite the large theoretical interest and policy advice based on the importance of regional proximity and co-location, surprisingly few empirical studies have actually provided convincing* *empirical evidence of the superiority of local over non-local interaction*' (Johannisson and Lindholm-Dahlstrand 2008, 15).

From a supply point of view, business-incubating activities are aimed at growth-oriented entrepreneurs in their endeavours to become strong, competitive and independent, and business incubating activities are therefore also selective. A critical mass of potential participants is necessary for business incubating activities to constitute an effective process for fostering innovative entrepreneurship. The selection of participants for incubating activities or potential good investments, as it would be phrased in the venture capitalist industry, is a common theme in the incubator literature (Hackett and Dilts 2004a). It is a difficult task, as many obstacles confront young ventures (Stinchcombe 1965), and start-ups encounter multiple hazards because they have no or only a very limited track record by which outsiders can evaluate their potential. As previously mentioned it is a common understanding that new technology start-ups are particularly risky and uncertain (Baum and Silverman 2004).

Identifying a start-up with the potential for significant growth in a supportive environment is no easy task. In this respect, the task of business incubation management is similar to that of a venture capitalist, who makes qualified guesses about which entrepreneuring actors might turn out to be more than a bright spark and turn into a viable, brilliant business. Bergek and Norrman (2008) show how different strategies can be used for selection, varying from pick-the-winners (entrepreneuring traits, motivation, experience) to an idea focus (idea potential), which also reflects the classic clash between viewing entrepreneurs as either born or made. The issue of incubatee selection is one of the most important tasks in incubator management (Hackett and Dilts 2004b), and what constitutes legitimate selection criteria is an ongoing discussion (Bergek and Norrman 2008, 23, Mason and Brown 2013). One widely used way of bringing legitimacy to the selection process and establishing relationship with participants is to engage experienced business development professionals, industry experts and financial professionals who are supposed to have access to deep industrial knowledge and the ability to judge personality and the driving forces of the entrepreneurial team and thus bring credibility to the selection process. Such structure of selection processes is designed to make entrepreneuring actors strive for acceptance into the programme and to feel specially selected from a fierce field of highly qualified start-ups.

As described in the introduction, this dissertation understands entrepreneurial actors as immature technology-based ventures in a phase of inadequate complementary and additional resources (Norrman 2008, 16). Some of these actors are part of the formative process of a new industry, which means that they are even more vulnerable than other new organisations, which compete in an existing market (Aldrich and Fiol 1994, 645), but that is not the case with all of them. We should therefore not consider all these actors particularly disruptive, although that may be part of their personal narrative as entrepreneurs! Certain characteristics and challenges are traditionally attached to technology-based entrepreneurs, including being focussed on one product, intangible assets and complex products, acting on new markets, small and short windows of opportunity, great risk, high uncertainty – high returns, advanced technology that is difficult to evaluate, challenges associated with shaping the existing environment and lack of managerial skills (Norrman 2008, 18).

Hatchett and Dilts declare that '*ideally, only those firms that are "weak-but-promising" should be considered incubation candidates'* (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, 62). I find this ideal strange, but important to mention, as it is shows that some incubating designers and managers expect the participants to be weak in some kind of way. The next question is how weak we will accept them to be, on what parameters (technology, personality, experience, network) we accept them to be weak, why we want them to be weak, and how we may assess their weakness beforehand. The screening process for entrepreneurial actors is a debated area, and selection is defined by the goals and strategy of the incubating activities rather than on proven methods for selecting profitable ventures (Bergek and Norrman 2008, 26). If entrepreneurial actors are expected to be weak, it is easier to understand the part of the vocabulary of incubating activities that subscribe to a 'nursing' perspective, expecting that a diagnosed weakness can be cured and made to go away like some sort of disease, or business incubation as a quick fix to eventual weakness.

3.4. The need for a relational perspective on incubating activities

Hackett and Dilts (2004a) emphasise that the incubator is more than the bricks and mortar of a shared office space: It also includes a network of related actors from the entrepreneuring ecosystem such as the incubator staff, alumni companies, local industry, investors, lawyers, universities, clients, service providers etc. In entrepreneurship policy theory on incubation, there are often quite high expectations with regard to the *expected exchange* between incubate, which evidently will happen when entrepreneuring individuals are located in the same building. However, this is not always the case, as these intended fruitful interactions need some kind of authentic purpose (Mønsted 2003). Studies of incubating activities that highlight the importance of networking and the exchange of ideas support this finding. It is not only about being part of a social network and having offices next to each other or being part of the same incubatee group; it is about interacting in an entrepreneurial and resourceful network. During the previous decade, a couple of researchers have pointed to that interaction between incubatees cannot be taken for granted, since it involves certain conditions to be present;

- Incubatees must have a shared real-time relevant purpose to collaborate on (Mønsted 2003)
- Incubatees must have an independently articulated need for complementary resources (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005)
- Incubatees must have a feeling of being part of a shared process in order to share their own resources (Warren et al. 2009)

This means that the community of interaction and the physical construction around meetings and interactions together influence the incubating process. It is my interpretation of such findings that the role of managing the incubator also concerns *creating* a community with a shared purpose and relational conditions for incubatees to trust and share, besides being a facility manager – on both a virtual and a physical level.

It is worth mentioning that policy makers, incubator managers and incubates share this idea of knowledge, network and resources being shared automatically. A study by Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) indicates how expectations about potential synergy effects, as a result of interactions with similar and complementary start-up actors are, to a certain degree, shared by the entrepreneurial actors approaching the incubator (Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, 114). This indicates how both the incubatees and the incubator management and advisors expect that entrepreneurs will have something in common because they are entrepreneurs, that they are capable of sharing experiences and challenges, and that they will accelerate as a result of this community feeling (Cooper and Park 2008). Furthermore, it is expected that the diversity of the entrepreneurs will complement their individual processes. However, as demonstrated in a study by Justesen (2007), it is not enough to have specific capabilities, talents, technologies etc., if they are not activated and leveraged, and this has to be managed or at least not taken for granted.

Hackett and Dilts (2004a) exclude the virtual incubator from their own definition of an incubator and instead call it an intervention programme. They argue that it is problematic from a definition point of view that all entities providing business assistance can be termed business incubators; in my assessment, that argument is only valid in relation to academic reviews. Bruneel et al. (2012) also point out that throughout the 90s, the phenomenon of business incubators developed their value proposition from providing infrastructure to providing in-house business support activities with the aim of accelerating the learning process of entrepreneuring actors (Bruneel et al. 2012, 110). Since business incubation is an umbrella term (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005) that covers a heterogeneous reality, as researchers we need to keep the arbitrary nature of incubating activities in mind when we try to theorise about them. Most types of incubating initiatives seek to address anticipated market failures, an entrepreneurial gap in the region – physical buildings or not (Gibb 1994, Aernoudt 2004, 128). That is why I include the virtual incubator, the bottom-up incubator, the entrepreneur community, start-up accelerators, investor networks, non-profit organisations and the university incubator in the this study and discussion of incubating activities. The theoretical construction for my inquiry is the relationship construction and interaction between incubators and incubatees, which I claim to be relevant to all incubating activities. The outcome of the theoretical anchoring is that defining content and design of business incubating activities depends of the kind relationship that one actor (the incubator) seeks to establish with another actor (the incubatee). The kind of relationship that designers and managers of incubating activities seeks to establish, obviously has to be related to the overall purpose and intentions of the programme or services.

3.5. The incubator services

As it is the offering of access to advice, finance, operational know-how, network and new markets that forms the incubation philosophy (Aernoudt 2004, 127), the assistance provided to entrepreneurial actors is the most significant shared characteristic of incubating activities. In response to this offer, entrepreneurial actors are expected to take advantage of the services, knowledge and experience made available by the incubating actors (Rice 2002, 170). Once the entrepreneuring actors have been selected into the process, the incubating team (managers, advisors and experts) will often perform some kind of needs assessment. An incubating team is supposed to be proactive in assisting the participants and to offer assistance in areas that the entrepreneuring actors might not have the competences to handle on their own. The exact mix of services and programmes offered in incubating activities vary with region, industry and culture, but the most frequent ones, identified by Prodan (2007), are:

- Consulting services
- Supportive environment, accommodation
- Entrepreneurial training and funds
- Co-financing of business premises
- Possibility of informal contacts
- Prestige
- General and administrative services
- Demo Day, Springboards and network opportunities (Prodan 2007, 31-32)

Commonly, the completion of the activities as accelerator processes is celebrated by a larger Demo Day event that includes investors, networks and related partners and gives the entrepreneurs an opportunity to test their pitches on the venture capital ecosystem and compete for awards.

The services offered through incubating activities are so-called deliverables. They may be offered as electives or as a more or less standardised programme. The latter model is attractive for control and evaluation purposes from a bureaucratic perspective, but it is also associated with a number of problems, because it fails to target the individual entrepreneurial actors more specifically (Gibb 1997, 22, Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 854) or take for granted the readiness to let outsiders take part in co-creating the venture (Rice 2002, 164). A standard package does not necessarily match the entrepreneurial self-identity of being unique and disruptive, and the relational aspects to the actual needs of the entrepreneurial actors.

In his article about small firms' training, Gibb writes about empathising with participants and questions whether training programmes have any focus on achieving empathy with entrepreneurial actors (Gibb 1997, 22). Empathy is a rare concept in the literature on incubating activities, which reflects the lack of concern for relationship construction and how incubating activities are delivered and how knowledge and learning become an embedded part of the actions of the entrepreneurial venture. In my understanding, tools, advice and access to resources are mistaken for encouraging and motivating instruments for entrepreneurial learning and creation, without high concern for the psychological aspects of relationship and collaboration such as empathy, curiosity, forgiveness, togetherness, power balance and the potential culture gap between partners.

3.6. Business models of Business Incubation

As there are different types of business incubators (Aernoudt 2004, Grimaldi and Grandi 2005), and business models for incubating activities come in many forms. Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) divide incubator business models into four main categories: university-based, government-owned, non-governmental/not-for-profit entities and private sector initiatives (Grimaldi and Grandi 2005, 113). Regardless of the ownership structure, which may also include public-private partnerships, it is a challenge for most incubating activities to achieve financial sustainability in terms of having their expenses covered. The business model of incubating activities is in many cases not profitable in traditional sense, as the revenue stream is too low or uncertain, and they are dependent on other sources. Consequently, most incubators and accelerator programs rely on a mix of revenue sources, including earned revenue based on rent, service fees, equity payments (less common in the EU region), and non-reimbursable funds from government, transnational institutions and the private sector.

The question of whether or not incubating activities should be pushed towards financial sustainability is not, to my knowledge, a central theme in the incubation literature compared to the theme of what incubating activities are and whether they work or not, but I assume it will increase in attention in the near future. However, the financial structure of incubating activities is related to some of the controversial aspects of incubating activities, such as evaluation, performance measures and selection, and influences the way in which incubating activities are carried out. As noted earlier, incubating activities are political tools, but they also have success criteria and KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) like any other industry. They need to deliver results, justify the spending of taxpayers' money and attract new funding (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, 58). It is hard to imagine how the vast funds allocated to public entrepreneurship promotion policies could be paid out without measures to ensure fairly substantial legitimisation in the eyes of the public.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, talking about specific measures or results as an outcome of incubating activities may lead to a blurry conversation (Norrman 2008, 70). Especially if we continue to insist on economic and industrial indicators of volumes, physical outcomes and operations, there is a risk that the need to satisfy political success criteria may favour the 'low-hanging fruits' as for example accepting ventures that are already well ahead in their entrepreneurial process into programmes. These are less risky investments for the incubator, even though the policy goal is in fact to assist the early-stage or immature entrepreneurs who have fewer resources and capabilities. If incubating activities are judged on the revenue acquired by the participating ventures, the incubator management faces a paradox between maintaining a market orientation and supporting cash-strapped and vulnerable ventures. This may in turn give rise to a new paradox: As the incubating team becomes too focussed on meeting performance targets, the participating ventures might distrust the quality and relevance of the incubating services (Cowie 2012, 252). Another blurry performance measures would be the specific number of start-ups serviced; this would mean that non-qualified start-ups are accepted into the programme or kept on too long, in order to meet a certain quota.

The above mentioned risks from the politically influenced business model, hints how the business model of the incubator may influence the actions of the incubator. Depending on the stated goal of a particular incubating activity it seems to be relevant to discuss whether other types of productivity and KPI's could be more relevant to incubating processes – if for example the goal of incubation is improvement of the entrepreneurial capabilities of entrepreneurs! According to Djellal and Gallouj (2013) this type of productivity goal would imply a more relationally based type of evaluation, which are able to identify improvements in the venture's relational qualities (relationships with customers, suppliers and partners, integration into networks) (Djellal and Gallouj 2013, 291). If incubating activities were measured on their ability to teach entrepreneurs how to network and how to create long-lasting relationships with suppliers and partners, I believe the incubation industry would have pay more attention to the actual advice and interaction process of incubating activities.

In order to get closer to the phenomenon of giving advice, the following section examine the tasks, functions and operating procedures of classical consultancy. It is outlined why the advisory function is used for facilitating incubating processes, as it is used in many other types of organisations.

3.7. Facilitating incubating activities

With reference to the sociologist Norbert Elias, Billing presents the classical argument of the advisor - that the advantage of the advisor's position is the possibility of being involved and detached at the same time, as it is sometimes important to be detached enough to be able to offer facilitative responses (Billing 2009, 39). As it was presented in previous chapter, much entrepreneurship policy concerning incubation is based on this notion – that entrepreneurs need management consulting. Generally, both the programme designers and entrepreneuring actors view consultancy as an almost natural part of incubating activities and as the obvious answer to the technology-based entrepreneurs' need for improved business understanding.

Management consultancy occupies a significant role when modern organisations legitimize their strategies and actions, and many internal decisions are made with support from external management consultants (Kipping and Clark 2012, 1). The use of external advice is part of most organisations' regular practice; hence it is not hard to understand why the role of an advisor[20] has been chosen as the facilitating actor to work with and support entrepreneurial actors in incubating activities. The classical idea of an advisor is that some actors – due to experience, formal education, network position etc. are in a position to see further into the 'game' and are thus in a position to advise other actors (Smith 2008, Nikolovana and Devinney 2012). The literature on the advisory role is traditionally based on empirical material in relatively large and stable organisations, which are not necessarily characterised by a high degree of predictability, yet it is a scene of some degree of routine and planning (Hicks 2010, 35). In his dissertation, Hicks describes consultancy as the world's newest profession, and with reference to Chris McKenna he writes, '*Consultancies have attempted to closely align themselves with professions, in particular the traditional professions of medicine and law. Consultancies have, for example, adopted the language of the professions, e.g. by referring to their business as a 'professional practice.' Like other professions, consultancies base their claims to authority on the possession of a body of expert knowledge, and continue to adopt 'professionalism' as the overarching value to which they aspire in their relationship with participants*' (Hicks 2010, 33). This quote highlights how the legitimacy of the advisor is crucial to gain the confidence of clients, and also how the consultancy industry have specialized in acting

[20] I use the word advisor to describe all types of expert/facilitator-receiver relationship. In many cases, this actor could also be referred to as a consultant, coach, mentor or facilitator.

“professional” – and thereby signalling relevance to all organisations. The dark suit of the consultant has become as authentic as doctor’s white coat!

The various approaches to business consultancy are often plotted along a simple, linear continuum with **expert** approaches at one end and **process** approaches at the other. In an expert approach, the expert claims to be able to identify and solve the problem, including possessing the necessary knowledge resources (Hicks 2010). Process consultants strive for a more transparent process of identifying and diagnosing the problem together with their participants before deciding how to acquire the required knowledge resources. The process consultant, in Schein’s (1987) description, is the facilitating advisor who looks at the existing organisation with new eyes and is able to challenge and offer advice on what to do next. Process consultants do not necessarily need content expertise, because their job is to stay outside the content, designing processes that will help the group help themselves to achieve the desired outcome (Billing 2009, 36). The classical perception of the advisor-participant relationship is a one-way relationship, where the advisor creates the relationship and has the responsibility for establishing respect and trust. Schein’s writings about consultants represent such a perception, and according to Smith (2008), the advisory literature tends to leave out the participant and present the advisor as some kind of superhero (Smith 2008, 42-47).

In general, consultancy firms and consultants offer advice on business planning, marketing and distribution plans, outsourcing strategies, financial planning and control, human resources, team building, process improvement, professional profile of specialisation, content expertise, IT consultancy and change management. Such deliverables are likely to be produced on the basis of specific models and delivered in a written form. A business plan is one of the most common outputs of many incubating activities aimed at supporting and educating entrepreneuring actors, and it forms an easily identifiable deliverable for the incubator provider.

In his article about participant-consultant relationships, Billing (2009) *‘contends that the emphasis in consulting assignments on producing deliverables – such as writing process reports or facilitating group sessions – elevates these to ends in themselves. It argues that because change in organisations is a result of changed patterns of interaction and conversation, the contribution of the consultant’s work emerges from changes in patterns of interaction arising from that work, rather than the actual production of the deliverable itself’* (Billing 2009, 30). The reason why a deliverable such as a business plan, a pitch or a contract is not a satisfying goal of the collaboration is that unless they are implemented and produce some sort of identifiable difference to the capacity of action, they are useless. A plan is not an end in itself; it is part of the ongoing process of entrepreneuring.

The INSEAD consulting club handbook for students 2011 states that a clear trend emerging in the industry is that customers and participants ask for greater focus on implementation rather than theoretical recommendations or strategic plans, and those participants are more demanding and ask for consultants who are specialised in the industry or topic (ICC Handbook 2011). Participants, consultants and researchers have been questioning the value of consultancy for participants, as they produce standardised solutions instead of conducting an individualised analysis of the organisations and listening carefully to the concerns of the participants (Hicks 2010, Nikolova and Devinney 2012, 389). A third emerging trend in the consulting industry described by INSEAD is that in order to handle the scepticism of customers and participants in terms of the value offered, consulting companies agree on equity payment; participants who demand more tangible results may even pay according to performance and measurable business results (ICC Handbook 2011, 11). An obvious question is what would happen if the same concept were applied to incubating activities.

3.8. The incubator advisor

The facilitating role of business incubating activities around the world varies by name and function; however, most operate with advisors, mentors, experts and consultants as facilitating actors. This dissertation operates with the overall term *advisor.*

Since start-ups and innovative environments all are new and characterised by a context of chaos and uncertainty where the organisation is constantly changing (Steyaert 1995, 30), it is challenging to be the advisor and even more difficult to be the expert (and superhero). Advice on new and complex challenges is not a matter of reproducing the actions of another successful venture or well-defined routine problems, and it is not a failsafe process of information exchange (Nikolova and Devinney 2012, 397). '*Like the level of uncertainty, information asymmetries may be particularly acute in the case of early-stage technology companies. In these instances, firm founders are often the leading experts in the relevant area of technology, and therefore are the best informed about the feasibility of a proposed technology*' (Shane and Stuart 2002, 156). Working as an advisor with this kind of entrepreneurial ventures involves a reflective process based on the advisor's stock of experience that is relevant to the particular entrepreneuring process.

One challenge with the notion of an expert related to the process of co-constructing the entrepreneurial process is very succinctly stated by Hicks with reference to his 10-year experience as a management consultant. His frustrations with playing the role of the expert was that *'the expert consultant is not allowed to 'not know' and must remain wary of open-ended discussions, e.g. discussions without any predetermined conclusions or direction, that might lead away from their expertise or the product or services they have to offer.*

When playing – and getting paid for playing – the role of the expert, one must be confident and decisive' (Hicks 2010, 23). Pittaway and Cope argue that it is exactly the moments of shared exploring, testing and open-ended discussions that are likely to move an immature project towards new solutions or decisions that improve the process; the moments of despair also make people reflect on their experiences and learn from them (Pittaway and Cope 2007). When applying an expert approach to entrepreneurial support, there is a risk that it produces unrealistic expectations, rendering the entrepreneuring actors passive, leaning back and waiting for the answers to drop from the sky instead of creating them on their own. For this reason this dissertation seeks to illuminate that the phenomenon of an expert advisor for entrepreneurs is tricky and should be considered carefully in any effort aimed at benefiting entrepreneurial ventures. When organisations call an expert, it is very often with the purpose of solving a specific problem, not necessarily for engaging in a dialogue about potentiality and finding creative ways to experiment.

3.9. Existing research on the advice function of incubating activities

In his article from 2002 Rice calls for more process-oriented research to understand interactions between participants and incubators (Rice 2002, 185). Nevertheless, despite the growing interest in business incubation – both from practice and within academia, the research that investigate, describes and evaluates the actors facilitating the incubating activities: advisors and managers employed by incubators and their relationship with participants, is still scarce (both from an entrepreneurial and consultancy perspective) (Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003, Damgaard et al. 2004, 162, Warren et al. 2009, Lewis et al. 2011). In introductions to academic books and articles on management consultancy and consultancy issues, trends, analytical frameworks, intervention approaches and future predictions, I have not been able to find chapters on the topic of advising or collaborating with entrepreneurial actors as a consultancy theme (Greiner and Poulfelt 2005, Kipping and Clark 2012). That sort of material could help policy makers and incubating actors develop their services and interact with entrepreneurial actors, and we can only speculate as to why this is not a theme in the consultancy literature, despite the fact that consultancy is applied in a wide range of organisations, including emerging ones. I have found four articles of particular interest to this dissertation, in the sense of providing us with knowledge about the matter of relational aspects of business incubation;

- In his exploratory study on the co-production of business assistance in business incubators, Rice (2002) found that the impact of incubation is influenced by four factors:
    - Total hours of co-production
    - The intensity of engagement by incubator advisor and manager

- The breadth of co-production
- The entrepreneur's readiness to engage in co-production (Rice 2002, 164).

The study highlights the importance of the relationship and the psychological dimensions at stake between advisor and participant including the factors of awareness, recognition and willingness, which very often are overlooked dimensions of incubator literature and entrepreneurship policy. This dissertation can be seen as an attempt to further contribute on how incubating activities works in terms of making a productive difference to entrepreneuring actors.

- Looking into the learning aspect of entrepreneurship, Sullivan (2000) has discussed learning issues, entrepreneur development, mentoring and matching up advisors and participants (Sullivan 2000, 160). In his article, Sullivan emphasises that the mental approach of the participants is crucial to learning. The concept of the traditional mentor-mentee relationship framed by trust, self-selection and respect based on experience is transferred to the relationship between entrepreneur and advisor in support programmes (Sullivan 2000, 170). This also emphasizes the importance of relationship and establishment of responsibility and roles. In Sullivan's description of the advisor, the skills of the advisor have to be pretty comprehensive in terms of experience, knowledge and skills. Sullivan maintains that such advisors exist and that they can provide added value to participants and therefore society if the participants are open to advice (Sullivan 2000, 172).
- In their paper based on a study of a British incubator programme, Warren et al. (2009) focus on the relational aspects of incubation and find that the role and competences of the incubation advisor are paramount for a positive programme experience. The article stress that it is crucial for individual advisors to have industry connections and to know other professional advisors and potential financiers if they are to bring value to the company. In addition, an advisor should be able to help the company develop a business plan and help the participants develop sufficient business acumen to be able to communicate with professionals outside their field, across different communities of practice and for a variety of purposes. The study found that the internal networks of the incubator (between the participants) did not make a difference to business outcomes; however, the *external* network of the programme (which in this case was the same as the manager's personal network) made a crucial difference to process and scope. A tipping point in the entrepreneuring process was when participants began to leverage/acquire social capital themselves, indicating that they acted on their own. Some owner-managers were less positive about the mentoring role of the advisor and were clearly concerned about interferences and issues of control (Warren et al. 2009, 492).

- McAdam and Marlow (2011) found similar tendencies in the different perspectives of incubator actors in their study of incubator influence on attracting investment capital. In their study, the collaboration between advisor and participant was not necessarily a harmonious process, since they found that participants focussed on the primacy of the technology/product/service, while the advisors focussed on the professional business package (McAdam and Marlow 2011, 463). A harmonious incubation processes is not necessarily a goal; however, to be able to co-construct or at least listen to each other with respect, it is important to be aware of the different perspectives influencing communication and learning. The authors also found that participants are somewhat reluctant to acknowledge the influence of the advisor after completing the programme.

Reviewing both the entrepreneurship policy and the incubation literature, I find that the existing articles on the relationship between advisors and client conclude rather vaguely on how to establish and make this relationship work. Researchers all state that the planners of educational programmes for start-ups and incubating practitioners should consider the findings. As an example, Hjalmarsson and Johansson (2003) suggest that '*symmetric power relations are necessary in order to establish dialogue and genuine collaboration between client and consultant*' (Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003, 95) – to which it is easy to agree. However, their recipe for achieving this symmetry is *openness,* which Hjorth and Johannisson (2006) also claims to be the source of entrepreneurial learning, and in that sense it valuable. Nevertheless, none of these above referred authors do really address or discuss why this *openness* is not present in the first place, how it may be established, and what is preventing the actors from establishing it. Few researchers enter into in-depth discussion of what it implies to be the advisor of uncertain dreams of growth adventures, or how entrepreneuring actors act in the role as participant – or even student or client. How do entrepreneurial actors use advice, what kind of actors do they take advice from, whose advice do they ignore or reject, and are they able and willing to take in the advice that the supply side of the incubation industry wants to give them – and if so, under what circumstances? Accepting advice is a complicated and emotional matter for most people (Schein 1987) - and also for entrepreneurs.

It is not only the relationship between the advisor and the incubatee that has been neglected in the incubation literature, also the individual and team level has also received limited attention – or been taken for granted as a passive receiver as explained in previous chapter. In their analysis of business incubation literature, Phan, Siegel and Wright (2005) outline several avenues for further research, among them why incubators actually exist, the objectives of incubation and their relationship to performance, the need for strategic approaches to incubation research, a structural contingency perspective and an agency theory perspective. Lastly they point out *'the paucity of research on the individual entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial teams working for firms located on science parks and incubators is striking. The nature of entrepreneurs and their teams may have particularly important influence on the ability of ventures to graduate from these institutions'* (Phan et al.2005, 167). Considering the expectations of entrepreneurial actors of accomplishing growth and prosperity from support activities and encountering political dreams of the same, it is remarkable how little attention the individual/group and its actions have received from researchers. In most research on incubating activities, the incubator, rather than the incubatee, is the object of study. The individual level has mostly been addressed in relation to the governance of incubators and agency theory, and as a legacy from economic thinking, the notion of the rational economic (and thus predictable) man persists, favouring the institutional contexts. This constitutes a level-of-analysis gap in incubation literature.

3.10. Challenges and critique of Business Incubation initiatives

Globally, the average lifetime of incubating activities as Accelerator programmes is five years, at which point the funding has run out, and the programme has not succeeded in establishing a financially sustainable model (Baird et al. 2012). Since the establishment of a new incubator sends strong political signals of actual steps being taken to support entrepreneurs, I wonder if it may be regarded as less 'profitable' to political decision makers to support existing initiatives than to establish new ones. One problem with the short life of incubating activities is that experience is lost or not transferred to new incubating activities, and that may be one of the reasons why Gibb (2000) finds that the same myths and mistakes in the design of incubating activities have been repeated over and over again since the beginning of 1960s, as policy makers keep reinventing the wheel (Blackburn and Schaper 2012). New incubating activities suffer from many of the same characteristics as other start-ups: the liability or newness during a period of establishment that goes beyond the facilities, programme design and team members and relates to trust, legitimacy, track record, reputation, network, industry acceptance etc., which takes several years and 'proof-of-market' to attain. Since yet-to-be-earned legitimacy is one of the main barriers for entrepreneurial actors to qualify for public support (Niska and Vesala 2013, 522) and for private parties to become part of their network, policy makers should be aware of that closing existing initiatives involves the risk of wasting valuable experience among incubator managers and programmes for the sake of grand openings, balloons and nice pictures of the cabinet minister in action.

I have outlined why I find it relevant to see the various entrepreneurship enhancing actors and initiatives as an industry of well-established public and private institutions each with their own agenda for surviving and a self-interest in maintaining funding for these activities. As such, the incubating industry has its own independent survival logic. Sometimes the non-profit aspect of public business incubating activities influences the design of programmes, due to financial dependency on public funding. '*The politically charged environment and the state of subsidy-dependency in which non-for-profit incubators operate cannot be ignored*' (Hackett and Dilts 2004a, 58). The non-profit and political aspects are influential factors in the incubator system, because they force the incubator to act and communicate in certain ways that are likely to attract capital from other sources than generated revenue, such as subsidies from the State or larger regional funds, including EU funds.

The private sector incubators also have their own agendas, and on various entrepreneurship online forums, entrepreneuring actors are widely debating why it is necessary to think twice before participating in incubating activities: Sure, they may find relevant support, but it also takes time, and they are totally dependent on the competence of the facilitators. Another considerations are the payment, which is often 5-10% equity in the company, the lack of relevant and proper networks and the rationale that if the venture is viable and attractive in the first place, VCs will notice them anyway, which means that joining an incubator should not be for the babysitting or the funding.

A further risk of having too many initiatives targeting entrepreneuring actors is that too many second-rate ventures are nursed when they should have been abandoned long ago. 'Kill'em early' is a common saying in the industry – but it is not always practiced! A relevant question is whether there are enough potential ideas and projects out there to be supported to keep the industry going. As the following quote suggests, the industry is large and growing, but to what extent and how realistic the performance indicators of incubating activities prove their efficiency and effectiveness (in terms of producing growth) remains an open and controversial question (Warren et al. 2009, Shane 2009, Murdock 2012, Mason and Brown 2013). The quote below stresses the industry logic of incubating activities, saying that even if does not produce high-growth ventures, still, the incubation industry actors are making money, and that in many and varied ways of entrepreneuring,

> *'There are, it seems, an almost incalculable number of programs, trips, seminars, co-working retreats, start-up boot camps, and hackathons designed to help entrepreneurs (for a fee, of course) start or grow their business idea. While it's unclear how many of these services are actually successful at graduating real, revenue-generating businesses, what is clear is that the market for these services is booming: it's a good time to be in the secondary market for entrepreneurship'* (Inc. Magazine 2013, June).

These critics claim that the incubator model destroys the real entrepreneurship environment and blows up the value of very young companies, at the risk of creating another unsustainable bubble. Bill et al. (2008) have analysed the rationale for entrepreneurs to participate in support initiatives for entrepreneurs, and they go as far as suggesting that the support of SMEs is not growth but incubation, since '*support programmes and* *further development initiatives are primarily intended to reproduce and replenish those who produce and consume them*' (Bill et al. 2008,103).

3.11. Concluding

This chapter has focused on the 'what' of incubating activities, what they provide, who provides it and for what purpose, together with descriptions of designs and problematic elements of their design. It is clear by now, judging from the considerable amount of research done over the last 30 years that an incubator is not just an incubator; indeed, the definition covers a wide range of entrepreneurial support activities around the world. In terms of their specific structure and content, incubators thus differ so much that we need to ask ourselves whether researchers are in fact studying the same phenomenon in their attempts to crack the code of the perfect incubator. The challenge of making one generic definition of incubators and incubating activities is that, like all social processes, structures and events, are characterised by a degree of complexity that, as Law puts it, '*exceeds our capacity to know them. No doubt local structures can be identified, but, or so I want to argue, the world defies any attempt at overall orderly accounting*' (Law 2004, 6). Whether incubators are publicly or privately financed, and however their ambitions and purpose are outlined, they are products of needs and resources in local environment and industries, which makes it both impossible and irrelevant to generalise empirical findings into one best practice model. This explains why research has not been able to define a single model for how an incubator should be structured and how it should perform, although there have been many attempts on the research side to conceptualise such a model (Aernoudt 2004, Phan et al.2005, Bergek and Norrman 2008).

The other side of incubation services, besides *what* is delivered, is also *who* can deliver it and *how* the service is (co-) created, presented, performed, delivered. In addition incubator managers need to consider how the recipients of the service are expected to interact with the service provider (incubator advisor). I return to this matter in the analysis, where I also question whether perceiving the incubator as a *service provider* is actually appropriate for the process incubation managers and policy makers would like to encourage. I posit that in order to increase the entrepreneurial capacity of incubating participants, the processes of interacting and facilitating entrepreneurial learning needs rethinking.

By investigating business incubating activities as *relationships* between activities and venture creation, I extend the study of incubating activities beyond the what-to-provide (or what-is-provided), towards a how-do-entrepreneurs-learn (how-collaboration-happens) perspective, focussing on relations and interactions as the constitutive elements of learning and venture creation. This acknowledges the uncertainty of the process as well as the role and importance of legitimacy and authority of the incubator and the advisors.

PART II Theory and Methods

Part II consists of a methodological chapter (Chapter 4), introducing the ontological and epistemological perspectives and fieldwork methods of the dissertation, and a theoretical chapter (Chapter 5), outlining how we may understand entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial learning from a relational-process point-of-view.

To this dissertation language is the core of the study, and chapter 4 outlines how a relational constructionist stance (Hosking and Hjorth 2004, Hosking 2011) is suitable for studying relations – constructed from language – together with an organisational ethnographic methodology (Czarniawska 2008, Watson 2011) for creating the empirical material. In addition, the Accelerator programme and context of the industrial research project is described – and why narrative method (Czarniawska) is chosen for analyzing and structuring the empirical material. What it means to be entrepreneurial and how to learn to be successful from entrepreneuring are two often asked – and highly difficult questions. In chapter 5 these questions are sought to be answered through a processual perspective on entrepreneurship (Steyaert 2007, Hjorth et al. 2008) and a dynamic and relational constructionist understanding of entrepreneurial learning. Rae's (2007) entrepreneurial learning framework is used to present entrepreneurial learning as tangible and hands-on – saying that these are the typical actions that drive a new venture forward. Then, it might be possible to investigate entrepreneurial learning and discuss how we might facilitate it.

Chapter 4: Methodology for fieldwork and analysis

4.1. Abstract

This chapter gives insights on the methodological choices of the dissertation and the process of collecting and analysing the fieldwork material – as the foundation for making a relational constructionist contribution to the fields of business incubation and entrepreneurial learning. The chapter clarifies the rationale for studying incubating practices through the lens of relational constructionism and applying an ethnographic inspired approach to a social science study. A narrative approach to analysis is presented as the outcome of seeing incubating practices as local-social-historical constructions, and as a way of structuring the many small stories of the empirical material. The industrial PhD framework and the case of the Accelerator programme are presented before the characteristics of organizational ethnography and fieldwork is discussed as suitable to this industrial PhD project. Then, the chapter also introduces the reader to how the fieldwork was performed and offers descriptions and demonstrations of the methodologies used to arrive at the accounts of the field that have guided the project. The challenges of a research study like this are discussed, and lastly the stylish form of the ethnographic texts in part III - as a multitude of field-based narratives - is explained.

4.2. The need for a relational language

As outlined in the introduction of the dissertation, my initial search in the field for entrepreneurial learning and the impact of the incubating activities did not turn out as I had expected. My first pilot interviews and conversations with both graduated participants and representatives (advisors, managers, support staff and investors) of the programme, focussed more on collaboration difficulties and lack of mutual understanding, than on the actual output, achievements or learning from the programme. From early on in my fieldwork I met tensions, unfulfilled hopes, disappointment in my conversations about impact, potential, success and what it takes to be a “real” entrepreneur. In the middle of the huge enthusiasm and pride of the Accelerator Programme – from both incubator side as providers and incubatees as participants – actors of the field also had a hard time explaining their unsatisfied expectations with regard to effects and outcome.

It has been my experience from working in the field for almost three years that pursuing an entrepreneurial learning study of incubating activities, such as this one, from a managerial, strategic, linear or instrumental perspective fails to take on crucial challenges of addressing the learning task of entrepreneuring actors. Too many relational preconditions of the process, as dialogue, motivation and mutual respect, are taken for granted in a managerial perspective, which draws upon economics and natural sciences. This is supported theoretically by Hjorth et al. 2008, who argues that managerial approaches to entrepreneurial creation does not take process and context into account and are uncreative in terms of what entrepreneurship might be. With regard to incubating practices, one consequence of the managerial approach, is that incubating practices are designed around a specific goal: growth, which focuses the attention on the search for one specific process that might enable entrepreneuring actors to produce this much desired growth! Another consequence is that the processes of taking on advice and collaborating in the incubator context is taken for granted to be positive and open. However, despite good intensions and shared goals – this seems to be much more complicated than expected. A third consequence has been that incubator studies often has been about the search for the one-incubator-model-fits-all to create growth - meaning a search for general laws of support for entrepreneurship that might transcend context. Again, as it is also widely recognised in parts of the incubation literature today, there is no one-size fits all and that many interrelated processes that are at play.

The incubation field is a relational setting with history, actors, patterns and institutions, and it has occurred to me to be of greatest importance - that before a field such as the incubation industry can talk about impact and change of entrepreneurial capacity - it needs to talk about relationships, experiences, expectations and the (relational) processes that are expected to produce change and impact! Studying the interaction process between incubating activities and participating entrepreneurs required a theoretical stance capable of investigating and talking about relations – as the foundation for entrepreneurial creation and impact – I needed a relational approach to answer the research question.

Relational constructionism is therefore the *thought style* of the dissertation, which implies a focus on relational processes and interactions as co-constructive of human beings and their worlds and also as a co-constructive understanding of research (Hosking 2007, Møller 2012). As such, the choice of relational constructionism is an inductively field based decision and the investigation of entrepreneurial learning becomes the investigation of the doing of relationship and what is done relationally.

4.3. Relational constructionism – the thought style of the dissertation

Relational constructionism is a theory about how the world is being created from relational practices, with specific focus on language and processes (Hosking 2007). It is a *thought style* with implications for research practice and the organising practices of organisations because it insists on the narrative reality of actors as local in both a social and a historical sense (Hosking and Hjorth 2004, 262). As an example, this thought style implies that the construction of science becomes a local relational reality, and constructions are no more, no less, than processes that make and re-make the local reality. In the study of entrepreneuring actors, relational constructionism sees entrepreneurial actors as relational beings – and the entrepreneurial creation is a continuously created construct from relations and interactions (Fletcher and Watson 2005, Fletcher 2006). The radical implication of such a view is that '*relational constructionism includes its own activities within the scope of its discourse of construction. Thus it treats the activities of theorizing and empirical work as processes of construction*' (Hosking 2007, 4).

The thought style means that traditional distinctions between individuals and context, description and explanation, objectivity and subjectivity, theoretical and empirical, the real world and the social world are sought to be overcome in the study of *inter-actions* – it so to speak collapses all these dualist oppositions. However, in practice this is not as easy as it sounds, but the theory opens up the researchers mind for questioning and taking into account traditional distinctions of good and bad or what may influence a study of entrepreneurial learning! It is a thought style that focuses on the inter-actions between human and non-human actors (technology, incubator programmes, organisations, laws, infrastructure etc.), in order to get closer to the social practices that *validate* or *discredit* how the local community of practice is constructed (Hosking and Hjorth, 2004, 263); hence the purpose has been to increase the knowledge of *how* and *why* something was created or not. The traditional management and organisation literature is dominated by entitative and realist ontology and it is important to stress that the relational epistemology results in rather different perceptions and creations of leadership, networking and negotiation (Dachler and Hosking 1995), as already touched upon.

As a point of entry to a field/ phenomenon of study, Hosking's definition of interaction does not allow the researcher to exclude or isolate any actors beforehand. Hosking uses '*the term inter-acting (a) to speak of performance (b) that involves coming together (c) of 'whoever and whatever' thereby (re)constructing person-world relations as (d) relational realities*' (Hosking 2011, 53). Studying interactions – the relational processes between or among actors – gives us a chance to understand things and their functionality, since it is within the relational conditions of exchange – meaning the use of things (such as incubating services) – that we understand what they do (Popp and Holt 2013, 55). The implications of a relational thought style is that it is not enough to investigate what kind of service entrepreneuring actors receive from incubating activities; we also need to focus on the narrative reality of how knowledge is created and transferred, the didactic methods, the context and how participants of a programme may have applied the services in order to understand what works to create productive collaboration for entrepreneurial learning.

In adopting relational constructionism as a thought style, this dissertation seeks to capture, describe and inform relational practices in the incubator context, not formulate new exact principles for design and action, even though some suggestions for alternative thinking and practice for stimulating entrepreneurial practices will be made. Relational constructionism supplements a study of barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubating context by;

- Dismissing the traditional understanding of an active provider and a passive receiver and focussing on relationships as the basis for interaction, and thus constructions, between different, but equal parties.
- Regarding relations as the creating force in the world, this makes relations the object of investigation in the study of incubating activities – implying that new ventures (relational realities) are ongoing constructions between actors, and not the historical outcome of individual creation.
- Accepting that there are no universal truths or best practice models and thus acknowledging and providing a language for complexity and uncertainty in a local-cultural-historical context as the natural state of acting, entrepreneuring, learning and incubating.

In this perspective, the study of barriers to entrepreneurial learning is a study of relations. The ontology of the dissertation means that relations are understood as ongoing relational creations, and that relations are created through verbal language as well as non-verbal language among human and non-humans actors (Latour 1987, Hosking 2011), and that people organise language with the purpose of obtaining and achieving things (Møller 2012, 39). Language comes in the form of discourses, narratives, conversations, body language, gestures, tone-of-voice, aesthetics, locality, indoor decoration, listening and dialogue, and through these forms of expression, language transforms and (re) creates patterns of social relations and actions (Hosking 2007, 9; Hosking 2011, 50). As a consequence, relations and the creation of the world are made up of more than individual cognition; it also involves emotions, sensing and collective experiences. When research takes its point of departure in relations it also considers the important social and psychological issues of social construction, which are often silenced or forgotten by retrospective sense-making processes (Møller 2012, 41). One of the problems that sometimes occurs when we analytically focus only on the individual is that we get the impression of a bounded, self-motivated human agent who acts on the environment, can create the environment and can be separated from the environment. With a relational perspective on incubating activities, such a simplistic focus does not adequately capture the complexity of how different worlds (narrative constructions) are co-constructed by the actors interacting within them. However, if we perceive fields and local construction as creations of relations, the '*interspace between the individual and the environment begins to emerge as a prime mover of human agency in the continuous work of cultivating its world*' (Cooper 2005, 1690). As I return to in Part III, this interspace between actors of the field can be understood as the available narratives, which becomes informing in terms of capturing, describing and explaining the logic of practice.

Bouwen (2010) describes how a relational approach to studying the creation of organisations and grasping the social world of collaborating actors involves focussing on the ongoing practices among the participating actors. In a way, my interest in relational constructionism (Hosking 2007) as valuable to this study came from the lack of organisational constructions (moving things, developing methods and changing ways of acting) in the empirical material, since much of it was about the troubled character of relationships as barriers to the interaction that they actually wanted to pursue. If we accept that '*it is in the doing together that the organisation is constituted*' (Bouwen 2010, 38), it becomes relevant to investigate the doing of the relationship and what is done in/ through relations – because if there is no productive doing-together – in the sense of changing, challenging or surprising interactions between advisors and entrepreneurs – it is likely that there is no entrepreneurial creation within the Accelerator Programme.

There is growing consensus in the academic field of incubation that so far it has been difficult for researchers to get close to the mechanisms of business incubating activities and study what they do because of the complexity of the phenomenon (Maritz and Brown 2013, Blackburn and Schaper 2012, Mason and Brown 2013). Most inquiries into incubating activities are designed as variance studies, in which the complexity is silent, and only one or two units of investigation have been studied (Van de Ven 2007). To allow the complexity to be heard, it is relevant to turn to theories that are capable of capturing the interdependent nature of organisational life, the in-betweens of relationships, inter-action learning, organising and entrepreneurial creation (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, 551). Relational constructionism offers a way of thinking about and performing empirical conduct and a vocabulary for entrepreneurial interactions and performance that allows the complexity of venturing actors and their making to be heard (Fletcher 2003, 127), which I have found to be both useful and important in terms of understanding why incubating activities are performed as they are – and also what acts as barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

Steyaert (2004, 11) suggests a study of entrepreneurial processes that look to the mundane; the small stories collected of the everydayness of entrepreneuring, studying the complexity of entrepreneurial making from interviews, meetings, e-mails, events, pieces of texts and language, as this study intended to do. This is also why it made sense to perform the fieldwork as an ethnographic inspired study focussing on narrative practices of an organisational field (Czarniawska 2004, 33). The study of relations and relationship constructions is by the nature of the phenomenon difficult, but I have chosen to investigate relations through texts, stories and conversation – in short – in the language of the field. Through narrative reading of language I seek meaning and explanations of the actions in the field to answer the research question. I follow Czarniawska's 2004 argument that "*a student of social life, no matter of which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as* *a form of social life, a form of knowledge, and a form of communication*" (Czarniawska 2004, 14). Narrative analysis and construction is introduced in this thesis as a writing method for structuring the empirical material – which allows me to make sense of the events and conversations that I have participated in during the fieldwork.

4.4. A narrative approach to analysis

The dissertation's ontological stance is that entrepreneuring and incubating processes are local-social-historical constructions (Hosking and Hjorth 2004, 261) of which it follows that *"the kinds of narratives people use to make sense of their situations always will be an empirical question rather than a presuppositional question*' (Somers 1994, 630). With a relational constructionist stance I have to engage in empirically based research due to the purpose of the dissertation – which supports the ethnographic inspired method and the narrative strategy for analysis. A relationally informed understanding of narrative and plot, with the aim of grasping the entrepreneurial learning processes of interacting with and around incubating activities, centres on what it means to provide support, the purpose of support, and what it is like to receive support?

In my way of applying narratives as a method for analyzing the empirical material, the thesis is stirred by the Czarniawska view (1997, 2004) on organizations – as complex and dynamic webs of narratives. She argues that in order to understand organizations – in this case an Accelerator Programme, its context and its practices – we need to gather local and concrete stories about the life that goes on when actors organize, and subject them to abstract and illustrative interpretation. The central argument of such narrative analysis of organizations is that the interpretative descriptions of how and why organizations work and act as they do, in many ways make it possible to disclose the paradoxes of organisational life – and eventually enable organisations to change (Czarniawska 1997).

According to Bruner (2004), narratives are indicators of how subscribing actors see themselves, and what options they have for acting in what they find to be an uncertain world in order to feel confident and secure about the future outcome. Narratives provide meaning for interpreting experience in a certain way and for structuring it in a way that shapes the content of practice (Bruner 2004, 701). To a large extent, narratives are pleasant and make people feel comfortable and feel that they understand and are part of their surroundings. People tell stories to make sense of their organizational life – as we relate to others and our environment through such organisational narratives (Czarniawska 2008, 32). They are likely to be sound and rational in the context where they occurred, although they may appear irrational and unintelligible to outsiders (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 119). Narratives follow certain patterns, use a certain vocabulary and refer to a certain set of ideas to enable other members of the field to understand and support the particular narrative field, which they all agree constitutes their world. Stories and narratives, which act as stabilizing effects in organisations, can be referred to as *frames* (Goffman 1974) or *interpretative templates* (Czarniawska 2008). The consequence of such shared interpretative template, is that certain narratives are retold within a particular community in the case that the community finds the narrative good, entertaining or interesting (Czarniawska 1997). Other narratives might act as silent narratives – or can be silenced, as they are not as pleasant and confirming of the existing practices as good and well-functioning – as the actors of the field would like them to be (Møller 2012). This means that there is a risk that strong organizational/ community/ field narratives might lead to the silencing of other narratives, and that positive and dominant narratives about performance and success can create self-reinforcing mechanisms and organizational inertia (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009). Møller (2012) explains such process as happening because narratives '*allows the community to communicate internally in meaningful ways, develop a sense of community, build personal and professional identities and not least, use a certain kind of argumentation which somehow tends to identify those not sharing the same ideas as ignorant threats to civilization*' (Møller 2012, 11). If new ideas do not fit into the existing frames of reference, Møller hints why some organisations or processes can be experienced as very resistant to change, critique or alternative ways of thinking.

Communities need narratives to enable actors to act within a framework of legitimacy and acceptance that makes other actors help, sustain and co-produce the community. Hence, in order for the incubation industry to be community of practice for learning, a narrative about entrepreneurial learning has to be present. In theory, there may be an endless number of ways to describe a field of incubating activities and therefore an endless number of ways to perform it (Czarniawska 2004, 62). However, as I am arguing in this dissertation, I find that some of narratives are repeatedly re-constructed in the field of business incubation are so common and familiar that they have become 'canonical narratives' (Bruner 1990, 47): They are accepted as truth, which in the end stands as a barrier to new relational constructions and therefore also entrepreneurial learning.

4.5. Narratives as forms of local knowledge and meaning

The structure of the analysis is made up of descriptions of a range of interacting narratives in the field, constructed by the researcher in the write-up process, which together form a story about barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context. The narratives of the analysis are constructed during the fieldwork as they have "sprung" from the analysis of the material. As the plot maker of the overall *'story'* of the thesis, I have chosen the narratives I have deemed to be important for understanding the barriers to entrepreneurial learning occurring as a process and as a potential relational outcome of incubating activities.

Narratives, then, become the analytical strategy and way of presenting the fieldwork material, for understanding incubating practices in the field that both researchers and practitioners can learn from.

A single narrative is a two-dimensional illustration, while multiple narratives together represent the field of incubation with greater detail and depth (Møller 2012, 9). The incubation industry is presented as an organizing unit continuously constructed, as narratives live together, depend on each other and sustain each other as a web of narratives. The present field construction may seem solid as a rock, which makes it challenging to have alternative stories or processes addressed by the actors in the field, or even getting the actors to imagine other kind of narratives as potentially relevant (Czarniawska 2008). Even though the Accelerator programme is a rather new construction and as such a new context of relationships, many of the relationships, experiences, expectations and contexts seem to be rather stable in the perception of existing and incoming actors; incubating relationships do not start from scratch. As an example, narratives about the need for support prevail in the field, and support for entrepreneurs is widely accepted as a necessary standard of the Welfare State and viewed as appropriate (Møller 2012, 134). In my interpretation we are studying a field whose attitude towards entrepreneurial support is that entrepreneurs in Denmark have certain unfulfilled needs - it is necessary that to provide support - and the support have to be professional. This is very much in line with the language of entrepreneurship policy presented in Part I. The field is reluctant to allow alternative interpretations of the exact ' real needs' of entrepreneurs – or get really precise on what 'professional' in terms of entrepreneurial support implies.

My work with the fieldwork material has, as it will be described later in this chapter, made it possible for me to connect many influencing parts and perform a multi-voices study of the local field (Langley et al. 2013, 1). The result is that I tell my overall story about barriers to entrepreneurial learning through different narratives – constructed during my analysis of the fieldwork material. In organizational communities as the incubator context in this study, storytelling is a common sense-making tool of human relationships among internal and external actors (Czarniawska 2004, 31). Single stories – as the following field-based examples - may act as tales of the field[21], which are typical sensemaking arguments in the field; stating that '*entrepreneurs are special human beings on a hard and difficult mission*' and '*entrepreneurship has to be externally supported,*' which represent a picture that matches other stories about '*the necessity of growth*', '*who is going to pay for my upkeep when I get old*?' and '*entrepreneurs as the heroes of tomorrow*'[22]. In collection, such stories form

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[21] Van Maanen 2011 use the word tales, because "*it draws attention the inherent story-like character of fieldwork accounts, as well as to the inevitable made by an author when composing an ethnographic work*" (Van Maanen 2011, 8). Each accounts given as examples here sum up tales, which are present in the incubation field
[22] These sentences are not quotes, but extracts of the empirical material made by the researcher

narratives, which are part of what we could describe as a field of practices – a community or one possible way of presenting the incubation industry. Such small-standardized stories act as reasonable arguments in the field, and are then not only representations or 'war stories' of a community but constellations of relationships that are continuously co-constructed and even more important – constellations that make actors act in certain ways.

The multi-voiced strategy of ethnographic write-up is "*recommended by many. There are then not one but many narratives; as in a postmodern novel, all tell their story and the researcher does not have to take a stand on which is 'right' and which is 'wrong' page*" (Czarniawska 2004, 62). It might be true that the researcher does not have to take a stand or judge the narratives – but, as it will also be clear in the analytical chapters, the researcher is likely to silence some of the voices that form the polyphony of the field to give some more space than others. As Czarniawska 2004 phrases it "*The problem is common: whom to include, whom to exclude, and who deserves which type of attention*?" (Czarniawska 2004, 121). An example of another story I could have told from the field that I have chosen not to develop further could be the matter of *selection* – how is entrepreneurial potential evaluated? This theme is strongly represented in the material – containing many stories about "spotting talent" and "evaluating technological superiority", but I have chosen not to question the selection process - or the potential of the ventures and their actors, and focus on the actual learning processes in the field, with the current resources available.
As I will return to later in the chapter, on how I have analyzed the empirical material as narratives, the overall analysis and plot of the thesis is the answer to the research question. My emplotment (Czarniawska 2004) introduces a structure that allows making sense of the complex and at some times also sensitive fieldwork experiences.

4.6. The industrial PhD programme and initiation of the research project

The field study of the dissertation is carried out under the setting of the Danish Industrial PhD programme, which funds collaborative research closely linked to practice, with the aim of collaborative research with both academic and practitioner value and impact. An industrial PhD project is conducted in collaboration between an Industrial PhD fellow, a university and a private company. The private company apply for subsidies for financing part of the researcher's salary from the Danish Agency of Science, Technology and Innovation, and the researcher is formally employed by the company, but also given access to the necessary facilities at the university. The researcher has to divide her time 50/50 between the company and the university and fulfil explicit requirements for both institutions. The industrial PhD differs from the university PhD by not having a teaching obligation but a communication obligation to the host company. The research conditions of the industrial PhD offers privileged access as an insider to the empirical field (Van de Ven 2007), but there are also challenges in the role as employed researcher related to the organisation under investigation (Alvesson 2003, 2009) as discussed later in this chapter.

The collaborative partners of this project are Symbion A/S and Copenhagen Business School. In 2009 CEO Peter Torstensen and Professor Mette Mønsted met at conference at Symbion and shared an enthusiasm for the research opportunities of Symbion's Accelerator programme. The ambition of the programme was to create a truly new and professional offer to highly potential entrepreneurs, and the programme structure gave extraordinary opportunities for following incubation impact and entrepreneurial learning processes in real time. Professor Mette Mønsted arranged for a meeting at Symbion between the CEO of Symbion and me, as the researcher. It was a relatively short meeting in which many perspectives was touched upon, but the main conclusion was an agreement of pursuing a research project application for the industrial PhD programme with the overall theme of; *Looking for growth*. The application was approved in Marts 2010.

The following quote is from the initial meeting in the beginning of 2010 with the CEO of Symbion. It indicates that many of the unanswered questions about the in-betweens of entrepreneurship support in research are a puzzle to practitioners as well. The task he had in mind for me was to study and document the effects of the incubating activities, and in an almost existential question for the programme, he asked,

> *'Does it make a difference – and what is it we do that works? What does it mean to develop small companies – What works – Why does it not work? What does timing mean, and which elements increase the likelihood of success – and what is that?'* (My notes from the meeting).

These questions suggest the many unknown elements of the incubating process that the programme manager was working within, and which he would like my research to explore. At the time, I did not know how essential these questions are to incubating processes as a field of practice and as a field of research.

Before I turn to the design and methodological considerations of the field study I introduce the Accelerator Programme, which has been the centre of the fieldwork and common denominator for all conversations performed in the field by the researcher together with actors of the field.

4.7. The Accelerator programme: content, process and actors

4.7.1. Description of the accelerator programme[23]

'*We support start-ups who have a unique product or service and the ambition to take their business further. We spot, train and fund start up talents to help them develop faster and cheaper. And we work dedicatedly to share and enhance our own knowledge on entrepreneurship and business development. We believe that entrepreneurship can be taught and learned*[24]*. Some lucky few just happen to be in the right place at the right time, but most successful start-ups have worked hard for their success*' (Webpage of the programme 2014)

The business accelerator programme, which serves as the empirical field of the dissertation is hosted and performed by a science park in Copenhagen, Denmark. The programme is funded by the Danish Government and EU funds, but the science park is involved in a wide variety of incubating initiatives that are funded by both private and public institutions. The incubator programme is a 5-month intensive go-to-market programme that runs twice a year with a class of 15 high-growth entrepreneuring ventures. The programme explicitly claims to be an elite programme for the best start-up ventures in Denmark. The empirical material covers venturing participants from all over Denmark. During my fieldwork period the programme expanded to other parts of the country, establishing local versions of programme.

The programme consists of five main components. These are presented in the Programme Book as follows:

- A series of camps headed by international experts. These offer the companies insights into key methods and tools and force them to work specifically with the core of their business.
- A coach model to compensate for a lack of resources and ensure that the input from the camps is translated into real action

[23] During the three-year fieldwork period, various elements of the programme content changed, as did the wording and descriptions of the programme. This means that the different participants and advisors have not been part of completely the same processes. During the fieldwork, I participated in and contributed to a number of programme alterations, evaluations, changes and new strategies for programme content. One advisor mentioned that he had seen more than 51 PowerPoint versions of the programme within the first three years! With regard to the research question, this does not change the possibilities for inquiring into the relational constructions of ventures – or the lack of them – that may lead to some kind of entrepreneurial capacity for acting entrepreneurially, which is the basic elements of interactions. No matter the design of the programme, there are still interactions to investigate.

[24] The word *learned* is used here in the 2014 description of the programme. The word *learning* as well as action learning methods increasingly became part of the rhetoric of the programme actors, during my fieldwork period. Nevertheless, as I discuss in chapter 5 it is my claim that the sociological, educational and relational prerequisites of learning were still not part of the actual programme practice. The same goes for the use of the terms *network* and *network model* which the field talk in an entitative, instrumental language, as something that can be found out there, added on or handed over.

- A network model where each venture links up with experts who have insights into markets and customers that will bring new knowledge to the process in order to test hypotheses and assumptions
- An interactive model for customer dialogue and markets testing to ensure that the companies' assumptions are constantly tested on real customers and potential partners
- An investment possibility. The programme also includes a pre-seed fund that participants can apply to after graduation. The max investment is a loan of EUR 400,000.

In academic terms the programme can be described as a *virtual incubator* focussing on tech-based growth ventures, with the ambition of turning entrepreneuring projects into exportable commercial ventures with no demand for the venture to be physically located at the science park site (Lewis et al. 2011). The programme interaction is designed as a close collaboration between the participating venture and an assigned advisor, which can includes coaching and professional guidance and introduction to models of business planning, marketing, customer insights, and sales on a weekly basis. The business assistance can be categorised as strong intervention (Bergek and Norrman 2008), as the incubating process is guided carefully by the advisor, follows a plan and has milestones and stage gates. Part of the incubating process is also to go beyond the incubator borders to interact with partners, customers, industry experts, suppliers etc., and the programme may act as the facilitator of such activities (Peters et al. 2004).

Camps often run as 2-5-day introductions to themes such as *value proposition, pitching, Lean Start-Up, Business models, Crossing the Chasm* and other related entrepreneurship literature themes. Entrepreneurship hotshot presenters, primarily from the United States, facilitate these camps, which aim to add a sense of professionalism and legitimacy to the programme and attract the best entrepreneuring ventures of Denmark.

4.7.2. The selection process of the Accelerator Programme

As a potential candidate for the programme, venturing actors must apply through an online form by a certain deadline. Once the deadline for a given period has passed, the programme manager and the advisors meet and score the applicants on a five-point scale on measures such as time-to-market, product differentiation, scalability, need for funding and management competencies. It is obviously difficult to determine these criteria, and that is also why other *signs* of future prosperity and quality such as team composition, previous performance, previous experience and references are more or less explicitly taken into account. In many ways these 'other signifiers' are relational (in-between) matters, indicating how relationally competent and well connected to other (successful) actors the venture is.

Some of the applicants have been contacted by the programme and encouraged to apply, and some have met or talked with advisors about the programme and their venture before they apply. This means that it varies how much information the programme team has about the individual ventures when making the recommendation for Selection Camp. For some of the applicants, it is a huge burden to fill out the application form, while others have no problems with this task. The applicants who receive the highest score are invited to present their case at Selection Camp for the Selection Board members. Typically 25-30 ventures are invited to pitch their case, and why they should be accepted into the programme.

Selection Camp is held twice annually and is organised by industry; thus, ventures in the IT field present their case to board members who have some industry-specific knowledge about their case. The selection procedure is that the applicant has 15 minutes to present his or her case, and afterwards the board has 5 minutes for follow-up questions. The candidate leaves the room, and each board member says 'yes,' 'no' or 'maybe'; these verdicts are collected by one of the programme advisors. Then the next applicant is invited to the stage. Once all the applicants have presented their case, the team members and programme management collect all the votes and decide which 15 to invite for Kick-Off Camp. Thus, although the board members lend their expertise and legitimacy to the selection process, the power of selecting whom to accept is still very much in the hands of the Accelerator Programme team. As it was described to me by one advisor;

> *"You have to remember that besides the `objective` evaluation of the product potential, it is also crucial that we have a feeling of being able to work with team and contribute with the stuff we do"* (Fieldnotes from Selection Camp)

The board members are representatives of the Danish Venture Capital industry and organisational partners of the programme. Most of the board members have some form of entrepreneurial background, they have invested personally in entrepreneurial start-ups, and they act as both advisors and investors for their respective organisations. The accelerator programme puts considerable effort and resources into making the selection process legitimate and 'professional', both as a means of attracting potential ventures and as a way of making up for the ambiguous measures of performance. The process is constructed to justify selection and investment in the companies and bring prestige to the selected companies, who are to feel part of the few selected who are worthy of investing in.

4.7.3. Characteristics of entrepreneurial actors and their entrepreneurial venture/project

The incubator participants are small technology-based projects or start-ups between the proof-of-concept and proof-of-market phase. Few are already on the market, hoping to become the next Danish gazelle venture. The programme aims only to take in companies with a finished product/ service that is ready for big-scale commercialisation, but it has proven difficult, based on the selection process, to evaluate how far along participants are in having proof-of-concept, a customer base etc. Various actor-network studies have shown that technology is as an independent actor in processes of entrepreneurial becoming and is as hard to predict and control as the social actors (Korsgaard 2011, 665). The majority of the participants have at least three years of university education, and even though the ventures included in the programme are technology-based many of the participants have some kind of business experience or education as well. Technology-based entrepreneurs are sometimes described in the techno-entrepreneurship and related incubation literature as nerdy engineers or biochemists with no interest in the real world (Roberts 1991, Prodan 2007). The respondents included in the empirical material cannot be stereotyped as such but form a much more heterogeneous group. Some of *the technologies* have participated in incubating activities, advice situations, pitch camps or competitions before, and the same goes for the *entrepreneurial actors*; this means that some participating actors know the game of incubating activities, speak the language and know what to expect. Most are, however, new to this kind of support and are less familiar with the language and what to expect. The participants in the programme are predominantly male and in the 25 to 55-year age span. Three of the 39 interviewed participants were women.

4.7.4. Characteristics of the advisors and partners of the programme

At the time of my arrival at the science park, the programme team consisted of eight advisors, one Industrial PhD and one programme manager[25]. Most team members were ambitious and successful individuals in their early thirties with an international outreach and no significant entrepreneurial experience. The programme also had more experienced advisors attached who were not in the office on a daily basis, and who mainly offered specific industry expertise. The working language of the programme and at the office was English; this aimed to signal an international outlook and to prepare the participants for taking their venture abroad. The working language was changed to Danish after the first year of my employment, at which time the team underwent a substantial expansion, several team members left, and all the members of the new team were native Danish-speakers. One experience from the early phase of the programme was that it was difficult to get experienced entrepreneurs attached to the entrepreneuring ventures as advisors on a daily basis, and that these experienced entrepreneurs were not willing to put in enough hours as mentors for the companies, which was part of the original programme philosophy. The programme manager had therefore chosen a team that consisted mainly of younger, high-performing consultants – wearing black suits and with generic competences to work with the companies. Few of the consultants had previous experience from start-ups and certain key

[25] The programme also had a Biotech part, but the activities and consultants were located elsewhere in Copenhagen

industries. From my early fieldwork is listened to an underlying discussion at the office and in the context of the programme - about the importance and use of generic skills versus industry expertise and experience. During the time of my fieldwork, the team of advisors and incubator managers has been very dynamic, and the make-up of the advisors' team has become more diverse with a stronger presence of advisors with specific industry experience, established networks and experience with founding their own companies - but with less focus on international outreach and international network.

The Accelerator programme has several partners from the Danish Incubation industry, as already described in chapter 3, ranging from university based innovation environments to ministries of business and education and the private investor industry. In addition the programme draws upon a network of external entrepreneurship teachers/ scholars and hot shot entrepreneurship-savvy people that are used for camps and other events. Through the large Danish network and many events of the programme, I have had the opportunity to meet, interview, observe, visit and to a smaller degree interact with many of these actors of the incubation industry. This has been an important source of getting to hear more and different stories of the field and regard the fieldwork as reaching beyond the programme as a single-case study, but as an organizational ethnography study of the Accelerator programme and its context.

4.8. Organizational ethnography and ethnographic inspired interviews

In an article from 2011, established entrepreneurship researchers Sarasvathy and Venkataraman (2011) point out that even an exhaustive search of the literature reveals very little research on the '*inter-subjective interactions between entrepreneurs and their stakeholders, partners, customers, suppliers, professional advisors, employees, or the local communities within which the fledging new venture is located* (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman 2011, 126). The authors therefore call for more longitudinal and qualitative work to address unanswered questions in entrepreneurship research on how network, interactions, content, governance, contexts and structures emerge over time – and this dissertation is also an attempt at contributing to this.

This methodological backdrop of this thesis draws upon anthropological and qualitative field methods to organizational life, which consists of long standing hermeneutic and interpretative traditions within social science (Watson 2011). This tradition relates back to Mayo (1933) and the Hawthorne studies and Goffman's (1959, 1961) studies of front-stage and back-stage of organizational life to mention a few. Organizational ethnography is one outcome of the long battle between quantitative (survey and statistical research) and qualitative approaches to organizational studies – as a renewal of the field drawing attention to ethnographic methods and associated theoretical ideas (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992). Especially the works of Van Maanen

(2011) and Geertz (2000) gave rise to a renewed appreciation of qualitative methods, as they have argued for and demonstrated the relevance of ethnographic methods in studies of organisations. In recent times organizational researchers expand ethnographic approaches to various contexts and areas of studies, in ways that create understanding of everyday meaning making as central component of organizing processes in organisations. Czarniawska has argued that ethnographically inspired approaches is the ones "*best suited for grasping the essence of organizational action – the inherent dialectics of matter and ideas*" (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 44), which is the primary purpose of this dissertation - in terms of understanding the barriers to entrepreneurial learning as relationally constructed. I have especially turned to Czarniawska (1997, 2004 and 2008) and Watson (2011) in distilating what is special about organisational ethnography, and how such a study could benefit the purpose of this dissertation. The dissertation is in many ways inspired by their approaches to organizational studies and focus on narratives as a method of understanding how we relationally perform or act in organizational contexts. When I stress that my interactions is *inspired* by ethnographic studies it is because the Industrial PhD set-up evidently differs from the ethnographic descriptions about the free researcher, going with the flow or planning the research and interview independently of the organisations goal. Employed by the organisation, this cannot be the case, but as already mentioned in the introduction, the set-up offers other advantages. Furthermore, the relational constructionist perspective includes that the researcher evidently is part of the research construction (Hosking 2011) and as Czarniawska (2004) stresses; narrative research involves the emplotment of the researcher.

The field of business incubation is loaded with political promises, entrepreneurial dreams and the venture industry's longing for the next big thing. Nevertheless, many questions about the methods and functionality of incubating activities still remain unanswered, indicating a lack of solid knowledge about what kinds of methods, processes or practical/ theoretical knowledge make an impact to entrepreneuring (Maritz and Brown 2013). That is why it has made sense to carry out an inductive, cyclical study of the process development of entrepreneurs and to follow an exploratory course within the field. Such an investigation calls for a space of dialogue and reflection, and the organisational researcher's ethnographic position offers this space. '*Ethnographers reflect constantly on their work, their writing, their motives etc. This reflective practice works to inform their research at every stage. Thus, ethnography is not a mechanical methodology where everyone goes out and collects data analyses it and writes it up'* (Scott-Jones 2010, 8). Hence, the industrial PhD set-up fits very well with the need for going back and forth and reflecting, in the field and with field as the research progresses. The ethnography is then the written product of fieldwork; it is a process of going back and forth between field and reflection and at some point moving the process to the desk and writing it up (Van Maanen 2011, 5).

Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) argue that interacting with empirical material as a conversation partner opens up the possibility of developing theoretical ideas by mobilising and problematising existing frameworks and theories, and that problematising the existing involves rethinking or developing with references from both the theoretical and practical world. The method of using empirical fieldwork as a conversation partner for critical dialogue has afforded me the opportunity of exploring the surprises and unexpected accounts instead of trying to steer around them or abandoning the study. I have continuously been able to test my questions on the Accelerator programme manager, team-members and participating entrepreneurs and have also challenged some of their daily work practices. This dialogue has provided insights into the incubating actors' rationales and arguments, as their interactions and decisions typically make sense from a local point of view. This is an important point for a researcher to understand in order not to judge their practice as strange and ill-conceived but instead understand the underlying logic. Interacting with the field in this way has also provided insights into ways of communicating with the field and given me an important opportunity to learn the language of the field. This has given me a better chance understanding the sensemaking of the field, but also – even more important – to speak a trustworthy, local language of the different contexts of the field.

In the case of this dissertation, the written product is a narrative analysis of the field – the environment of the Accelerator programme. The field acts as a site for narrative production, and together with my observations and participation in the field, this study have favoured qualitative interviews to get closer the interactions of incubating interactions (Steyaert and Katz 2004). The direct and influential interaction with the actors of the field is one area where organizational ethnography can differ significantly from traditional ethnography, which proposes objectivity and a sharp distinction between self and other (Tedlock 1991), and therefore from a relational constructionist view does not make sense. Interviews in various forms have been widely criticised for their lack of objectivity and authentic insights – and the 'scientific character' of interviews are often questioned (Ybema et al. 2009). However, from a relational point of view there is no authentic world to be found and no naïve realism to subscribe to. In addition, along with Czarniawska (2004) and (Gubrium and Holstein 2008), this dissertation anticipates that objectivity might be the goal of other scientific studies, but not of organizational studies of relations as they are always specific to the context. Nevertheless, treating the interview as an ethnographic object, also means acknowledging and foregrounding the relational circumstances in which narratives occurs, not just the narrative content (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The interview is thus regarded as a "*micro-site of narrative production or just a site of distribution where a researcher is allowed to parttake in narratives previously produced*" (Czarniawska 2004, 51).

Interviews offer insights into an artificial reality, revealing how actors make sense and act upon the world in the setting of the relationally constructed interview – often in the form of retrospective sensemaking (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Traditional ethnography, in the sense of purely observationally fieldwork may be 'enough' for catching organisations as they happen – but, the study of organisational relations cannot in the same sense be observed – as they are indeed results of retrospective sensemaking. We may observe actions and pictures and listen randomly to voices, but we learn the meaning making of organisations by speaking and interacting with the locals of the field. And as Czarniawska-Joerges soberly phrases it, '*if organizational actors lie, and they do it in a repetitive way, this common lie is more informative than an idiosyncratic truth*' (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 198). Interviews generate stories, but they may also provoke storytelling through the repetitive, open and extensive conversation format. Actors and their accounts are and will remain the main source of the knowledge we can acquire about organising processes, and in the context of studying incubating activities interviews and informal conversation has proved to be an accessible method for entering into the life of organisational actors in the field of the incubation industry.

One of the distinctive features of organizational ethnography is that the level of the researcher's participation in the daily activities of the field is often flexible and unstructured with the aim of understanding meaning, stories and actions from the viewpoint of the field actors. Ethnography is a research method that seeks to produce a representation of the social constructions – as support - with the purpose of producing understanding and insight (Watson 2013b, 406). It typically involves extensive fieldwork where the researcher is sometimes a form of participant observer and sometimes an observing participant (Van Maanen 2011, 14). While conventional ethnography often is about a stranger entering a new setting and 'breaking in', this study can be described as *at-home* ethnography (Alvesson 2009), in which the struggle can be more of 'breaking out' from the taken-for-granted and familiar. For the same reason it is important to '*be keenly aware of the unavoidably collaborative nature of the process*' and '*take more explicit note than usual of the participation in the interview conversation, recording their contributions along with those of the informant*' (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 37). In the following I will describe how I have sought to do this.

4.9. Field study descriptions - interaction, participation and observation

Employed as an Industrial PhD by a the science park, I have over a three-year period been present in the field learning about the processes, functions, languages and social mechanisms of the incubating activities performed by the actors of the science park and other related actors of the incubation industry. I came with an overall plan for how to conduct my research, but without each of my activities necessarily having a pre-defined purpose (Johnstone 2007, 99). I have applied methods from the ethnographic toolbox (Scott-Jones and Watt

2010) to produce the material, which mainly consists of qualitative interviews, observations of and participation in the dialogues, interactions and going concerns that inform the field and writing tons of notes in notebooks for later inspection and analysis.

As an employee of the science park I began my work by being assigned a desk in a large office space together with the team members of the Accelerator programme. I was not introduced in any way to the team and was required to present my research task and myself repeatedly as I met the members of the organisation. Nobody affiliated with the programme seemed to know I was coming, as the research proposal had been arranged with the incubator manager, but people were open and friendly and helped me settle in at the office. Some of my new colleagues were a little puzzled about my research task, while others were more pragmatic and began to hand over some of their smaller tasks to enable me to learn about their work. The team was located in a single, large room with desks, telephones, computers, a meeting table and many different people coming and going throughout the day. As the secretary, the advisors and the manager of the programme all had their desk in the same office space, this was a good place to listen, watch, participate, ask questions and observe. Lunchtime was one of the most important situations during my day, as it offered an opportunity to ask questions about previous occurrences and events at the office, get to know people and discover the general topics that the team talked about. Much time has been spent discussing my study, the experiences of the advisors and support for entrepreneurs in general – as most of the advisors were open to tell and discuss these matters.

After one month I conducted a pilot interview-study focusing on impact, with participants from the third round of the programme, testing out some of questions about which kind of change the programme had contributed with to the ventures. The findings were presented to the management and programme team at an internal seminar – and led to further interviews with two consultants and 5 Selection Board members. Encouraged by the incubator manager, I also began a specific case-study of a selected participant of the incubating programme round 4, which meant that I was present at all the venture's meetings with the advisor and participated in camps and group sessions as an additional resource. I made notes during meetings and sent out resumes of the meeting to every member of the group[26].

[26] The Programme Manager encouraged me to follow three participating ventures and be part of the entire advisory process during round 4. I selected three ventures based on having seen them present at Selection Camp and my knowledge about the advisors of the team – as I knew by then these advisors would represent different approaches (industry expert, generic advisor, go-do-attitude) to counseling. Nevertheless, after being part of three sessions with the advisors and ventures, two of the advise-processes were not really progressing – and I pulled from the process – also due to time constraints. It turned out to be very time-consuming to be part of just one advisory-process.

The initial interviews during the first year served as basis for planning the larger pre- and post programme study that I was to follow up on after my maternity leave. This meant that I interviewed the participants of Round 5 just before my leave, and then again a year later in late 2011.

During this first year at the office I was present 3-4 days a week and only at the university for meetings and when writing. I primarily read, performed smaller survey tasks for the programme, arranged interviews and organised my notes, as the programme office was not a quiet place to work, although it was a great place for having conversations with the advisors. These conversations were crucial in the preparation of interview questionnaires, and I would often ask for comments to my questionnaires before interviews and test my initial constructions of the incubating practice. I also participated in all activities, team meetings and educational camps related to the accelerator programme. During the 5 month programme the participants would be exposed to 4-5 major camps lasting 1-2 days – and these sessions were great places to observe actors of the programme, relate and interact and get to know the participants and continuously talk with them about their venture, the accelerator programme and how they experienced the various inputs they got exposed to through the programme. At camps I would participate in workshops and small sessions of group-work, always presenting myself as a researcher of the programme, but contributing to the group with whatever possible and relevant. This type of participation was not planned, but a mix between observation and participation, in order not to disturb, but act as member of the programme team.

Being present in the field, I observed the recruitment process for new participants from the initial cold calls to potential leads (high-potential entrepreneuring actors) in the office; to the subsequent meetings with the candidates and the tension in the office to reach a certain critical mass of good leads in order to be able to reject the less promising ones; to evaluation meetings with advisors and incubator management to decide which candidates to present to the Selection Board; to Selection Camp with presentations and evaluation by the Selection Board; and to the team members' final selection of the fortunate 15 who would be invited for Kick-Off Camp. As described earlier, the selection of entrepreneuring actors into the programme is a significant and interesting part of the incubating process, both from a political point of view, and from a research point of view, because the process defines what gets into the box of incubation and is thus also an indicator of what kind of outcome to expect. Getting potential leads into the programme is part of the programme cycle, and it is an important task for the programme manager to encourage advisors to call up new ventures to sell them the programme and to keep in touch with the entrepreneur community to learn about new ventures – 'leads' - and attract them to the programme. The selection camp processes has been important events in the field work, as the process involves the interaction of most actors of the programme context and to some extent displays some of the paradoxes of supporting entrepreneurship. The selection camp process has given me extraordinary insights on the decision-making processes of the programme and how the providing actors of the incubation industry talk about – and select – the potential entrepreneurs.

Returning from maternity leave in late 2011 I continued to participate partially in the consultancy work of the programme with the participants and carry out minor tasks for the advisors and programme manager as research tasks, writing one-pagers on the participating ventures and participating in team meetings whenever possible. As planned, I interviewed the 15 participants of Round 5 to finalize the before and after study.

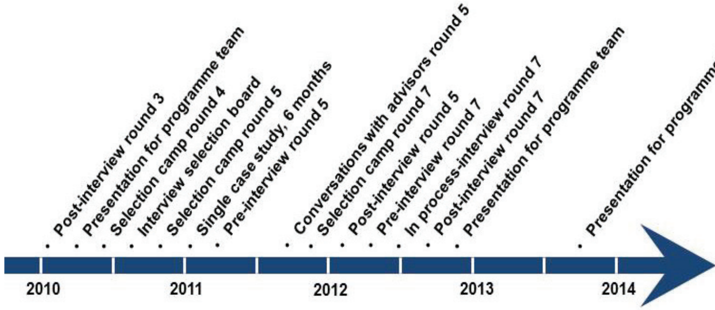
During the second year of the PhD process I began to spend less time at the programme office and more time at the university – to be able to work with the field material in a more quiet and remote place. This made me a rare person at the office, even though I would still participate in team meetings, and also in the research group Entrepreneurial Learning Lab, EL2[27] – which had been established in the Science Park while I was on maternity leave. I contributed with material for the research group based on my initial findings, participated in meetings and discussions and conducted 15 interviews with each participants of Round 7 of the programme during 2012.

During the third year of the PhD I spent most of time at my university office, reading – writing and knitting all the bits and pieces of the fieldwork together. I had one weekly day at the programme office, in which I typically had meetings with my company advisor and would follow up on various processes, including the participants I had interviewed, that I had been following previously.

Below is a timeline showing the major events and progression of the fieldwork – which cannot display the everyday presence in the field as a researcher and employee of the programme.

[27] EL2 was a collaboration project funded by The Danish Industry Foundation together with Symbion Science Park, with the purpose of investigating entrepreneurial learning. Despite the obvious relevance to my project, this project did not affect my study significantly in terms of theory or methods. The interviews with Round 7 participants were part of my work for EL2. They were designed in a way to both contribute to the EL2 research and my study on barriers to entrepreneurial learning as well.

Table 4.1 Timeline of fieldwork



In the following I will go deeper into my description of why the field study got the form it did, and also reflect on my way of collecting material and acting in the field as researcher and interviewer.

4.10. Field work reflections - excess of access – and gaining *real* access

Much has been written about researchers' difficulties with gaining access to a certain field, as organisations do not necessarily like to be observed (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, Neergaard 2007). I have enjoyed what might be expressed as an excess of access – almost every direction has been possible, and it has been a challenge to turn down new tasks and involvement in programme activities. Being employed as an Industrial Ph.D. by the organisation under investigation obviously made access easier, but it should be mentioned that *all* doors were opened to me in the network of the programme. I mentioned my PhD fellow title and company affiliation every time I contacted potential respondents or informants[28], and I have not experienced a single rejection, whether the first, second or third time I approached someone for interviews or information. I have had positive, critical and open dialogues with numerous actors affiliated with the Accelerator Programme who entered into conversations with me, listened and responded to the issues I raised. This is not to say that the position

[28] I will refer to the actors I have interviewed both as *respondents, participants and advisors*, when I talk about the interviews and in the re-construction of the conversations into narratives. The respondents and I are co-creators of the empirical material, and in a relational constructionist vocabulary they would be referred to as my co-authors or co-researchers (McNamee and Hosking 2012, Møller 2012). However, the interviews were still made in a setting where there is an interviewer with an interview guide and a recording device, and where interviewee provides the answers. The respondents are likely to have perceived themselves as respondents in a more artificial construction than a normal conversation (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 37), which is why I find it more appropriate for this study to maintain the term *respondent*. Also remark that I refer to all respondents as *he*, and have changed the few *she's* in the fieldwork material and interview material into *he* in an attempt to anonymise the few female actors in the field.

industrial PhD and ethnographic researcher position are easy, but it is a privileged and rich position in terms of access. I will return to some of the challenges of the employed field worker later in this chapter.

During my second year of work and field study, the advisors with whom I was working closely at the office and in programme activities and regarded as my colleagues, began to realise that they too were the subject of observation along with the participants and other parts of the programme. In my experience, to some extent this changed their view of me as a researcher who was studying some remote object elsewhere. It became clear that in my research, I was also to a certain extent evaluating the team members' (both advisors and administrative staff) performance. In some situations, it got somewhat awkward to work closely with and listen to conversations about processes concerning specific participants or events that I was quite familiar with from the other side of the table, from long conversations with the participant in question**.** The participant interviews are quite revealing[29] in terms of how the participants experience the quality and outcome of the incubating activities as well as their positive and negative experiences with the performance of the advisors. My position as an observer and part of the team changed, as I came to be seen as a person with confidential information about the programme activities and the advisors' work that I was not free to share. All interviews and conversations have been conducted under confidentiality. Implicit in the friendly jokes about me as – '*the shrink of the organisation*' or '*watch what you say – everything goes into that notebook*' – was an element of them not really understanding what I was doing with all my material, which gave rise to some uncertainty.

Time constraints and the sheer amount of raw material to be organised and written up created a need for 'freezing' the material, complete the fieldwork and begin to write up the material elsewhere, although due to the terms of my employment that was not entirely possible. Not being constantly located in the field made it easier to freeze the material, since it stopped evolving and shifting around me, as it had previously. During the last year of my project, my interaction with the field therefore changed into presentations to the programme team and management, which generated invaluable response from the field on my initial findings, and special events and occasions where it was natural for me to participate as an employee. During such events or simply over lunch, I would still ask around about specific ventures that I had previously followed, programme development and participants' reactions. I discussed my preliminary work and received feedback and responses from the advisors. These conversations have been influential in my work, as it enabled me to test my most recent hypotheses about a particular aspect of the incubating process in the field, and in many cases the advisors offered further suggestions as to which questions about their work they would like answers to or

[29] This also goes for the interviews and conversations with advisors and selection board members – but this was not as problematic when interviewing the participants – as they would not expect me to share their advisors comments with them.

knowledge about. On many occasions, the advisors have come to me with questions about how to handle interactions with the participants or about how to evaluate whether their work actually made a difference to the participants.

Questions that have been posed to me repeatedly, often on one-to-one occasions with the advisors has been '*Does the programme work – does our effort make any differences to the participants – and what do you think work to make a difference to them?'* this was often with reference to a specific participant that they knew I had interviewed. They too – were in doubt. It is important to note that my interpretation of this question – about the programme "working" meant - are they learning anything that makes them go do new cool stuff? Are the participants learning to become entrepreneurial in their venture-creation efforts? Such events encouraged me in investigating the barriers to learning in an incubator context.

In relation to the incubating activities and the start-up community, it is my impression that being part of the entrepreneurship community is a game where everyone is expected to contribute with what they have to offer and where everybody has to share – otherwise one's presence is not legitimate and not considered trustworthy. I see this as a general characteristic of the field, as I observed this attitude in other parts of the material. Remember also that this field is full of 'industry secrets', 'non-disclosure agreements' and a constant fear of other people stealing ideas and design. Credentials, endorsements or other types of legitimacy builders are crucial for earning a seat at the table.

In my early work at the programme office I stopped taking extensive notes at meetings and during the day, as I felt that it generated a sceptical/awkward attitude from the team members and participants. Sometimes, the actors seemed to feel uncomfortable when I was writing something while they were talking, and they might ask what I was writing. In the relational constructionist language, I was too far removed from the local conventions of right and wrong and on the edge of being wrong. My note taking became a disturbing element that jeopardised my acceptance by both the entrepreneurs and the advisors, because they were distracted by thoughts about what on earth I was writing, why I was writing, and why I stopped writing[30]. This demonstrates how the empirical material is co-constructed with the field with mixed methods, as I had to change my fieldwork praxis. Instead I learned how the actors in the field construct their relationships, and I learned to enter into the ongoing stream of stories and use the local language. I changed words in my language and my praxis in the field. I began to take notes after meetings, conversations and events and when it seemed more

[30] These experiences also reflect the challenge of the industrial PhD researcher as having many roles, both as employee, participant, observer, contributor and evaluator. Even though I find that both advisors and participants of the programme have been positive about my presence, the actual purpose of my work has had to be communicated many times.

accepted to take notes, as in the setting of Selection Camp, Educational camps or internal programme meetings. On these kinds of occasions, it is accepted to listen passively and take notes. On other occasions, I realised that in order to be accepted as an equal participant, I had to participate actively with questions and suggestions, volunteering for small tasks and contributing to the processes with my understanding of business and organisational creation. My participation needed to be appropriate in the local setting of the field, and if I wanted to be in the room I had to respect the technology, say my prayers to the holy entrepreneurship Gods and contribute with what I had to offer. In my own interpretation of the present situations, it was not appropriate for the ongoing process, nor was it my goal, to be the non-participating observer, as Bruno Latour or as Barbara Czarniawska acting as a shadow of the subjects of study (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, Czarniawska 2008). I had to find my own way of getting accepted as a legitimate researcher in the field.

For actors who are short of time, and who are distrustful of everything they have not yet recognised as valuable to their emotional quest of venturing, the relational aspects of trust and legitimacy are crucial for the collaboration (Thorpe et al. 2009, 203). In order to gain access to the participants' entrepreneuring processes, researchers, support staff and advisors of incubating activities have to interact with and adopt an attitude that clearly shows that we too invest ourselves in the process, and that we respect the entrepreneuring actors' time more than anything else – including our own performance measures. This signals that working within this field is not only about gaining access and space for observing – it is also about establishing trust, legitimacy and interest and about respecting the respondents' individual meaning making in order to gain access to stories and experiences. That also goes for interviewing and interacting with advisors in the field. My most important tools with regard to gaining access have been *thorough preparation* on the entrepreneurial ventures and actors and their technologies, a willingness to listen to the respondents in order to find appropriate ways to provoke and challenge and being open about my project and its purpose.

Whether I was doing interviews, participating in meetings or attending camps, the design of my interaction, note taking, presence and form of interaction were not given beforehand. One of the challenges of an ethnographic research strategy is *'that researchers begin without the benefit of a clear linear path and the certainty of a conclusion, and must deal with complexity and make design choices as their research progresses'* (Johnstone 2007, 102). On the other hand, I have experienced how the ability to change my approach and my language took me to other places than expected, and how my methods for interacting with the field have evolved over the course of my study. Studying the training and learning processes of incubating activities have been a learning journey for me too. That is especially true when it comes to entering into dialogue and carrying out interviews but also with regard to listening and learning about how the field speaks or does not speak about certain processes. I had to find ways to make actors talk about things that they do, but normally do not articulate. Some entrepreneurs do not articulate who and whom they consider being part of or would like to make part of their ongoing construction of a network – at least not in short, well-defined answers. Nevertheless, it is still possible to frame concrete questions that encourage respondents to talk about the necessary relational constructions (whom and what to influence) to change the import regulations of cars, or where the money came from for the prototype production.

In the following sections I will dig into the interviews of the fieldwork – as they have a dominant role in empirical material and have shown to be a productive way of getting closer to the meaning making of the field. The "*research interview thus opens a possibility for an unusual but symmetrical exchange. The practitioners offer a personal insight into the realities of their practice. The researcher offers that which our profession has an abundance of but others do not: an opportunity of trying out one's thoughts without practical consequences*" (Czarniawska 2004, 52). I believe that this is one of the reasons for most of the respondents I have interviewed reacting quite positively to the situation, being often relieved afterwards – having had time to reflect and be challenged on their individual praxis – without immediate consequences!

4.11. Interviews – occasions for narrative work

The formal interviews were held in Danish, recorded and transcribed. Most of the interviews with participants and advisors were performed at their location/organisation, indicating that I met them in their own setting. I arranged the interviewed as this on purpose, as a way of experiencing the participants in their own environment and also having time to small talk, getting to know each other before and after the actual interview. Second reason was for me to be as little a disturbance to them as possible, not wasting their time. Some interviews were also performed in the meeting rooms of the Science Park and in a few cases via Skype. Due to the amount of interview material, a student aid was hired to do the transcribing. I instructed the student on how to reproduce language, and in all cases, the exactness of the transcription was checked and verified against audio recordings by myself. Formal conversations with incubation programme advisors were conducted, and notes were taken during and after the conversations. These conversations were intended as preparation for interviews with participants, but many of the conversations turned out to offer valuable accounts of the other side of the relationship experience. All interviews were conducted under confidentiality, which is a key concern for most of the respondents. The interview length varies from 30 minutes to 1.5 hour, with one hour being the average.

The interviews have been conducted as ethnographic inspired interviews, as contextually situated and with meaning co-constructed by the respondent and researcher (Spradley 1979, 13). Among the advantages of ethnographic interview are the insights into alternative realities, the complexity of processes and creation, which the interviews produce (Johnstone 2007, 113). The context of incubating activities is a field of salesmen, superheroes and dreamers who are used to telling stories, specifically stories with a certain purpose (in most cases to convince, persuade or impress). I have sought to get behind the initial glorified stories, not necessarily in an attempt to uncover the true story but to discover another story that would tell me more about their daily relational constructions to realise the venture. In many cases, this involves talking about venturing when it gets tough and difficult. Many of the respondents are used to 'selling' themselves as legitimate investment opportunities to potential investors, advisors, journalists, boards, managers, friends, family and researchers. '*Legitimacy building emerges in conversations that entrepreneurs have among themselves, their audiences, and their environments. In narrative terms, legitimacy building may be defined as the pursuit of intertextuality (O'Connor, 2000), or the crafting of the story line of the new company into existing, relevant, generally accepted, and taken-for-granted story lines*' (O'Connor 2004, 106). It seems to me that entrepreneurs intuitively like to tell nice stories about solid planning, control, and proof-of-concept, strong sales figures and happy customers if they are not challenged or asked to elaborate on their answers. That is also why I elected against the approach and set-up of the phenomenological interview (Thompson et al. 1989, Steyaert 1995) in this study of impact and entrepreneurial learning.

Actors of incubating activities are not homogenous; although it is possible to use categories as 'entrepreneur' and 'advisor', the individual actors vary in background, values, ways of working, industry expertise – and personal narratives. The interviews with non-homogeneous actors discussed here were carried out in slightly different set-ups in order to produce knowledge about similar processes of incubating activities. My approach to interviewing the actors of the field therefore differs from the traditional phenomenological interview focussing on the respondent's authentic life-world (Eisenhardt 1989, Cope 2005b) in that it is very specific with regard to which processes of entrepreneurial venturing are being explored, and in the way they are performed by the interviewer. One important implication of working with non-homogenous respondents is that not only the questions but also the questioning and tone-of-voice (using sarcasm, jokes, curiosity. enthusiasm, scepticism and empathy) must be tailored to the individual respondent, and the interview guide is only a guideline.

I prepared interview-guides (Appendix A-F) for the semi-structured interviews for each interview round that investigate the small actions of entrepreneuring in the incubator context, the ordinary events of everyday life, how respondents go about networking, negotiating, selling and preparing the market. For each respondent I have made tiny adjustments to the interview guide based on my preparation or previous meetings. The interview format was meant to encourage respondents to speak about the details in their work and, to a certain degree, reveal the complexities of creating a profitable venture – either as an advisor or as the entrepreneuring actor, as the stories I hear are selected anecdotes, memories and reflections (Bruner 2004, 693). My questions concern how they act, why, and how they had the idea in the first place, whom they collaborate with, whom and what they depend on, and how they seek the resources they need. These are difficult questions to answer, and many of the respondents had never previously articulated, in this way, how they worked or even how they thought about it. It is very often only after asking the same question in different variations and listening to what the respondents are really saying that the researcher can uncover these rich descriptions of entrepreneurial actions. Based on my experiences, with respondents telling me their best 'fairy tales,' I have deliberately sought to provoke respondents by questioning their ready-made identity constructions and get beyond their retrospective sensemaking. During the fieldwork I realised that some of the themes I was investigating were more controversial than I had thought – as the themes of learning and outcomes of incubating activities are hard to investigate when actors do not know what to say – or how to express what they got out of it. They want to be polite and tell me that they have used the material and sparring they have got, but in order to get behind the politeness I had to use more insisting techniques of asking – as the role of a journalist and in many ways therefore going beyond the usual image of the ethnographic researcher. This could means saying to them that I did not believe the fairytale or confronting them with knowledge from previous interviews that went against their latest answer.

The interviews reflect profound insights into the entrepreneuring process as viewed from the respondent's point of view – although we have to remember that these insights are also sensitive to the circumstances of the respondent and the story that they think I would like to hear (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 11). It is not necessarily how something happened, but how the respondent experienced it, or how he would like to be seen by the world and that is what he acts upon. As Bruner puts it, '*a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold*' (Bruner 2004, 708).

It is not an aspect of the interview technique that all questions were posed with the same wording or in the same order, nor were all the same questions posed to each respondent. Therefore, despite the large number of interviews and observations, the material cannot be used for quantitative conclusions, besides concluding that certain themes are running strong throughout the material and can be said to be important to the practice of advising and co-constructing entrepreneuring processes of technology-based start-ups.

4.12. Interview preparation and techniques

In my fieldwork interviews with venturing actors I experienced that if I did not guide the conversation or insisted on getting a specific answer to a question as; "how exactly did you get in touch with your sub-contractor?" I would either get rather dull interviews with no real details of practice, or I would get these so-called fairy tales about everything is according to plan. Both outcomes would leave me with a feeling of not getting through to the respondent and of having acquired material that was not useful to my inquiry on how to make a qualitative difference to the young ventures. There are a small number of interviews in the material that sadly fit that description, but even so, they contributed to my learning process as a researcher in this particular field.

Part of the idea behind the ethnographic interview is that both answers and questions should be found in the field, not just at the researcher's desk (Spradley 1979, 31). I prepared each interview by doing basic Internet searches, exploring the respondent's personal web identity and media on the venture (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, online articles, webzines etc.), looking into the history of the technology and collecting the material that was already available in-house, in the Accelerator programme. This was a rather time-consuming task but a very important one, as I used the information to find conversation openers, familiarising myself with key concepts of the technology, and establishing some knowledge to hold against the answers in the interview situation (Alvesson 2003, 171). I would also speak with the advisors of the incubating team about specific cases, either before or after the interview. This was not done systematically with all cases but I did it whenever time permitted.

The interviews with advisors and participants contain a lot of '*everything is going according to plan*' or '*no problems – no challenges*' in response to my questions, but the preparation prepared me for challenging the idealised narratives. To provoke and get behind the mask, I interrupted the respondents and steered towards pre-defined themes, to avoid the interview being side-tracked by polished fairy-tales and personal desires to speak of certain subjects. I sort of act as the truth speaker – and in my own opinion I have been granted permission to take on this role. I have sought to establish a mutual relationship of being serious about interview situation, and in my own experience I have been taken seriously be the respondents – as they had something they wanted to share with me. Not least because most of them had something they would like me to know about the common subject of support for entrepreneurs – either as provider or receiver.

My notes and observations from the selection process, including Selection Camp, prior to acceptance into the programme have been highly valuable to me in my preparation of the interviews with both participants and advisors. It meant that in many cases, prior to an interview I had observed the entrepreneurial actors present their project and heard the questions from the board and the board's evaluation comments after the entrepreneur had left the room. Being present at these events introduced me to the entrepreneurial teams and the technologies, allowed me to listen to the judgement of investors and advisors and gave me an impression of potential and obvious weaknesses of the case from the perspective of both the incubation and the venture industries.

During interview situations, I would sometimes refer to specific events or situations to hear how the respondent had experienced it, to explain where I my knowledge came from, why I was asking a specific question – or to hear their reaction to the selection process itself. As an interviewer and as a participating observant in the field, I have found it crucial to have some kind of answer (knowledge, reflections, questions) to offer that will make the respondents interested and hopefully make them lose some layers of their mask. It is helpful to say something unexpected or to challenge the standardised repertoires of answers, because it makes them alert, curious and makes them either listen or defend their story even more strongly. In my own assessment, I have primarily been capable of having a meaningful conversation about the respondent's venture and actual processes when I have had relevant and concrete knowledge to challenge the respondent's statements and answers. As a researcher this makes me co-creator of the meaning of the interview, which is a result of socially situated activities and not objective facts (Fletcher 2011, 69). It is obvious that this type of approach is more like a journalist, than a researcher seeking to establish a room of neutrality. But then again, this was never the purpose with a study where the researcher moves within organisational processes and interactions in an attempt to understand from the inside (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). As an organizational ethnographer by method and action researcher by the nature of the industrial PhD programme, my participation and engagement has been explicit – as I have been present also with the purpose of having an impact on how actors and the organisation work. To illustrate how this interacting, provocative approach to interviewing have been providing different kinds of answers and how I have acted as a truth speaker, the following conversation excerpt is from an interview with two founders of a venture. The excerpt demonstrates the potential of having knowledge about the programme process from different sources and the potentiality of doing more than one interview with the same respondents in order to explore the process of entrepreneuring.

The excerpt is from our second meeting, which takes place a year after the first interview and six months after them leaving the accelerator programme. A second meeting offers the potential for a certain degree of trust and familiarity to be established between the interviewer and the respondents; they are familiar with the situation and feel relaxed in their own office, which in my interpretation encourages them to articulate their attitudes, beliefs and tacit assumptions freely.

4.12.1. Empirical demonstration: 'How are Batman and Superman doing today?'

Interviewer: *Last time we met, you guys were pretty much Batman and Superman! Do you still have that feeling now – that, 'yeah, it's just too cool to be us, and we are going to conquer the world'?*

Respondent 1: *Ha ha – well, okay – we have taken some knocks for certain things, but it's a tough industry, so that's all right. (Silence)*

Interviewer: *I would obviously like to hear about these 'knocks'. Where have you taken these knocks?*

Respondent 2: *Well, first of all, we have realised that it takes some time to get out there with a new product. We developed our product in six months, which I don't think has ever been done before. Normally, it would take 5-10 years, so in this regard we are a success. But now it's all about production and all that stuff, and the procedures in this industry are just really tough. We are retrofitting existing factories, which means that we don't have our own factories; we reconstruct other factories to make our product. That's a huge task, one really needs a lot of technical expertise – and what about the company that you enter into; what's their economy like, who owns them, are they internationally owned? Then they are short of money, and then there is a crisis. There are all sorts of thing we need to get a handle on, and it's effing heavy!*

Interviewer: *But where did you take some knocks?*

Respondent 1: *It all took longer than expected. But we have been very patient.*

Respondent 2: *Maybe, we didn't have the right mindset for this, since we are entrepreneurs in spirit and all – everything has to happen fast. And this has not been fast, we have trudged around in the mud, and you use a lot of energy doing that. That has been our experience, and I think that has been extremely frustrating. But I think that we're very good at handling it, and we have an amazing chairman of the board and a board who are really good at calming us down and saying that what we are doing is all right.*

(… later in the interview)

Interviewer: *I also have a question about how you are doing in terms of getting rich.*

Respondent 1: *What … did you listened to the interview from last year? It – well – it's getting better. At least we are not getting any poorer. I mean, we're not doing badly; however, it has become clear to us that it takes some time before this case is up and running. But we will get very rich. (Laughs)*

Respondent 2: *It's kind of funny that we have a bunch of co-owners, and we've got company X that's holding a large share of our company. Then we have our investor, who is slowly buying him more and more of our venture. On the one hand, we claim to be entrepreneurs, and of course we are entrepreneurs, but we are also employees, since we work on behalf of them. So in a way, we are getting a kind of salary that we normally wouldn't as entrepreneurs.*

Interviewer: *It does not have much to do with 'bootstrapping' it?*

Respondent 1: *It is entrepreneurship on first class. (Laughs) We have succeeded in making a decent wage agreement, which secures us a regular paycheck and some other stuff, and we may be able to maintain enough ownership for it to be really fun, if all goes well. Our role is not defined as being here forever. For us, this is also a trade-off.*

Interviewer: *And your investor and that second round of investment did that turn out well?*[31]

Respondent 1: *What do you mean?*

Interviewer: *Whether you think it's a fair deal?*

[31] From a conversation with their advisor from the Accelerator programme, I was informed that this venture had accepted a second round of investment from their primary investor. This meant that the investor now owned 40% of the venture – and had substantial decision power in terms of what could happen to the venture in the future. During the same interview-round I also interviewed a venture who had rejected this particularly investor – as they could not settle with the offered terms and felt that the terms was constructed in an difficult and unfair manner that would make it very difficult for them to ever profit from their work.

Respondent 1: *By and large and all, one would always like to have a little more ownership, but our alternative offers were not any better. One just has to realise that it's difficult to make the so-called hockey stick, at least to do it fast. And that is where the price on these shares has been set. So – I think it is fair enough, I would have liked to get some more, but I don't think that I would have given more myself. (*Com04R5)

The excerpt reflects that having internal knowledge about, e.g., their funding situation, and being able to ask provocative questions provides an opportunity to gain insights into the doubts and emotional rollercoaster rides of entrepreneuring, which they have learned from. In my assessment, these two respondents have learned about entrepreneuring during the past year. Note how my questions make them reflect about being employees with an entrepreneurial identity – it seems that being a successful start-up (in terms of receiving large funding) is somehow a paradox to the entrepreneurial dream about freedom and much slower in terms of speed than they had expected. Furthermore, it is difficult for them to sidestep the questions because we have talked before, and they cannot tell me that their present situation is according to the original plan. That is not to say that I have *tricked* them into revealing their darkest secrets, as they still only tell me what they want to, but the demonstration it is an example of how information about their development and learning is generated through the interconnectedness of the researcher, the field and the respondent(s) (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, 552). I impact the study with my background knowledge and observations, and the answers I receive in turn impact my further investigations. I am using my inside knowledge of their past and knowledge about other processes in the field to make them reflect on the present. This brings me closer to learning what is actually going on with the entrepreneurial dream after a year – and also to the very difficult collaboration between entrepreneurs and investors, where immature entrepreneurs are often poorly prepared for negotiations and planning, as they have never signed an investment deal before. I expect that these respondents will handle an investment situation differently if they choose to pursue other opportunities of entrepreneuring. They have already realized that if this project is going to be a huge success – they are probably not going to be one profiting the most – even though they are close to being superheroes! In terms of entrepreneurial learning I believe that they are better prepared for making relational constructions that they benefit from, due to their experiences. In my analysis of the interviews I have been listening for stories like this one - about how planning was conducted, how meetings was arranged, how hypothesis' was formulated and how programme content and experiences was applied – and furthermore what happened and what kind of reflections the respondents have made from it, in order to evaluate whether the respondents could be expected to act differently next time. This is the way interviewing have helped me evaluate whether entrepreneurial learning happened or not.

4.13. The constructions of conversations

The fieldwork has been constructed from both informal and formal, more planned conversations. Nevertheless, some of the techniques, tricks and ways of gaining information described have been applied for both kinds of conversation.

The interview guides[32] developed prior to interviews were followed in a way that allowed the interview to resemble a friendly conversation (Spradley 1979, 55) about sensitive matters, e.g. project challenges, concerns, feelings and dreams, and with respect for the direction that the conversation naturally would take. I would show empathy and give honest answers if the respondents asked my opinion, and on occasion, I have referred to the conversation being recorded or to my position as an employee of the host of the incubating programme, if I felt that we were crossing a line with regard to what it would be appropriate for me to know. At times I would share things about my study, my assumptions, my family or myself or draw on my own experiences or concerns if it felt appropriate. At the end of the interview, or if I needed it during the session, I would check my question guide and look over the questions to see if I had covered the intended topics. That was also a way of taking a moment to think, accepting the silence that occurred.

The interview itself and the reconstruction of the interview are based on languages – the ones spoken by the field and the ones spoken by the researcher (Spradley 1979, 17), where words and combinations of themes or expressions are open to interpretation. The intention is not to find some pre-existing world but rather to enlarge possible worlds and possible ways of relating (Hosking 2007, 28). As an interviewer I do not know how the respondents understand certain concepts, which means that even though I am a co-producer of the world we are talking about, I still have to be careful about the phrasing and use of words.

In my interviews with participants of incubating activities, in one way or another I asked almost all of them what they got out of programme – an open and carefully phrased question. As the programme has multiple elements, their answer indicated to me which elements they viewed as constituting the programme. In answering this initial question, most respondents referred to their interactions with their personal advisor, while others referred to the camps, meetings with industry experts or specific theories or frameworks that had been spot-on in relation to their needs.

After having talked about the advice part, if that was the first aspect they brought up, I would then ask them about their experiences with the camps or other activities which I knew they had participated in, having an

[32] See Appendix A-F for the interview guides applied for the interview rounds, including presumptions and reflections before the interviews about what to expect.

indication that these elements where not at the top of the respondent's mind. Asking respondents about specific events, which they had not mentioned themselves, such as their experience of the Value Proposition Camp, would generate very different answers. Some respondents would respond with a long story, as if they had been reminded of something long forgotten. Others replied something along the lines of 'fine' or 'nice input,' and when I asked them how they had applied the input or what kind of reflections or actions it had resulted in, I often got the sense that their first reply was normative or an attempt at being polite. Another way of approaching the programme's impact was to avoid using words such as business plan, value proposition, beachhead customers or names of advisors in the beginning of the interview in order to develop sense of whether this vocabulary had become part of the respondent's way of understanding his/her experience from the programme and his/her work in general. When investigating impact, I have found it crucial to listen carefully and to change the subject if it seems that the respondent does not have anything to say, in order to avoid creating just any reality and make sure to create a possible reality that could be seen as influential in the lived life of the respondent. A key part of listening is '*to listen in ways that are more open to other(ness), to multiple voices, and to possibilities involves listening in ways that are both 'not knowing' and not self-centred'* (Hosking 2007, 29). That is far from easy, and it is clear that the empirical material is the result of construction and reflects choices, interpretations and the use of specific language. What is important to remember is that the use of language reveals the world, but it also constructs it (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000, 125).

From my dialogues in the field I got to see and to be a part of what is often put into 'the black box' of business incubation in terms of consulting, knowledge, exercises, motivation, talk, meetings, planning etc. Through a continuous process of interviews, observations and participation I have aimed to make the box transparent and to follow the input of incubating activities and its impact on developing companies. By having multiple conversations with different actors who are part of the same processes (the incubating activities), I have sought to produce an empirical material that is thick and varied as a way for me to distil more common ways of describing this 'culture,' which I present as narratives of the field. Referring to Geertz (2000), Bruner (2004) remarks that one account cannot confirm another, but it can *thicken* it – and the same goes for the rich and thick descriptions in my fieldwork. The interviews and thick descriptions are not used for illustrating single cases, but for creating the narratives. The distillation into particular narratives is one possible write-up that constitutes the analysis I wish to present. It is purely my construction, my contribution (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992).

4.14. The role of the researcher and challenges in the study of relation

Given a relational constructionist understanding of the world, the empirical material is a co-construction between a local context of incubating activities, the field, and my own position as a researcher, who becomes a co-constructor of the local reality of the field that I am intervening with (Hosking and Pluut 2010, 67). My activity as a social scientist has unfolded as a relational activity in the field, and I have been '*integrated in the ongoing content-relational activity of the particular community of practice*' (Bouwen 2001, 367). Being hired by the organisation one studies may lead to a risk of becoming too familiar with the field, thus losing the ability to approach it with an outsider's view. Bouwen (2001) suggests that since it is traditionally a challenge for social science to produce impact in practice, as the researcher often arrives with an outside theory and practice that it is difficult for the field to accept and understand - the risk of familiarity is balanced by the chance of relevance! Nevertheless, this does not mean that I have not dealt with the research challenge of being personally involved in the object of study. One of the most common challenges of at-home research according to Alvesson (2009) is to liberate one-self from some of the taken-for-granted ideas of the field. In my case, I find that this has not been my biggest problem, as many of the taken-for-granted ideas about incubation, impact, entrepreneurs and learning presented to me in the field was challenged or rejected rather early in the research process – and the further research process has centred on finding explanations to the taken-for-granted. As I began my research journey with a focus on entrepreneurial development, entrepreneurial learning and what makes a difference in creating strong ventures, several surprises changed the course of the study, as it is common in exploratory studies. Such surprises came from my own taken-for-granted assumptions about entrepreneurial actors' willingness to learn and about technologies working as they are supposed to, but they also sprang from the discrepancies between the descriptions of the incubating programme given to me by the incubator manager versus the descriptions offered the incubating team members and from the praxis and narratives I encountered in my early research phase. This indicates how the construction and reconstruction of the research phase involves all the actors of the field. My dialogues with the field have not been without challenges, as my findings have provoked curiosity but also resistance, which hints at how the field sees itself and how it responds, incorporating – or not incorporating – new knowledge about their own practice. The incubation industry is highly sensitive to the question of impact and has a strong language for making meaning of its processes and designs, as a means of gaining legitimacy and purpose. Another challenge, as I have already touched upon, has also been the process of finding an acceptable way of being an internal researcher – getting accepted as "*a kindly Trojan horse taking notes*" (Alvesson 2009, 179)!

It is a challenge to investigate relational constructions and learning that is not visible and whose quantifiable outcome are always side effects, which is very common in the social sciences. This matter becomes additionally complicated if the empirical object of investigation (learning, relationship, co-construction and network) does not have a voice in the field. As an example I sought to study the creation, transfer and use of industry-specific networks but encountered advisors who indicated that the programme was not working with networks, in terms of how to develop and use them, but primarily with a network deliverable in the form of meetings with industry experts. Many of the entrepreneurs I interviewed lacked a language for networking, in terms of describing contacts, supporters and other actors likely to be part of the venture construction. The same goes for entrepreneurial learning, which was a key interest for the incubator manager, but which was not presented in the actions and vocabulary of entrepreneurs and advisors, whether as a process or a goal. But it was a clear goal that entrepreneurs should be able to use the methods from the programme themselves after the programme. From my perspective, this is not an indication that learning or networks are not part of the incubating activities; instead it indicates that they are silent actors, and that I needed to interpret the actions and language of the human actors in order to get them to speak. I did this by listening to entrepreneurial actions through stories, expressions and descriptions - hereby uncovering some of the immaterial aspects of actions by being in dialogue with the field, relying on analytical concepts in my interpretation of actions and development (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 188).

The following quote by Czarniawska-Joerges illustrative of my own *intentions* within the field, as I have applied *'an anthropological frame of mind, expressed by not taking social realities for granted. This means on the one hand, modesty and openness towards new worlds and new meanings, and on the other, a constant urge to problematize, to turn what seems familiar and understandable upside down and inside out'* (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 73). Nevertheless, one thing is what the researcher intends to do – another thing is the way the researcher is perceived and reacted upon in the field.

I have already touched upon the challenges of describing my study to the actors of the field, and also wonder about who and what that were my research object – what the results would look like and who would get access to them. I did, as it has been described earlier, construct a role for me that made sense to the field – which often was a role of a reflection partner for actors to reflect about their work and the organisational constructions they were part of. One consequence of being employed by the Accelerator programme under investigation was that I did not systematically interview advisors of the programme – my colleagues, only a few who had been part of the programme beginning and the Selection Board. It never seemed appropriate to interview my colleagues, and the programme management never suggested it. Instead I have gained access to the narratives of the incubator side through the fieldwork and many occasions for conversations, asking questions and being part of the decision making process of how to deliver support to entrepreneurs.

If we talk about a supply side and a demand side of incubation, I was obviously representing the supply side as employed by the Science Park – which occasionally was also the potential investor of the participating ventures. This could create a situation of conflict or precaution – and I have spent some time clearing out the purpose of the study, my position as researcher with a scientific purpose and emphasizing the confidential nature of the interviews and how the material would be anonymous. One of course has to remember that no matter how friendly I as a researcher try to make the interview situation, it is still an artificial situation with me having an predefined agenda for the conversation, and being a representative of a organisation that most of the respondents was seeking to give a certain (positive) impression of themselves and their venture. With this in mind it has been my experience that in most cases it was possible to create a room for earnest and relevant conversation. Even though I might have gotten fairy tales on the individual processes of the venture, I have heard many critical stories about the incubating processes. Based on this and I have no reason to believe that the participants and other critical voices of the programme and entrepreneurial support in general have been withholding critique, with regard to the manifold critical stories about lack of relational constructions as basis for collaboration.

The reactions of the field to me as a researcher and my preliminary experiences and constructions have been an important guide in determining where to take the project and which stories to tell. Since the empirical material is rich, thick and longitudinal, I have felt an urge to tell some of the stories that the field does not normally hear – based on the field's own voices.

4.15. Overview of ethnographic fieldwork– data-packages

It is difficult to capture the entire fieldwork process, but below is an attempt at structuring the more formal parts of the interactions in the field into small descriptions of activities. It is important to be aware that some of my work was performed as employee, and not on my own initiative, but was part of my job. This means that I as industrial PhD present in the field as ethnographic researcher, has produced what can be called two types of data material – material that was part of my research agenda, but also material, which has similar character (interviews and literature reviews) as other collected materials, but was not necessarily meant to be used for scientific purpose. The point is that all data produced and collected should not be regarded as my empirical material, but some of the material that I have collected is more likely to have played the role of *context material*. Nevertheless, it is hard to make a sharp distinction between what was used directly as empirical material for analysis and what was not – as for example some of the interview-processes in Round 7 have indeed been used as empirical material, even though they were collected as a specific task for my employer[33].

The following list and table give an overview of the various (research) tasks that have been performed during the study process. The table shows whether the tasks were initiated by the company or by the researcher. I have treated the collection of fieldwork material as data packages as a way of ordering the material. Note that the entire collection of material of language in different forms is broad and varied in structure and content, and to create an order in the mess – so to speak – quotes and resumes of experiences is transformed into narratives of the field.

Overview of data-packages – descriptions and quantification;

- **Fieldwork: Working at the programme office**, attending team meetings, internal and external seminars and other team building activities, observations, conversations, participation in programme activities over a two-year period. For three years, I have been included in all official programme communication on e-mail and in a large part of the internal e-mail correspondence concerning programme planning, development and activities.
- **Fieldwork: Observing at Selection Camp** during round 4, 5 and 7. Taking extensive notes on all company presentations, at the Board evaluations and the following final selection of candidates.
- **Fieldwork: Programme activities** include, for example; Kick-Off Camp, Customer Insights Camp, Value Proposition Camp, Business Model Camp, Investor Day etc.
- **Fieldwork: Continuous conversations with advisors** of the programme about their work with the participants both before and after the interviews with the participants. These conversations were not recorded, but notes were taken afterwards in a notebook. The main part of these conversations was informal and non-scheduled, except for the preparation for the Post-Interviews with round 5 participants, which was formally scheduled and prepared for all advisors of the team.
- **Survey assignment**: Cold-calling entrepreneurial actors who were encouraged to apply for the programme but who did not wish to participate – carried out a quantitative survey for the programme manager. Main topic: reasons for turning the programme down.
- **Five semi-structured qualitative expert interviews** with Selection Board members. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. The main topic of the interview series was selection criteria for accepting ventures to the programme.
- **Close-up case study** of one participant-advisor relationship (round 4), in which I followed the participant from selection process to final meetings with advisors. I attended all meetings between programme (camp, advisor meetings and other activities) and participant, almost 20 meetings over a period of 6 months. I was included in all e-mail correspondence and performed two semi-structured qualitative interviews with the participant about his programme experience during and after

[33] The three-year time constraints of the PhD process, did not allow for analysing the entire material collected. Nevertheless, all tasks have been based on solid preparation and proper methods for social science studies, thus the material could have been applicable for further analysis.

the programme process in addition to our regular conversations. I had a continuous dialogue with the advisor about the process, a final evaluative meeting about the full process and did a 1,5-hour interview with entrepreneur after the process. The case study gave valuable insights on how the programme advisors work. The way the analysis of dissertation has turned out, I chose not to use the case study of this participant – as a case study. The case material contains many different perspectives on counseling, entrepreneurial capacity and venture creation, but it also showed that the entrepreneur did not have a learning perspective on his participation. In the end it became clear that the entrepreneur saw the programme as a "free meal" without obligations, that he did not really follow the plan made together with the team and that he considered himself as the expert of venture – which made him less open to other conclusions than his own. Despite an open and positive attitude it was my conclusion that he never really opened up – despite endless meetings with the advisor, myself and with a variety of experts. The case was not a good learning case, but the substantial material has been used as fieldwork material in line with the rest of the material – and supported the analysis of barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

- **Two semi-structured qualitative expert interviews** with previous employees (advisor interviews) of the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and individual interview guides were prepared. The main topic of the interview series was the issue of collaborating with entrepreneuring actors and their experiences with creating and running an incubating programme.
- **Seven semi-structured interviews with participants** (round 3) *after* completing the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. The main topics of the interview series were programme impact on decision making and networking capabilities.
- **Fifteen semi-structured interviews with participants** of the programme (round 5) *before* their participation in the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. The main topics of the interview series was the participant's own judgement of needs and his/her expectations of the programme process.
- **Fifteen semi-structured interviews with participants** of (round 5) *after* completing the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. The main topics of the interview series were entrepreneurial learning as an impact on entrepreneurial capacity, change in capacity to make decisions and expansion of the possibilities of the venture/technology.
- **Fifteen semi-structured interviews with participants** of the programme (round 7) *before* their participation in the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with participants (round 7) *during* their part*icipat*ion. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with participants of the pro*gramme* (round 7) *after* their participation in the programme. Information about the respondents and the organisation they represented was acquired, and an interview guide was prepared that was used for all the interviews. ***Three*** **one-hour presentations** of the preliminary findings of my study to the team *memb*ers of the programme and programme management followed by dialogue and discussions.

Table 4.2 Overview of data packages, their initiation and their application in the analysis

Data package	Initiated by	Type of material	Subject of study	Primary findings	Used how
Field work	Company/ researcher	Various ethnographic text materials and experiences of the researcher	The Accelerator programme and its context	• Insights on the life and actions of the accelerator programme and its context	• Used directly and indirectly for construction of narratives[34] and the incubation industry
Field work	Company/ researcher	Selection Camp observations and notes	The Selection Camp process	• Insights on how business and technological potential is evaluated by investors and actors of the incubation industry • Insights on the language of entrepreneurs and investors • Insights on pitching and presentation techniques	• Used as inside knowledge on companies during interviews and conversations • Used directly and indirectly for construction of narratives
Field work	Company/ researcher	Programme camps observations and participation and notes	The camps – investigating the life and actions of parts of the programme contents	• Getting to know the participants and other related actors of the programme • Understanding the content and its form provided to participants • Getting to know educators and presenters	• Used as inside knowledge on companies during interviews and conversations • Used directly and indirectly for construction of narratives
Round 3	Company/ researcher	Interviews – post participation Transcribed by researcher	Programme participants – investigating decision making capacity and impact on entrepreneurial process	• Lack of learning and acceleration • Insights on expectations • Insights on advisor/participant relationship • Participant profile did not match theory	• Used for guiding the further research process – investigating some of the surprises of the • Used directly in the construction of all narratives
Case study	Company	Notes, emails, working papers	One participant of the programme – investigating the working processes of the advisors and learning opportunities of the participant	• Insights on programme process and advisor work • Lack of progress in venture • Insights on participant and advisor attitudes	• Used for guiding the research process towards barriers to learning • Used indirectly for construction of the entrepreneurial and the advisor narratives
Round 5	Researcher	Interviews – before and after participation	Programme participants – investigating needs and wants of the	• Insights on advisor/participant relationship	Used directly in the construction of all narratives

[34] Directly refers to exact quotes and field note references used in analysis, and indirect refers to material serving as part of the ethnographic material, that it has not been possible to "show" directly in the text.

		Transcribed by student	participants prior to programme process, including expectations, entrepreneurial preparedness, previous experience and history of the venture	• Insights on entrepreneurial needs and wants • Insights on expectations and lack of mutual trust • Insights on lack of learning focus and achievement	
Round 7	Company	Interviews – pre, during and post Transcribed by student	Programme participants – investigating the learning processes of participants, with the aim of identifying identifiable differences in actions and attitudes	• Insights on advisor/participant relationship • Insights on entrepreneurial needs and wants • Insights on expectations and lack of mutual trust • Insights on lack of learning focus and achievement • Insights on entrepreneurial learning processes	Used directly in the construction of narratives
Selection Board	Researcher	Interviews Transcribed be researcher	Selection Board – investigating the personal selection criteria of the members and their experiences with counselling and mentoring entrepreneurs	• Insights on selection criteria • Insights on personal ways of working with support • Insights on the incubation industry	Used directly for the construction of all narratives
Advisor reflections	Researcher	Interviews Transcribed by student	Former advisors – investigating the origin of the programme and their experiences from working with potential entrepreneurs	• Insights on the programme construction and development • Insights on the challenges to support	Used directly for the construction of the Policy narrative and Best Practice Narratives
Survey assignment	Company	Structured survey based on calling 100 companies	Potential participants of the programme investigating rejection reasons	• Insights on prejudices towards incubation and public support •	Used indirectly for guiding the construction of the Critique Narrative and the Blame Game Narratives
Presentations	Company/ researcher	Power Points and notes and team reactions	Accelerator programme team members	• Reactions and feedback from programme advisors and management on preliminary findings	Directly used for testing the narrative constructions and recommendations for the future programme

4.16. From fieldwork to a field of narratives – preparing the write-up

The outcome of the fieldwork has emerged from a hermeneutic process that has been reflective, language-based and interpretative (Van Maanen 2011, 93). In such a process, the index of the dissertation has changed over the course of the fieldwork but also in the process of writing up, since the empirical material is nothing more than a large mess of potential stories, fragments, anecdotes and findings until important decisions are made for the write-up (Spradley 1979, 212). My interpretative, ethnographic approach has made me alert to multiplicity of voices and interpretations that create and recreate the relations and narratives of incubating activities.

The interviews were not coded in a software program for the write-up, even though it is a widely recommended method for the complex coding of texts (Johnstone 2007, 115). I began the coding process by using highlighter pens of different colours, and themes, categories and accounts have sprung from this process. Even though I considered transferring my still-in-making empirical data to Nvivo, I found that it would take too long time to learn to use and transfer the material to the Nvivo, and continued with analytical methods I had used previously in my studies. In retrospect, and considering the amount of material I ended up with, it would have been appropriate to use the Nvivo programme to structure the work of coding and especially reading across the interviews – as a way of "keeping track and place" of the huge material.

The types of coding I have applied for the material is illustrated in Appendix H (themes for highlighting) and Appendix I - a work document of the research process in which I continuously have written down my surprises and curiosities during the research process. As for all the rounds of interview they were conducted with a pre-defined research purpose and questions to investigate – see Appendix A-F for interview guides and my initial pre-understanding of the subject that was to be investigated. Obviously answering these questions were the focus of my first readings of the interviews. It was during these readings that the matter of relationship and lack of management of expectations came up – and it was also during these readings of especially Round 3, Round 5 and the Selection Board interviews that I experienced how certain narratives of field were speaking through the many stories of the material. This is why I say that the narratives have "sprung" from the material and I began to group the pieces of text that could sum up the narratives in the field.

I have also worked with tables to systematize the material – see Appendix G. This index was made after round 5 (and up-dated after round 7) due to my interest in the actual needs and wants of the participants – as the pilot interviews of round 3 pointed towards low satisfaction rate with the outcome of the programme process. I made the overview to identify what kind of resources, in terms of capital, network and industry experience/knowledge, the venturing actors actually had within their reach, from where the ideas and resources had been sourced, and whether I could find an identifiable difference in the participants' resource pool after the programme. Table 1 of Appendix G displays the majority of the entrepreneuring ventures (programme participants) 2010-2012 (Incubating programme Rounds 3, 4, 5 and 7 which I have interacted with and interviewed). The overview of the participants' resources is based on interviews and other fieldwork materials, which identified the different kinds of experience and resources the ventures had internally, but also what kind of resources they apparently could access externally. With four background categories and three analytical constructs based on the interviews, the chart shows that the participants are surprising well off in terms of resources – but based on my analysis they were not applying them in an entrepreneurial way with regard to their present venture – as the ventures were not progressing.

The table suggests that entrepreneuring actors need knowledge about what to do with resources – how to activate them, like a craftsperson's practical skills. The participants had more resources, in quantitative terms, with regard to experience, network and capital than I had expected. Based on my initial reading of the entrepreneurship policy literature and the incubation literature I expected that these resources were what the incubating activities offered, and what the ventures were expected to need. Consequently, a common question I often asked the participants during interviews was. '*With all this – What do you need the Accelerator programme for?*' This produced a wide variety of functional answers about expanding the network, specific network demands, more capital, marketing competences and getting in touch with customers – or very specific demands such as a meeting with a bank or a law firm but also rather optimistic wishes about becoming a salesman and finding the one right customer to sell to. For many participants it has been my impression that they do not enter into the programme with a learning mindset. They have either reacted surprised to my questions on learning – or it has been my interpretation that they have entered the programme with expectations of getting something concrete and tangible (as capital or an industry contact) – and not with their own personal development in mind.

Appendix G is an illustration of how I have worked with the empirical material – and furthermore, how the overview gave insights into how entrepreneuring participants believe that they have relevant experience, but for some reason this experience is not taking them any further with this venture. An example is that entrepreneurial experience from an industry such as fashion that comes from selling clothes in a store - is of limited use when the new business is selling clothes online from a web-based platform. The *sales channels* and the behaviour of customers are different, and even though *the need* is the customer is the same, the *platform* for selling is different, and maybe also the business model! I speculate that sometimes entrepreneuring actors may believe that they have well-functioning networking processes, but the relations that they activate might not be relevant to the particular case, and that might be one of the reasons why their project is not progressing as expected!

Working with the empirical material indicated to me, how resources and experiences seems to be relative to the local and relational context – and confirmed to me Stevenson's definition of entrepreneurship, as being not only about possessing or gathering resources but also about demonstrating the better use of resources, regardless who owns them (Stevenson 1985). Knowledge and capital as entities or goods on a shelf does not seem to be apply to the challenge we want to overcome; they have to be activated and applied by the appropriate skills and have to be perceived as relevant by the receiver (Mønsted 2003). My conclusion was that most of the participants needed to learn how to exploit their existing resources better and attract new one – which basically are actions of relational matters. Table 1 also illustrates a remarkable combination of serial entrepreneurship and the lack of action (in terms of attracting the relevant resources and creating the company), as more than half have experiences from previous venturing. The question is furthermore – why does an accelerator programme for entrepreneurs not teach them to act entrepreneurially? – This gave rise to the research question and a narrative analysis for answering this paradox.

4.17. The write-up – the form of the ethnographic text

Writing up the material involved translations of the various texts that were available to me (Spradley 1979, 205) as illustrated in the previous section. As a researcher I am present in the material; my social, professional and philosophical (ontological and epistemological) background has influenced how I have chosen to carry out the fieldwork and the interpretations and conclusions are my own and do not necessarily match those of the actors of the field (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010, 182).

When writing a dissertation as this, it is important to make sure that the collective text tells a good story, which takes the reader from introduction, through literature reviews, theory and method and into analysis. It is a well-known organisation of text that most academic readers can relate to. In the same manner the construction of narratives in the analysis of this dissertation is written to tell a story about clashing narratives and the consequences related to this clash. It is a narrating process that involves organizing with the help of plot and characters. The way the analysis is formed is directed by processes of *emplotment* – meaning structuring the text in a way that makes sense of the events written about (Czarniawska 2004, 123). Czarniawska refers to Ryan (1993) when giving instructions on three useful steps researchers go through in the work of emplotment, without saying they have to come in a specific order;

- Constructing *characters* (which, in social science texts, are often non-human: an economic decline, growing unemployment, or a new computer technology).
- Attributing *functions* to single events and actions.
- Finding an *interpretative theme* (Czarniawska 2004, 126)

The interpretative theme of this dissertation is the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context, and as it will be outlined in the analysis, the plot is that the field is loaded with narratives that clash and somehow comes to inhibit learning and new relational constructions. All descriptions, emplotment and meaning making are subordinated to this plot. This analysis is constructed through the descriptions of narratives, representing both characters and functions in the field. The Ryan instructions have been used to structure the write-up in my efforts to make explanations to actions in the field. The empirical material contains a richness of representation (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, 552). The field study allows for the narrative constructions in part III, covering a span of themes that all contribute to the narrative analysis of entrepreneurial support and learning. '*Some of these meanings are directly expressed in the language; many are taken for granted and communicated only indirectly through word and action. But in every society people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organize their behaviour, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world they live in'* (Spradley 1979, 5). The narratives are patterns in the fieldwork, representing the dominant actors and their actions – without reflecting an exact real world, but creating one that brings new perspectives to the field (Czarniawska 2004, 118). I have emplotted the narratives to offer insights into the meaning and values behind actions and processes and to illustrate what the narratives do and do not do (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 51). Trying to capture the interrelated, interdependent and intersubjective characteristics of incubating activities means exploring the organising of relationships, in the context of incubating processes (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, 551). In the specific context of incubating activities, I have been able to follow the development of both the entrepreneurial actors and the venture by listening to and to a smaller degree interact with the respondents several times, and given that entrepreneurial learning is a continuous process of the actors, and it has been advantage not to rely exclusively on the retrospective sense-making of a single meeting (Rae 2000, 150).

I have chosen to present the material as narratives for two reasons: First, the single case study of individual companies or individuals produces too narrow a description for the analysis that I want to share with the world and leaves out too much of the rich material. The material is both regarded as *one* text and as a multi-voice compound of texts that may be interpreted and sliced in a variety of ways. Second, I want to focus on the unexpected and incomprehensible in my representation of the field (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007), because I consider this the most important and interesting contribution I can make from my research journey. It may inspire for critical dialogue between theoretical assumptions, as we saw it in PART I, and the empirical impressions of my fieldwork.

Methodologically, the narratives presented in the following chapters are distillates from observations, participation and personal interviews, they are also constructions created by the researcher and parts of the message I seek to put forward. The interviews and interactions can be said to serve as a narrative production site - and "*there is no need for the illusion that 'these people' talk for themselves; indeed they do not*" (Czarniawska 2004, 122) as the narratives are my constructions on the basis of what people did and said in the field study, which I claim are interesting representations of practices in the field. As a social science researcher my claim cannot be supported by natural sciences facts, but rely on my ability to make my readers believe in my stories from the field – as they were there. As Czarniawska 2004 writes about how to write a social science monograph the main question is – "*Will it persuade*"? I hope so!

4.1. Concluding

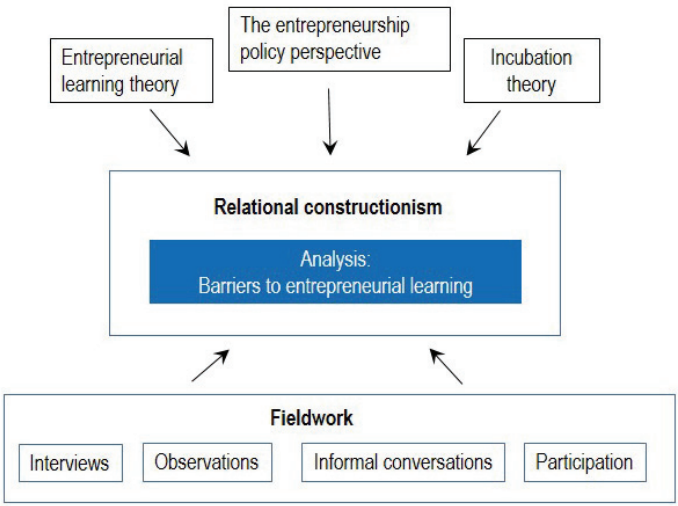
This chapter has now introduced the thought style of the dissertation – relational constructionism – along with the methodological consequences it implies, as having a narrative approach to the write-up of ethnographic fieldwork. As it is hopefully clear by now, my dialogues and interactions as Industrial PhD in the field of the accelerator programme, has been both intense, time-consuming and provided me with a rich and multi-facetted empirical material. The dissertation is positioned as an organizational ethnography study, with the ambition to include many voices from the field in order to understand what might be called *a culture*[35] of business incubating activities and the barriers to entrepreneurial learning. The presentation of different voices is a way to present the various relationships, as it is hard to 'see' the actual relationship, but every interview or dialogue is an effect of a relationship. Law (2004) describes such a research process as slow but valuable in terms of insights into the taken-for-grated, motivation and rationales behind action that make it easier to understand and construct explanations for process outcomes or the lack of them (Law 2004, 10). I find that new, alternative explanations to the actions in the field is actually the outcome of the fieldwork – and also what makes it possible to offer other perspectives on support for entrepreneurial processes.

[35] Even though this is not a direct study of an incubating culture, the ethnographic fieldwork implicitly reveals details about the shared belief system and values of the field. Without writing up detailed accounts of the culture of the field, which is obviously included in the material, this cultural knowledge is used in the analysis of the taken-for-granted in order to construct the narratives of the field. For an implicit understanding of culture as underlying contextual meanings, I subscribe to Spadley's definition of culture as '*The acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior'* (Spadley 1979, 5).

The chapter demonstrates how the dissertation is inductively based, and that the choices for theory, methods and analysis have been empirically derived. Nevertheless, the write-up of the material and the methodology for making the field study are retrospective and cannot in that sense 'be true' to the chronological order in which experiences and recognitions occurred. The narrative analysis of the fieldwork, presented in Part III of the dissertation, is not a classic narrative presentation of one descriptive story – but a presentation of a variety of narratives representing different plots and characters. The narrative constructions came to be appropriate as analytical strategy because of my focus on relations and because of the way I experienced that the small stories of the field interacted. The small stories that I have collected seems to perform a certain constructed reality of the actors in the field – as '*narrative imitates life, life imitate narrative'* (Bruner 2004, 692).

What follows is an overview of the dissertation, Table 4.3, in terms of how literature review, theory and method play along and inform the analysis and further recommendations. It is my platform for working with fieldwork material and telling my story about the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context;

Table 4.3 Collaboration between theory and empirical material of the dissertation



Chapter 5: Theories of entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial learning

5.1. Abstract

The chapter introduces the European School of Entrepreneurship as a specific, processual approach to entrepreneurship studies that investigates what might constitute the entrepreneurial process, and how it can be studied. As touched upon in Chapter 1, a processual view of entrepreneuring activities directs us to the everyday relational activities of creating ventures (Steyaert 2012, 155), which is appropriate for the study of the learning opportunities of incubating processes. Entrepreneurship studies are introduced as a field that has been working towards a learning theory during the 00'ies, and a conceptual framework is presented based on the existing research in the field (Rae 2006, 2007, Cope 2005a, Politis 2008). In the end I discuss the concept of entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context and its implications. The existing literature within this field has been concerned with *what* entrepreneurial learning is, *what* the entrepreneurs need to learn in order to be successful and *how* entrepreneurs may learn from actions and experiments. Nevertheless, the existing entrepreneurship learning research illustrates that the processes of externally stimulating or facilitating entrepreneurial learning processes – especially the relational aspects of support – is only touched upon to a small degree. I have studied an attempt to stimulate start-up growth, which did not place enough emphasis on learning. What learning could do is something the dissertation discusses, but mainly as a conceptual development, as there were not much positive examples of learning to be studied in the field.

5.2. Entrepreneuring – a relational perspective

Despite the tales of superheroes with unique foresight and special abilities, most entrepreneurial actors (start-ups or corporate) would agree that getting an idea, product, system or service on the market is never the effort of a one-man-band. 'Selling tickets' is the result of continuous dialogues with an audience aimed at making them accept and buy the product, and the creations of entrepreneurial organisations are thus relational interactive processes (Steyaert 2007, 453). Although the following quote is older than the process-based understanding of entrepreneuring, I find that Aldrich and Fiol (1994) offer a very apt description of the relational character of entrepreneuring, explaining how entrepreneurial actors engage in a dialogue with their surroundings to persuade, bargain, negotiate and transform the world to believe in their idea, follow it, like it, share it and initially buy it and re-tweet it.

> *'Founders of ventures in new industries, without the advantage of a taken-for-granted activity and without widespread socio-political approval, must first call upon whatever personal and interpersonal resources they possess. They must interact with extremely sceptical customers, creditors, suppliers, and other resource holders, who are afraid of being taken for fools. With no external evidence, why should potential trusting parties 'trust' an entrepreneur's claims to relationship 'will work out', given that an entrepreneur may be no more than an ill-fated fool?' (Aldrich and Fiol 1994, 650)*

The fieldwork, the design, the thinking and the writing of the dissertation are positioned within the European school of entrepreneurship (Hjorth et al. 2008, Gartner 2013), a specific approach of inquiry into the processes of entrepreneuring. It is not an exact method but rather a style of research with certain interests that has been formulated over the previous decade as a *school* or *tradition* of researchers approaching entrepreneurship as processes of creation, rather than a personal trait, and as something very practical and mundane, rather than heroic and special abilities (Olaison 2014). One of the consequences of this approach is the emphasis on entrepreneurial actions and everyday entrepreneurship and the insistence on using the term entrepreneuring (Steyaert 2007) as a way to stress the *momentary action* that is characteristic of the phenomenon. To be entrepreneuring is not the exclusive domain of special actors– it is something '*in which particular people engage in particular circumstances at particular times in their life*' (Watson 2013a, 17).

What then, is it that these people do when they momentarily participate in processes that we label as entrepreneurial? Within the European school of entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial process is understood as everyday practices of creation that changes the venture (as answering phone calls, fixing broken machinery or dealing with unsatisfied customers) (Steyaert 2007) and as forms of organisational creativity in the particular venture (Hjorth 2007). The point is that entrepreneuring is not only about that one great idea or being particularly visionary – it is much more of a long, hard process of moving back and forward again. For people, or individuals, it is the creation of organization – relating resources, ideas, images, and people in new ways – that make them entrepreneurial. They are not entrepreneurs that become entrepreneurial. They are people that are performatively defined as entrepreneurial by what they do – create organizations. For incubators and incubating advisors, it is the question of *how* to interact with immature entrepreneurs in order for them to become capable of the creative organising resources that has guided this dissertation, and a process perspective has been found to be particularly relevant in terms of investigating barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

Watson (2013a) refers to the concept of knowing how things work as to '*learning the ropes*' (Watson 2013a, 23), which is very much the purpose of incubating activities – even though it is hard for incubating managers to define the exact types of 'ropes' for entrepreneuring in general! Is it to write a business plan or is it to set up a production line in Vietnam? This point underscores that if entrepreneurship researchers and incubating managers want to know how things work in the incubator, we need to engage in ethnographic field studies to improve our understanding of how entrepreneurial actives are performed in real life – and also of incubating activities. Another important focus point of the process perspective of entrepreneurial activities is the role of emotions and the emotional character of entrepreneuring. Not only in the sense of the passion, desire and creative joy involved in making the world (Hjorth 2013, 207) but also in the sense of it being a relational matter that is influenced by other factors besides purely economic calculations and visionary strategies (Steyaert 2012, 154). Most of the time, entrepreneuring actors are learning subjects in a state of emotionality, uncertainty, risk, lack of trust, and urgency, and do not have the luxury of making rational choices based on pre-calculated scenarios – or even pretending to have done so (Mønsted 2003, 276)! The European approach to entrepreneurship research is sensitive to the role of the small and often non-articulated actions of entrepreneurial processes, and emphasise that '*There is never simply one causal relation, but a web of connections and relationships a researcher needs to attend to*' (Steyaert 2012, 159), which a ethnographic field study of interacting with various actors allows for to a certain degree.

5.3. A relational approach to the incubator study

Why are relationships important to business incubating activities and to the study of how entrepreneurial activities unfold? If we agree that the creation of an organisation, a unity of production, is ongoing processes of interaction and learning among actors under streams of uncertainty (Steyaert 2007), the necessary interaction with context is relational. This implies a number of assumptions;

1. That entrepreneurship is the creation of organisation
2. That learning is present in the ongoing process
3. That dialogue is the way to describe relations
4. That context is something within which you can have a dialogue

Much entrepreneurship research focuses on either individual, contexts, motivation, policies, family background, structures, processes or traits as critical to entrepreneurial practice (Gartner et al. 1992, Fletcher 2006, 424) but not on the collective of all these factors and their interactions. During the last 10-15 years, a large number of texts have been engaged in a criticism of positivistic, rationalistic, empiricist, unitary, monologic truth-seeking, individualistic research into entrepreneurship (Jones and Spicer 2005). According to this criticism these approaches neglect the fact that there is nothing coherent and stable about entrepreneuring processes and miss out on capturing and acknowledging important aspects of the world they are exposing.

Relational constructionism as an ontological thought style offers a different view of science, which enables a less model-oriented and mono-scientific view, where '*persons and worlds emerge in processes and they are always emerging*' (Hosking 2007, 8). In her paper about the relational construction of entrepreneurial opportunity, Fletcher (2006) argues that '*in contrast to both structurally-determinist and cognitive/agency views of opportunity recognition, (…) the business venturing process is relationally and communally constituted – an argument not fully taken into account of in the descriptive or linear process models of opportunity recognition'* (Fletcher 2006, 423). In line with this argument I understand and analyze incubating processes as relational co-constructions of entrepreneurial opportunity in a specific context; an incubator. Hence, incubating activities contribute to existing ventures by offering additional resources, which the venture needed to find anyway, but can be fortunate to find in a formalised incubator set-up.

Does this mean that incubating processes are similar to entrepreneuring processes, and can we go as far as saying that the incubating process is a temporary support process in the entrepreneurial process that is already taking place? If we perceive incubating activities as additional and complementary resources to the entrepreneurial creation I believe the answer is yes! Some of the entrepreneurial respondents perceive their incubation affiliation as part of their bootstrapping strategy in a multitude of efforts to make their company real (O'Connor 2004). From a relational point of view, it makes good sense to use supporting activities as additional building blocks of creation along with other resources, and not as the only interactions constituting the venture or the last hope before failure. Entrepreneuring actors must not believe that an external actor is going to come on board to take the venture to customers, success and growth, as assistance providers for immature ventures are '*more or less, commercial services and part of a broader business environment of the company*' (Gibb 2000, 18).

5.4. Entrepreneurial creation as relationally constructed

Relational constructionism does not emphasise individuals and their sense-making but draws attention to relational processes as interactions that make the identities and worlds we live in, as local rationalities or cultures (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 41). Historically, the individualistic and static view of entrepreneurial behaviour has marginalised and undervalued the wider context within which entrepreneurs operate, and what they do when they relate to their surroundings (Steyaert 2007, Thorpe et al. 2009). Such an understanding is closely related to the Schumpeterian entrepreneur as an extraordinary being who is capable of bringing together invention and demand. However, even though the Schumpeterian entrepreneur does exists in a few rare cases, insights, intuition, skilfulness and quick reactions must be reformulated in the language of organising and relating. As Akrich et al. (2002) put it, individual qualities '*are no longer the property of an individual, but become collective virtues, during which the art of governing and managing play a key role*' (Akrich et al. 2002, 189).

Rae (2006) writes about how individuals feel that they change their identity, stating, '*The point at which a person becomes an entrepreneur is significant*' (Rae 2006, 46). Rae represents a social constructionist perspective, whereas this study is advocating the possibilities of a relational constructionist perspective. From a relational constructionist perspective, such a statement based on interviews with technology-based entrepreneurs constitutes retrospective sensemaking. There is no one point in time at which individuals change their identity, since identity is performative and an unstable construction based on the existing relational opportunities of the context. Instead it might happen at any time (Down and Warren 2008, 5). We move in and out of identities based on what we do and on the contextual set-up is a question of a relational achievement. Our narrative co-construction of identity and emotions with the surroundings has been an ongoing process of relational constructions, development and interactions (Bouwen 2010). The relational stance does not imply that individuals do not have a specific identity, and it acknowledges that there is a lifeworld which the individual makes sense of, and which has consequences for action. But individuals may have more than one identity and may move in and out of these various identities: project manager, mother, board member, swimmer or entrepreneur, for example, all of which are possible during the course of a single day. What the relational stance offers is a view of the narrative (co)construction of the individual as both relational and performative – as the narrative lifeworld influences how actors act in the world. The empirical material displays the individualistic, almost cliché-like (Down and Warren 2008) narrative of entrepreneuring, which includes a very persuasive and convincing individual under heavy emotional pressure and sets the stage for the variety – or lack of it variety – of relational connections for the venture and thus also for the performance of the venture.

In this study, I perceive the individual as part of the context and history with the aim of understanding his/her interactions – or the lack of them. Thus, it is not the individual who creates the venture; it is the interactions that he/she engages in (Watson 2013a, 17). Such a thought style of organisational creation as relationally and communally constituted challenges linear and individualistic understandings (Fletcher 2006, 437) and the methods used for investigation. In order to get closer to how things go on, rather than obtaining a static look at what is, the theoretical and methodological beginning of inquiry is '*the whole of human relations and their social context*' (Fletcher 2006, 436). Such a study is neither traits nor structure based; however '*the traits of agents and the weight of institutional forces are understood together, each manifesting the other with relational conditions that play out over time as an entrepreneurial story*' (Popp and Holt 2013, 53).

A relational constructionist lens does not imply that everything is relative and that relational realities cannot be assumed to be stable for a certain period in time, as they are not easily transformed or in constant flux, just because they are constructed from relations (Hosking 2011, Gergen 2009). It is important to take into account the context and history of every making, since '*the activities we label entrepreneurship require immense effort, negotiation, dialogue and they always 'go on' in relations to something else that has gone before*' (Fletcher 2006, 437). No single individual put the computer on the market, no hero was sent from above with a vaccine for malaria, and no region became a centre for innovation and entrepreneurship overnight. As it is presented in Popp and Holt's intriguing story about *John Shaw and Sons*, a British trading company founded in the early 19th century, John Shaw was never alone in creating the company (Popp and Holt 2013). The story of John Shaw could easily have been told as the story of a single man with certain (entrepreneurial) traits who found an opportunity and acted on it single-handedly, as we (researchers, politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs, mentors) often tend to frame good stories[36] of superhero-entrepreneurs. Such stories often suggest that the entrepreneur had the competences for pursuing his quest, but this story demonstrates how these skills and resources are developed and achieved during the process as learning outcomes. Tales of superheroes do often not include the details of the *inter*actions that made it happen, the contextual preconditions or the power struggles of resource mobilisation that the narrative analysis may offer (Fletcher 2007, 656).

Based on personal letters among the members of the Shaw family, Popp and Holt tell us a story of the Shaws where neither John nor his wife, Elisabeth Shaw, saw themselves as special in any way. Among many stories that could have been told, one story presented about *John Shaw and Sons* shows that '*The often fragile nature of the Shaws' experience in which business judgment is informed by curiosity, empathy, fate and even struggle as much, as readily, as it is by the identification and pursuit of opportunity and the organization of resources. The appearance of the Shaws' business becomes that of lives whose existence continually renews them as they pulled into an open future'* (Popp and Holt 2013, 66). The narrative tradition of studying entrepreneurship that Popp and Holt subscribe to here illustrates how entrepreneurial creation does not fall from the sky but has a history, a set of existing – but not stable – actors that was already there, existing – but

[36] In terms of a drama with heroes and villains, who overcome emotional pressure and finally achieve success.

not stable – cultures and traditions, and a set of rationales that constructed the local setting (Hosking 2011, 54). The story provides insights into the learning situations of entrepreneuring actors and into the *social, local* and *emotional* dimensions of life that influence and co-construct venture creation and maintenance, and which are so often taken for granted or forgotten in studies of business and business creation. The interactions have a historical aspect, imprinted with earlier performances that influenced how new processes happened (Hosking 2011, 55), but they also hint that how and what they experience and learn are interrelated. The case of the Shaws is an example of entrepreneurial learning processes and development, and Popp and Holt demonstrates this by using a narrative form of investigation and listening to the story in their conversations. Relational constructionism is a thought style that makes us see what entrepreneurial being is *also* about, and which remembers the often-forgotten relatedness among objects, ideas, images, discourses and practices that constitute social reality (Fletcher 2006).

I will argue that when incubating managers design business incubating activities they might benefit from remembering the case of the Shaws, and how entrepreneurial skills and experiences are developed over time from relational constructions within the given context of the venture. It suggests less instrumental and standardised approaches to entrepreneurial support than we see today, and focus on the relational learning processes that make the venture.

5.5. Entrepreneuring is for everybody

As outlined in the introduction, incubation as a socially constructed concept has an economic agenda, and entrepreneurial endeavours are regarded as single cases and defined and assessed according to economic principles (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 186). The problem arising from only imagining entrepreneuring as reserved for specific actors and actions is that when we define entrepreneuring only in terms of economic success, entrepreneuring activities only occur in a few places. Steyaert and Katz (2004) suggest that a narrow perspective on entrepreneuring will result in policy makers and researchers only being able to explain the needs and success of entrepreneurs from a few examples of very successful entrepreneuring actors. Such experiences may not be relevant to actors outside a small and very specific group of people, and if we instead focus on the efforts made to improve processes, meet needs, combine actors and entities in new and different ways and see profit as a means for small and large purposes and not only an end (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 191) we get a much more nuanced view of what it can mean to be entrepreneuring. With a more mundane look at entrepreneuring activities we enable a larger and more diverse range of actors to see themselves as entrepreneurs, and are able to view entrepreneurship as an integrated and important element of society. As Steyaert and Katz (2004) put it, '*entrepreneurial activities should not be reserved for specific actors and* *actions*' (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 190). This means that if we perceive entrepreneuring as way of acting and handling processes instead of assessing it by a specific outcome, it is something that everybody can perform and learn from.

A relational approach to the construction of entrepreneurial learning implies that I embrace the instability of meaning and ambiguity instead of ignoring it and look towards actors or elements that point to potentiality of the processes. This works well with the exploratory methods of organizational ethnography, and means that I do not know beforehand which sources entrepreneurial learning should come from, or whether it is going to happen at all, but that I remain open to seeing learning spring from other sources than I expected.

5.6. Theorising about entrepreneurial learning

To theorise is to focus on the connection between understanding (the researcher) and living (the object of investigation) in an effort to make the world and its processes more explicit (Steyaert 2012, 154). From a constructionist point of view, there is no one theory about entrepreneurial learning, and there is no need for aiming at constructing a single unifying theory, as theories can never fully capture entrepreneurial becoming. An interest in the processes of learning combined with the methods available for investigating learning processes produces *theorising*: something more than theories, which emerges when I, as a researcher, make sense of the field based on collecting, reflecting and selecting. The theorising in this dissertation has its roots in the particular context where relational meanings and culture were investigated. This has allowed for surprises and disconfirmation of pre-existing theoretical approximations and made room for imagining and constructing new ones, which differs from what we know as classical theory building (Steyaert 2012, 153).

In the following sections, entrepreneurial learning is presented from a relational perspective, because the empirical material has suggested that the interactions of actors is central for illuminating how entrepreneurial actors may learn as the outcome of supporting initiatives. It should be emphasised that entrepreneurial learning includes many different processes happening simultaneously over time, at different speeds and levels, and not only one learning process. Most venture creations involve the development, transformation and learning of various types of tasks and within various areas of expertise. The researchers Gibb, Rae and Cope represent an in-depth reading of organisational and management learning literature[37] and their theorising on entrepreneurial training[38] in educational and incubation contexts together with their theorising on

[37] Wenger (1998), Argyris and Schön (1978), Fiol and Lyles (1985), Minetti and Bygrave (2001), Honey and Mumford (1995), Senge (1996), Young and Sexton (1997).
[38] Training is more instrumental in character than learning, which is an important distinction. One trains for something fairly specific to be carried out. Learning is a more open endeavour, since what one learns can be used in many different

entrepreneurial learning processes supports the present study well. They have all been interested in how actors learn to act in entrepreneurial ways and how they reason and act. They have also expressed frustration with the unsatisfactory results of quantitative methods for doing research into these issues. The most significant aspect of their collective work is the recognition of learning as located within certain situations and contexts and as a process that is intrinsically social; a point of view that has not previously held great prominence in the entrepreneurship or incubation literature. This development made learning theory necessary, and the thought style of relational constructionism required a specific learning theory.

A relational look into entrepreneurial learning cycles is an interest in the many different kinds of constructing and de-constructing processes that go on continuously when a venture is being created. As a consequence there is no *one* learning cycle of the venture but multiple learning cycles that unfold on the personal, organisational and relational level of cognition but also in the various tasks of the venture, such as selling, producing, communicating etc. This also relates to the challenge of defining *one* specific learning need for entrepreneuring ventures. In many cases it is a broad set of resources, skills and experiences that are needed.

5.7. Entrepreneurship studies – a field with a need for a learning theory

The study of entrepreneurship has historically represented an unusual domain for the study of learning, although most entrepreneurs become actively engaged in learning in order to become proficient managers of people and resources (Cope 2003, 429). Gibb (1997) was one of the first to emphasise entrepreneurs to be embedded in a learning environment that is constituted by many different actors and relations, and in agreement with Minetti and Bygrave (2001) he claimed that '*a theory of entrepreneurship needs a theory of learning*' (Minetti and Bygrave 2001, 7). Even though the field of entrepreneurship learning and facilitation methods is still rather small, the subject is receiving growing attention (Harrison and Leitch 2008, Karatas-Özkan and Chell 2010, Karatas-Özkan 2011) According to Pittaway et al. (2009), two reasons can be said to drive this process. One is the growing recognition of the shortcomings of existing educational and incubating activities targeted at actors with entrepreneurial aspirations. These shortages become clear if we accept that '*learning is a fundamental and integral part of the entrepreneuring process, in which the human, social and behavioural activities are as of much concern as the economic aspect which are often highlighted*' (Rae 2005, 324). The second reason is that some researchers move away from the deterministic understanding about

contexts. Training can be an occasion for learning, as situated learning, and may be relevant for incubating activities, but as this dissertation is looking for processes to expand the entrepreneurial capacity of actors, the focus point is learning processes rather than specific training sessions.

human behaviour, which opens up a space for talking about entrepreneurial learning instead of focusing on finding the very special individuals with the very specific skills (talent) for business (Pittaway et al. 2009; Karatas-Özkan and Chell 2010).

While there appears to be a close link between learning and entrepreneurial achievements, there is less understanding with respect to the processes of how entrepreneurial actors learn, especially the role of previous experience (Politis 2005, 45), role of contextual and emotional aspects of entrepreneuring processes (Gibb 2009, 211) and the learning experience of entrepreneurial teams (Karatas-Özkan 2011, 878). Entrepreneurial learning is often associated with experimental processes of *learning by doing*, including processes of trial-and-error, problem solving and discovery (Minetti and Bygrave 2001, Leitch et al. 2009, 247).

Smilor (1997, 344) claims that effective entrepreneurs are exceptional learners. Cope (2005a) argues that entrepreneurial creations come from mutual learning among actors in social networks, emphasising that opportunity development is a social process. Cope summarises the literature on adult and management learning, saying '*that learning is located within certain situations and contexts and that learning is an intrinsically social process that explicate the concept of "situated learning" where learning is described as an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice'* (Cope 2005a, 388). This implies that learning derives from social interaction with other actors, created from responsive, rhetorical and argumentative processes, which again urges us to focus on relations and the emotional underpinnings with regard to business incubating activities. The lack of recognition of emotional and psychological factors as important to entrepreneurial learning, as pointed out by Gibb (2002, 2009), inhibits the capacity of entrepreneurship programmes to go beyond the norms of conventional business education, and this limitation may be one of the reasons '*why there has been so little progress in meeting the learning needs of small enterprises over many decades*' (Gibb 2009, 210), an observation that is further supported by Klofsten and Jones-Evans (2013).

The following sections presents parts of Cope's learning framework (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012) and his learning task overview, as his conceptualisations highlight the complexities and dynamic aspects of entrepreneurial learning at different levels and at different times. Following Rae (2006), entrepreneurial learning happens and can be understood in terms of *personal and social emergence, contextual learning* and *negotiated enterprise*; these terms construct a framework for entrepreneurial learning that is presented in this chapter and form a constructionist framework that can be used to interpret entrepreneurial learning experiences (Rae 2006, 41). I apply this framework as steppingstones for introducing three different but interrelated levels of entrepreneurial learning. Gibb, Rae and Cope have all striven to uncover the black box of entrepreneurial education, support and leaning processes over the last 20 years (Maritz and Brown 2013, 235). Framed by similar constructionist thought styles to this study, their work forms a helpful basis for understanding entrepreneurial learning and will provide a vocabulary for discussing entrepreneurial learning in the following chapters. In many ways, relational constructionism builds on, rather than rejects, social constructionism, which is why I find the relational stance an important supplement for answering my research question.

With support from Rae, Gibb and Cope, the chapter frames what is distinct about the entrepreneurial context for learning, what entrepreneurial learning is and why we need a specific entrepreneurial learning theory. Even though I find the work of the above-mentioned authors both informative and important to the field of entrepreneurial learning, I still miss practical instructions, with relational mechanisms in mind, for how to actually perform entrepreneurial learning support for actors with entrepreneurial aspirations who are not yet capable enough. With a few exceptions, such as Klofsten and Evans-Jones (2013), Hjorth (2013) and Alexandersson (2015) the incubation literature pays little attention to the specific methods and pedagogies for how interactions may be performed.

5.8. Defining entrepreneurial learning - as a process and outcome of incubating activities

The present study centres on entrepreneurial learning as a possible outcome of incubator activity, hence making it central to define what is understood by entrepreneurial learning. Rae (2000) refers to entrepreneurial learning as a form of change in the capacity of entrepreneurial action, which enables individuals and groups to act differently and have more choices for action than before (Rae 2000, 151). The implications of such description of entrepreneurial learning to this dissertation are that the fieldwork activities have been concerned with identifying a *capacity change*, within the participants of the Accelerator programme.[39]

Rae states that '*when learning is applied to the concept of entrepreneurship, it is concerned with learning how to recognise and act on opportunities, how to organise and manage ventures, and so on*' (Rae 2000, 151).

[39] An obvious question to this statement – is whether it is possible, based on the fieldwork and interviews, to evaluate an eventual capacity change with the participants of the Accelerator programme? The interview guides have been specifically designed to investigate this matter, and every participant has been asked how they have understood, interpreted and applied the various types of programme material. These questions have been followed up on by asking to concrete examples of actions that could be seen as an outcome of the interactions in the programme. Lastly, the researcher has interpreted on the interviews and the further actions of the participants, whether their patterns for acting could be said to have changed and whether the participants in their own interpretation has changed their ways of thinking and acting about certain matters. Based on the comprehensive, longitudinal fieldwork, it is therefore the understanding of the researcher that it is possible to evaluate whether there has been a capacity change with the entrepreneuring participants – at least in their own perception – which is important, because it affects how they believe themselves to be able to act.

Opportunities are in this setting, combinations of time (timing), context and actions, which makes entrepreneurial learning based on entrepreneurial pursuit, dynamic and contextual (Karatas-Özkan 2011) – and in some senses local, or at least not universal! Recalling Stevenson's definition of entrepreneurship as '*the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled*' (Stevenson 1985) and combining this with Rae's assertion above, I have summed up what I find to be a useful definition of entrepreneurial learning to incubating contexts, to be;

Entrepreneurial learning is a capacity change in the variety of ways to perform the pursuit of opportunities and organising and managing these opportunities - without regard to the resources currently controlled.

In the incubator context, it seems to be particularly important to be able to act – or at least learn how to - without all needed resources. One of the main reasons for entrepreneuring actors to join the incubator is exactly to attract resources – or be able to acquire more or complementary resources than currently available. This is important to stress, as lack of resources often is the main argument (excuse) from entrepreneurs for *not* acting or organising – and also the entrepreneurship policy argument for initiating support in the first place. What Stevenson adds to the definition is that acting, at least from an entrepreneurship theory perspective, is always possible.

Entrepreneurship scholars seem to agree that capacity change may come from specific learning episodes or result from the ongoing entrepreneurial experience of learning entrepreneurially (Cope 2005a, Politis 2005, Hjorth and Johannisson 2006, Cope and Down 2010). Rae (2009) furthermore stresses the *double connotation* of learning to behave *in* and learning *through* entrepreneurial ways (Rae 2009, 291), indicating that the learning process itself needs to be understood as an entrepreneurial process. This is how entrepreneuring actors learn: entrepreneurially (Hjorth and Johannisson 2006). From Politis' (2005) work on entrepreneurial learning we understand that entrepreneurial learning is an experimental process, and that the experiences acquired en the early process enables entrepreneurs to pursue their future task of managing the venture (Politis 2005) – which means that she is primarily writing about the learning *through* entrepreneuring. This study is focused on how to get entrepreneuring actors into the process of organising and managing in the first place – i.e. what motivates and encourages *behaving* in entrepreneurial ways[40]. Setting a scene for actors

[40] Entrepreneurship studies on learning, as Stevenson (1985) and Sarasvathy (2001, 2004) is based on individuals who are already acting entrepreneurially; they have, so to speak, learned the robes of entrepreneuring. The respondents that I have been in dialogue with, as in Cope's studies, are actors who are still pursuing the entrepreneurial process but who are, from a performative perspective, not quite there yet.

to learn to behave in entrepreneurial ways – and then learning through the entrepreneuring process, is the main task of policy makers and incubator managers/ advisors.

From his study of entrepreneurs and influenced by Huber (1991), Cope found that cognitive change does not necessarily lead to changes in behaviour (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 843). However, from an incubator perspective it might be too ambitious to expect that participants change behaviour immediately, but, as Huber (1991) writes, *'an entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviours is changed'* (Huber 1991, 91). This description of learning is appropriate to incubator studies, as these activities attempt to expand the *range of potential behaviour,* which means a change of capacity in the entrepreneurial venture.

Based on the intentions and purpose of incubating activities, the dissertation positions such expansion of range of behaviour -as what is supposed to be the outcome of the temporary relationship between immature ventures and entrepreneurship support. The relational approach implies that this relationship is equal, with mutual responsibilities and views "*the entrepreneur as being proactive in the learning process and envisioning the future opportunities, while reflecting on past and current situations and conducting day-to-day management of the business in relation to a number of stakeholders*" (Karatas-Özkan 2011, 881). The relation component of creation is from this perspective important when investigating entrepreneurial learning, since entrepreneurial actors are relational beings that make decisions and choices when they engage with others. Entrepreneurial learning is thus a creative-relational construction, based on the capacity for the pursuit of opportunity (Hjorth 2011, 50) and the task of policy makers and incubator managers are to stimulate and support such constructions.

It is unknown how the entrepreneurial actors will act out this expanded range in the future, but incubating managers and actors have to put their efforts into the processual design and pedagogies of the activities. I argue that if the range of possibilities for interacting and organising the venture is expanded with additional or complementary resources achieved through incubating processes, we may say that the process has resulted in a capacity change. It might be noted here that the learning of an entrepreneurial actor, which involves both human beings and the venture as a whole, involves parallel processes of both personal and organisational change – which cannot be easily separated (Karatas-Özkan 2011).

It is widely accepted in the literature on entrepreneurial learning that entrepreneurial actors are action-oriented[41] and learn from experience, trial and error, problem solving and discovery (Cope 2003, 430, Rae 2006, 41). Entrepreneurial learning is a process involving experimentation, unpredictability and unknown consequences, which springs from choices based on the available information. The result is therefore often that entrepreneuring actors may be inadequately prepared for the consequences of their choices, which indicates the underlying mode of urgency that is associated with entrepreneurial performance. Cope (2005a) argues that there is more to learning than simply *doing*: The reflections and emotions produced by experience also make a difference in the entrepreneurial capacity to act; this again refers back to Rae's remark on the double connotation of entrepreneurial learning. This follows a line of thought which accepts that entrepreneurs learn from and are transformed by experience, but it also seeks to explore how entrepreneurs learn from these formative experiences (Cope and Watts 2000, 109) and broadens the distinction between two forms of entrepreneurial learning: 'learning by doing' and 'learning through critical episodes or events' (Cope 2005a, 382). Cope (2010) almost suggests that some kind of crisis or shock is a prerequisite for higher-level learning (double-loop or complex) and emphasises learning episodes as crucial for the transformation of entrepreneurial actors and their ventures. Learning episodes, he argues, have more explanatory power than simple day-to-day experiences. Gibb has a broader understanding of what kind of experiences entrepreneurial actors learn from and writes that they learn from *'dealing with a wide (holistic) task structure; learning from peers; learning by doing; learning by feedback from customers and suppliers; learning by coping; learning by experiment; learning by problem solving and opportunity taking; and learning from mistakes'* (Gibb 1997, 19). I find this to be more appropriate to incubator studies and practice – as it acknowledges the unpredictable, complex and multi-dimensional nature of entrepreneurial learning, as also pointed to by Karatas-Özkan (2011).

5.9. Entrepreneurial learning concepts developed by Cope

In his own work and together with colleagues, Cope created a framework[42] of entrepreneurial learning that perceives learning as a relational phenomenon and incorporates social, emotional and contextual dimensions to entrepreneurial learning (Cope and Watt 2000, Cope 2003, Cope 2005a, Cope 2005b, Pittaway and Cope 2007, Cope 2010). The framework presents '*opportunities for understanding entrepreneurs in context, by highlighting the complex, interactive learning relationship that exists between the entrepreneur, his or her business, and the wider environment*' (Cope 2005a, 391). Of particular interest to incubating activities are the

[41] Comment: Some of the entrepreneurs I have interviewed are not very action-oriented but mainly talk about action. Perhaps that is their problem: that they are entrepreneurs by name only, not in deed.
[42] The framework is closely related to Wenger's (1998) concept of situated learning

concepts of the entrepreneurial learning tasks and the stock of experience (Cope 2003, 377, Pittaway and Thorpe 2012).

- *Learning tasks* are related to needs and specific to the individual entrepreneuring venture and its human actors and defined by the past, present and future of the venture. Every venture is constructed from a unique collection of skills, contexts experiences, resources and the need for additional and complementary resources that varies from project to project and from venture to venture. Whether entrepreneurial projects draw on business incubating activities or drive the relational processes themselves, there is an urgent need for entrepreneurs to learn how '*to become effective managers of people and resources*' (Thorpe et al. 2009, 201) of this particular venturing setting.
- The *existing stock of experience* is important because it tells us something about the frame of reference within which entrepreneurial actors perceive and evaluate new knowledge, support and opportunities. In order to gain the attention of entrepreneurial actors, incubating activities need to tap in the existing world of references and value, speak a language that is recognisable and offer a kind of legitimacy that participants are likely to value. This is very much about acknowledging that entrepreneurial actors have different starting points, and also that incubating activities are not about taking the venture to a certain stage or, even worse, the same specific stage before take-off but rather about increasing what is already there.

5.10. A competence overview of entrepreneuring – learning areas of importance

As the context of entrepreneuring actors is likely to be both dynamic and unique, it is hard for incubating actors, teachers or researchers to pre-define entrepreneurial learning tasks (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 849). Nevertheless, based on his extensive reading of the learning literature and entrepreneurship studies, Cope (2005a) introduces five learning areas of importance to the individual[43] entrepreneur in relation to the *content* dimension of the entrepreneurial learning task (Cope 2005a, 380). What is interesting is that we might interpret these five learning areas as Cope's attempt at describing a competence profile for entrepreneuring actors – as necessary skills in a venture's resource pool, whether they are currently controlled or not, if the venture is to develop and prosper. Cope's five learning areas are:

[43] I interpret this competence overview as learning areas for the entire venture, including internal and external relations as part of the process of constructing the venture – and not only for the founder.

1. *Learning about oneself: Learning issues include understanding one's own weaknesses; one's changing role within the business; personal and family needs and objectives; areas for personal development; personal interests and motivations.*
2. *Learning about the business: This includes strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats; internal business needs; requirements for growth; areas for development; understanding and facilitating one's staff; future direction.*
3. *Learning about the environment and entrepreneurial networks: learning how to manage relationships with existing and potential customers, suppliers and competitors. And learning about appreciating and maximising relationships with advisory agencies and support services such as the bank and the accountant.*
4. *Learning about small business management: learning how to run and control the business effectively, including important procedures and systems such as recruitment, salary and reward structures and financial monitoring.*
5. *Learning about the nature and management of relationships: This regards both internal (to the firm) and external partnerships. This final element of the learning task forms an integral part of the other four elements outlined above (Cope 2005a, 230).*[44]

These learning areas point to key areas that entrepreneurial actors need to develop and remind us of the multidisciplinary nature of the endeavour and why the practice of entrepreneuring and the ability to excel in all these areas are not necessarily to be found in one individual; instead they are more likely to be found in a good team/network of complementary competences.

Based on my reading of the incubation literature in Chapter 3 I find that incubating activities primarily offer services that upgrade participants on learning task 2 and somewhat less on learning task 4 – and these areas are also the ones that incubator managers focus on. This observation is also reflected in the empirical material. Participants may be introduced to new concepts or potential customers, but they learn less about managing relationships or initiate new ones, as the programme focuses more on managerial education and less on participative learning opportunities.

Furthermore, it is my understanding that the fifth learning task slightly more important than the others, as the relational abilities of entrepreneurial teams in a relational constructionist perspective is critical to the creation of a real business and is therefore of significant interest for my perspective on incubating activities. Gibb (2000) contends that managing stakeholder networks is the very essence of entrepreneurial activity, and he writes about relationship learning needs (Gibb 2000, 19). The learning areas from Cope relate to Rae's interrelated levels of social, conceptual and negotiated learning by describing the various learning needs at different levels and in relation to different topics with greater specificity.

. I find it remarkable that the word 'selling' is not part of the framework – at least not explicitly – and it is important to be critical to a framework and its touch with practice if it fails to mention 'selling' as a crucial element

5.11. Conceptual framework for entrepreneurial learning developed by Rae

The entrepreneurship literature is scarce in terms of understanding entrepreneurial learning from a relational perspective instead on the content dimension of what entrepreneurial actors need to learn about (Rae and Carswell 2001, Cope 2005a, Steyaert 2007, Karatas-Özkan 2011). The general consensus in the entrepreneurship literature is that entrepreneurs perform a wide range of small and large activities. However the focus is on explaining, in retrospect, what entrepreneurs did (best practice stories) or who they are (traits), while it is less clear *how* these actions were performed and, even more important, how they are continuously altered, improved and changed (Cope 2005a, 375). Drawing on Wenger (1998), Rae argues that to make a proper framework of entrepreneurial learning, theorists need to escape the divide between cognitive and interpretative approaches. In line with this Karatas-Özkan 2011 argues that entrepreneurial learning studies should bridge traditional levels of analysis – as micro, meso and macro level – because entrepreneurial learning processes transcend individual-, team-, firm- and network-level analysis (Karatas-Özkan 2011, 902). This leads us to an understanding of entrepreneurial learning as a situated (contextual) and active experience (local and dynamic) – and, according to Rae, an experience that is individual, social and organisational, hence bridging traditional levels of analysis.

Rae (2005, 2006, 2007) has developed a conceptual framework for entrepreneurial learning based on methods with a qualitative and narrative orientation. This framework includes three major themes, which are:

- ***Personal and social emergence - behaving entrepreneurially***
- ***Contextual learning – opportunity recognition***
- ***Negotiated enterprise – interacting with and creating markets***[45]

According to Rae, this range of themes demonstrates the complexity of entrepreneurial learning – meaning, how it crosses traditional levels of actors, structures and disciplines in a context of uncertainty and emotional exposure (Rae 2005, 326). I apply the themes as headlines for the different kinds of entrepreneurial capacity change. Inspired by Karatas-Özkan's (2011) article about understanding the relational qualities of entrepreneurial learning, I outline specific learning aspects of each theme – which are the development points – areas of capacity changes - I have investigated during the fieldwork. All immature ventures have different learning tasks and stock of experience – and the needs for capacity expansion will vary from project to project. The learning areas of each learning theme are therefore not an exact list of competences that all immature

[45] The purpose of the entrepreneurial learning model is to stimulate personal awareness and reflection of the entrepreneurial journey of entrepreneurial learning (Rae 2007, 45)

ventures must accomplish, but a way to illustrate what kind of achievements and expansion in capacity this dissertation refers to when referring to entrepreneurial learning.

- ***Personal and social emergence***: Personal and social emergence is about the emotional and identity-transforming context of the entrepreneuring process, which to a large degree influences the interactions and performances of entrepreneuring actors. When nothing is known and everything is about convincing the world about the beauty and usefulness of one's project, work and actions become emotional and dependent on trust, previous experience and the relational connections at hand. Four subthemes characterizes this theme;
    - ***Narrative construction of identity***
    - ***Role of family***
    - ***Identity as practice***
    - ***Tensions between current and future identities (Rae 2007, 45)***

  Rae describes this process as '*becoming recognised as an enterprising person, people renegotiate their personal and social identities that express who they are, who they want to be, and how they prefer to be recognised within their social context*' (Rae 2006, 45). When actors go from one context of being employed, unemployed or students to working on an idea or project with the purpose of commercialisation, in a sense they become entrepreneurs in their own perception – and if successful - also in the perceptions of their surroundings (Down and Warren 2008, 16). This influences their sense of self, identity and the aspirations that may be pursued (Rae 2006, 44). The close family of entrepreneuring actors are often closely related to the project, both as inspiration (parents), but also in terms of supporting and being part of the entrepreneurial emergence. Family can both play a motivating role for entrepreneuring actors, in the sense of taking care of one's family, but also constraining; in the sense of being risk adverse (Rae 2007, 46).

  Being in a situation of emotional exposure is potentially an intense and exiting learning situation, but it may also make entrepreneurial actors feel isolated and alone, as the responsibility is theirs alone (Pittaway et al. 2009, 269). According to Cope (2003), the early entrepreneurial process is often associated with high personal exposure (emotional, financial and social) and high uncertainty and the personal judgement of entrepreneurs and managers are subjective and rely on what the entrepreneurs already know. The assessment of risk, relevant knowledge, reliable partners, additional resources, business incubating activities and future needs are subjective, and as Cope demonstrates, *'the performance of the business is inextricably linked to the emotional and financial wellbeing of the* *entrepreneur, his or her family and other stakeholders'* (Cope 2003, 430). Cope's research on failure brings us closer to the relational mechanisms that enable people to learn from practice and failure: the emotional pain that *personal disappointment*, *humiliation*, *social exclusion* and *remorse* can produce. Cope finds that these are relational costs interwoven with failure (Cope 2010, 605). However, he also finds that failure does not produce fundamental long-term professional costs, as we might expect, and that actually makes failed entrepreneurs better equipped for unforeseen events, as they are less naïve and less prone to perceiving themselves as invincible.

From a relational perspective, theorising on personal and social emergence offers insights into how the identity construction of entrepreneuring actors is picked up in the local, social and historical context of the entrepreneuring actors. In a setting characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity, many entrepreneurial actors protect themselves by relying on what is known and what feels safe when they face difficult decisions (Aldrich and Kim 2007). The emotional state of personal and social emergence should be taken seriously, as the feeling of being exposed is a central part of their personal understanding as entrepreneurs. The implications for entrepreneurial actors and for the actors who wish to support them is to acknowledge that the becoming of entrepreneurial creation is both a social and an emotional process, and that the emotional state of the entrepreneuring actor is significant in order for an advisor or investor to be allowed access to the venture and influence how entrepreneurial actors act. For technology-based entrepreneurs, this may be a different kind of learning than they had imagined they needed, as it is not just about making the product perfect - but involves transformational processes of how they as actors interact with their surroundings.

Central on-going learning areas of the personal emergence theme[46]:

- Learning to identify business opportunities
- Learning to sell the idea, the product and the business
- Learning to transform business idea into viable business
- Learning to manage one-self and various functions of the venture
- Learning to learn from failures and successes on a personal level
- Learning to attract (relevant and valuable) resources at various levels

[46] The specific learning areas of each learning theme is my way of making the learning theory concrete, and stress that it is manifold and complex. They are interpretations of entrepreneurial learning theory by Rae, Cope and Karatas-Ozkan, but also the experiences from the fieldwork. The learning areas have been used in the interviews as learning dimensions to look for.

- Learning to make good decisions and minimize the risk

- **Contextual learning:** Contextual learning relates to the external relations of the entrepreneurial venture and includes the skills, expert knowledge and social contacts from earlier employment, experience and industry-specific knowledge. Three subthemes characterizes this theme;
    - ***Learning through engagement with industry or community***
    - ***Opportunity recognition and innovation through participation***
    - ***Practical theories (Rae 2007, 50)***

According to Rae, it has been established that entrepreneurial learning stems from the social, environmental and economic context in which it takes place, and also that context to a large degree determines the possibilities of learning constructions, such as what is being learned, when the learning takes place and how it is translated into other projects (Rae 2006, 47). Thus, the development of a venture is based on social interactions, participation in the community, industry and other resourceful networks and is closely connected with openness to outside intervention – which can be formulated as '*holding the space for multiple community-based constructions*' (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 14). Contextual learning is the result of social activities that help entrepreneuring actors positioning themselves for collaborations and the exchange of knowledge, which according to Bouwen (2010) is a relational practice that can lead to belonging or a membership based on meaningful interactions (Bouwen 2010, 24).

Contextual learning and knowledge are also important, as a source of new resources and ideas in order to remain competitive and able to meet the future needs of customers. It is from the personal and contextual learning that entrepreneuring actors begin to develop their routines and make their organising of the venture more effective. Rae describes this as entrepreneurial actors shaping their own, often tacit, practical theories of action '*as analytical tools that enable people to see connections and create meaning between aspects of their lives and practices and to account for their actions*' (Rae 2006, 49). It is not an easy task to reconcile the rationalities of different actors in the context or community where the entrepreneuring actor is located, as these other actors are likely to be involved in the same context but use different vocabularies and therefore also conceptualise potentials and challenges from their own respective vantage points (Shotter 2010, 242). Again, this confirms that there is much more to entrepreneurial creation than capital or one good idea. It also crucially involves the relational mastering of personal, social and technological relations, which is very much about mastering dialogue. Rae (2006) argues that especially in the case of technology-based entrepreneurs, the contextual learning is of significant importance, since '*innovations, opportunities and entrepreneurial skills are developed through contextual learning and this cannot occur without participation*' (Rae 2006, 49). Few technology-based entrepreneurs make a product that can stand alone or are in control of the entire production line; instead, they are more likely to be suppliers of components for other kinds of products and have to fit into and speak with other systems, which make them inherently relationally dependent.

Central on-going learning areas of the contextual learning theme:[47]

- Learning to legitimise the venture to the market and sell its products and services
- Learning to transform knowledge and new experiences into new opportunities
- Learning to attract stable and new sources of resources
- Learning to manage and lead the venture (people management)
- Learning to develop "practical theories" about what works to this venture
- Learning to learn from failures and successes on a team/firm level
- Learning to identify the specifics of one's industry
- Learning to be strategic about relationships with all related actors of the venture
- Learning to identify and form strategic alliances/ partnerships/ networks
- Learning to perform certain discourses/ narratives of the ventures industry(ies)

- **Negotiated enterprise**: Negotiated enterprise is about playing the real game of relational constructionism. The concept of the negotiated enterprise is the relational understanding in its wide notion – that multiple, simultaneous and ongoing forms of relating construct relational realities (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 41). Four subthemes characterize this theme;
  - ***Participation and joint enterprise***
  - ***Negotiated meaning, structures and practices***
  - ***Engagement in networks and external relationships***
  - ***Changing roles over time (Rae 2007, 52)***

According to Rae the central point of this theme is that '*the notion of the negotiated enterprise is that business venture is not enacted by one person alone, but is dependent on the outcome of negotiated*

[47] The specific learning areas of each learning theme is my way of making the learning theory concrete, and stress that it is manifold and complex. They are interpretations of entrepreneurial learning theory by Rae, Cope and Karatas-Özkan, but also the experiences from the fieldwork. The learning areas have been used in the interviews as learning dimensions to look for.

relationships with other parties' (Rae 2006, 51). It emphasises that networks, ecosystems, communities of practice and other group designs based on family, friends, colleagues, competitors, customers, partners and peers are all part of the ongoing conversation that entrepreneuring actors have with their surroundings (O'Connor 2004, 107). As we know from other social contexts, the emotional context of trust, respect and shared experiences is crucial for the construction of relationships and therefore also for entrepreneurial learning as a shared outcome of interaction (Sullivan 2000). The negotiation of the entrepreneurial creation, whether the idea/project/ambition is turned into products, workplaces, customer satisfaction and monetary output, can be seen as process of interaction with more or less potential, but we do not know beforehand whether the interaction will unleash the potentiality (Rae 2006). The notion of the negotiated enterprise can be associated to a processual-relational understanding of entrepreneuring and can also be used in the understanding of the incubating relationship, as this relationship is also part of the ongoing negotiation of the entrepreneurial creation. Through the negotiations (based on social competences and contextual knowledge) and the enacted participation of various actors, entrepreneurial actors develop a distinctive culture and a local rationality with a similar style of thinking (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 37).

The emphasis on negotiation as a central theme in the construction of external relations is interesting in the sense that entrepreneuring activities can be associated with various forms of *games*. The game metaphor is relevant when interaction is unpredictable, meaning that it is possible to lose, that something is at stake, that strategies have to be made, that the players do not know or control the game of other players (partners or customers), and that it is uncertain whether other players will react as expected and play according to the official rules. Negotiations are often associated with distributive battles that need to be won. Nevertheless, in the entrepreneuring context, negotiations are more likely to be – and should be – seen as integrative: the process of finding common interest, sharing resources and – to stick to the language of negotiation – expanding the pie rather than simply slicing it (Thompson 2005).

Central on-going learning areas of the negotiated enterprise theme:[48]

- Learning to let products and service develop – identify new business opportunities
- Learning to negotiate professionally at all levels of venturing
- Learning to balance firm development and structure

[48] The specific learning areas of each learning theme is my way of making the learning theory concrete, and stress that it is manifold and complex. They are interpretations of entrepreneurial learning theory by Rae, Cope and Karatas-Ozkan, but also the experiences from the fieldwork. The learning areas have been used in the interviews as learning dimensions to look for.

- Learning to manage relationships effectively and make long-term investments
- Learning to negotiate the continuous existence and relevance of the venture
- Learning to collaborate, trust and delegate responsibilities
- Learning to explore and exploit influence and positions
- Learning to lead the industry – and stay ahead of competitors

The three forms of learning developed by Rae cannot be said to function as linear levels of learning stages, meaning that learning to negotiate the existence of the venture is on a higher or more sophisticated level than personal, social and contextual learning. However, it is clear that there is a lot to learn as aspiring entrepreneurs – and that it is the social skills and contextual understanding and knowledge that enable entrepreneuring actors to actively engage other actors to participate constructively in their entrepreneurial becoming. The task that entrepreneurship policy makers and incubator managers and designers have set themselves to solve is actually, to facilitate that immature entrepreneuring actors turn in on a path of learning the robes of entrepreneuring – here presented as learning areas under the headlines of Rae's learning framework – and behave in an entrepreneurial way that will make them learn through the entrepreneuring process.

5.12. What then - is it that entrepreneuring actors need to learn?

Entrepreneuring actors may have many learning needs – as it has just been outlined. These needs are often characterised by uncertainty and complexity when it comes to exact context and value. All these learning needs are related to change, upgrades, and capacity expansions – for which there is no general standard (Gibb 2009, 222). Since experience and context are always unique for any start-up or venture, the level of the existing stock of experience is also unique, without this necessarily saying anything about quality or relevance. Cope and his research fellow's call for entrepreneuring actors to access learned skills and ability actively by looking '*backward and inward, reflecting on the relevance of past experience (…) to envisage their preparedness for entrepreneurship' (Cope 2005a, 379).* Rae gives the following ideal description of the skills that entrepreneuring actors need to master; this is probably the most accurate and conclusive description of how actors ought to act to be entrepreneuring well, and if I were to set up a goal for the learning outcome of incubating activities – this would be it!

> '*The skills of listening, understanding the others party's position, negotiating and storytelling are essential in maintaining effective relationships (…) The skills of the negotiated enterprise for technology-based entrepreneurs are to recognise their own distinctive skills, expertise and limitations, understanding the need to interact with people who have complementary skills to*

> *optimise their contribution to a venture forming and working effectively within an entrepreneurial team that has capabilities beyond those of the founder. If the skills of interaction, team formation and participation can be developed early, these can be used to advantage. The "lone wolf" innovator is increasingly disadvantaged, as the ability to develop effective relationships with investors, corporate partners, suppliers and major customers through presentation, negotiation and trust building is essential. An essential activity for potential technology-based entrepreneurs is to be active member of industry, professional or technical networks, and to develop a wide range of contacts. They will need to participate actively in selected external networks to represent the business and develop new opportunities*' (Rae 2006, 52).

In an incubating setting, incubating actors will have to be explicit about who or whom (demography, culture, location) to impact, why (reason), what (content) to bring forward, and how (methods) we expect learning may be facilitated to establish a potentiality for change in actions. To be able to create growth from added capital and resources, we assume that entrepreneurial actors need to develop entrepreneurial capability as a form of added strength. This strengthening of capacity and the ability to act differently is closely linked to entrepreneurial learning, and entrepreneurial learning is a fundamental part of the development of the technology-based venture and thus associated with the human, social and behavioural aspects of learning (Rae 2006, 40). Entrepreneurial learning is to be understood as the outcome of co-constructive (experience and reflection) processes that have made the entrepreneur/entrepreneurial team/venture stronger, more independent, better at attracting and exploiting complementary resources and capable of acting on their own. From incubating activities, entrepreneurial learning should confer the possibility of changed behaviour to the entrepreneurial venture. Producing this sort of learning from incubating practice does not leave either party 'untouched', and as a by-product of incubation collaboration, the supportive actor also becomes stronger. Incubating processes in their best form should leave both the incubator and the incubatee stronger, more experienced and better equipped for making more sustainable and growing businesses.

The following section is a short introduction to a fieldwork study of Chambliss (1989), which I find relevant to the way learning and success traditionally is talked about – also in my fieldwork, as it challenges many of the traditional assumptions about the relationship between training and extraordinary performances. Chambliss's study informs this study with an understanding of what works to make a qualitative difference for competitors, in a situation where we often speak of *talent* in lack of a proper term for (learning) processes we do not understand, and where excellence is in the detail, which may be more mundane than we expect it to be (Chambliss 1989, 85).

5.13. The extraordinaire may be mundane – but it is not a standard

For nearly two years, Chambliss (1989) conducted intensive fieldwork within the environment of national and international swimming competitions. He lived with the coaches and athletes of the team he was studying in a traditional participant observer role (Chambliss 1989, 71). Chambliss's study of swimmers '*provides an unusually clear opportunity for studying the nature of excellence*.' In my opinion, a study of entrepreneuring actors does not. Excellence, understood as outstanding performances, may be investigated within swimming because *success* is defined precisely by success in competition, the athlete's success can be defined by the stratification system, and the athlete's career may be relatively short, which provides the opportunity for longitudinal studies. This known process with a known goal constitutes a situation that is very far from the complex context of entrepreneuring, of entrepreneurial support and of cross-disciplinary research in the field of entrepreneurship. This has not inhibited various attempts from academics around the world at providing a recipe for becoming a successful entrepreneur, although no one has been able to define how entrepreneurial excellence can be performed in general. Entrepreneuring activities are, nonetheless, a scene for studying processes of entrepreneurial learning, as continuous learning from experiences is part of simple survival and one of the key drivers of organisational emergence (Politis 2008, 63).

In his write-up of the field study, Chambliss does not mention personality or family background beyond the simple description of the individual swimmers' age and sex. Instead, based on the personal accounts of the swimmers and his observations, Chambliss describe the actions of the swimmers and how they relate – or not – to their teammates, competitors, coaches, the water and the competitions. The constructions of practice and of new practices occur not only at the interpersonal level but also at the level of relational activity. Seen through the lens of relational constructionism, Fletcher describes such processes of new ideas, new practices, and capacity changes as emerging '*through pieces of dialogue that are themselves fragments of previous conversations, experiences, thoughts and happenings. Ideas are always related to some previous understanding of experience*' (Fletcher 2006, 434).

My study is not a study of entrepreneurial personality or family background, not because I claim that these factors do not influence the process, but because this is a study of language and actions or the lack of language and actions, and of influence or the lack of influence and of negotiations or the lack of negotiations. What I have learned from my fieldwork material is if entrepreneurial actors do not enter into relationships they do not exist, which is a central argument for the relational approach of the dissertation. The expectations of advice in the field of entrepreneurial support are often that the advisor should deliver solutions instead of co-creating them so that the entrepreneur might learn to perform similar activities on his or her own afterwards. In my interpretation of the empirical material – the transformation of consultants as experts in certain other areas of business into consultants of innovative, unpredictable and emerging projects is problematic, as many of the traditional social norms of expertise and legitimacy are not in place.

One of the really interesting aspects of the foundation for the incubating programme of the fieldwork, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is that the programme was supposed to deliver something new, fill a market gap and perform the incubating activities differently than the existing programmes. The ambition was for start-ups and small entrepreneurs to move from one level of doing business to another level, where business practices and actors may be different. Chambliss's (1989) study of swimmers and excellence showed how different levels of competition involve the existence of sub-worlds: '*Each such world has its own distinctive types of powerful people and dominant athletes, and being prominent in one world is no guarantee of being prominent in another*' (Chambliss 1989, 77). Chambliss was able to see the difference between levels of competitions, for example between the Olympics and the Regionals, and similarly, I can see the levels of learning of entrepreneurs and whether the entrepreneuring actors are capable of progressing across the stages of Rae's entrepreneurial learning framework. When moving from one stage of business to another, it takes time to acquire new skills, pick up on the network system, develop new strategies and a vocabulary for action and effecting a change of attitude to be able to perform equally well on the new stage. Again, this demonstrates how complex it is to make a push towards internationalisation in an artificial environment, as we may assume that change and learning in companies and projects stem from significant readjustments in physical work as well as in one's social and psychological stance.

The transformation of a start-up into a gazelle company is likely to be comparable to a swimmer taking the journey from the Regionals to the Olympics – it is not impossible, but few succeed. Chambliss claims that *'there are significant, qualitative breaks – discontinuities – between levels of the sport. These include differences in attitude, discipline, and technique which in turn lead to small but consistent quantitative differences in speed.'* Again, to draw the analogy to entrepreneuring ventures, this observation tells us that to move from one level to another calls for a change of actions, and we might suspect that when we see many start-ups struggling with the transformation from one stage to another and being stuck on one level, it is because the entrepreneuring actors maintain the daily work habits and routines that they set out with. With this, I wish make notice that the task that the policy makers set themselves is not impossible, but few in fact succeed.

A common assumption about success in general, and especially in sports and entrepreneurship is that excellence comes from either hard work or talent. Chambliss's study shows that this is not necessarily the case, and that talent is just a word we use in lack of a better explanation. He shows how the really successful swimmers have developed their own personal tricks – such as being able to predict the starting pistol or always performing certain exercises in a specific manner compared to competitors and teammates – that make the difference at the final. Based on Chambliss' study I can ask three questions related to the extraordinaire that are also relevant to incubating activities.

- Do the good (progressing) actors work harder or more? Not necessarily – Chambliss would reply – doing more does not equal doing better! High performers (inter)act differently in their context than competitors. "Spotting talent" can be seen as a substitute for developing sound methods for entrepreneurial learning, and the 10.000-hour rule does not necessarily make entrepreneurs extraordinaire.
- Do high performers have more talent? No – Chambliss would reply – treating talent as the inherent possession of the few masks the concrete actions that create success. We do not know whether success comes from talent or from something the actors have learned, but talking about talent tends to make the actors blind to the insights we can gain from empirical investigations and logical explanations.
- Is excellence doing the extraordinary? Both yes and no – Chambliss would reply. '*Excellence is mundane. Excellence is accomplished through the doing of actions, ordinary in themselves (…) The action in itself, is nothing special; the care and consistency with which it is made is*' (Chambliss 1989, 85)

I find these conclusions highly relevant to my study of impact from entrepreneurial support, because Chambliss's findings are similar to my own findings about the small qualitative differences that make the difference to entrepreneurial creation. This is radical compared to how success is traditionally understood in sports, business, politics and academics. The extraordinaire may be mundane, but it is not a standard, which can be put into a theory or model.

Chambliss makes an interesting remark about the swimmers in his study: '*What these athletes do was rather interesting, but the people themselves were only fast swimmers, who did the particular things one does to swim fast*' (Chambliss 1989. 86). This indicates that there is not much exiting to say about them as individuals, and if we want to understand their success we need to study how they perform their daily activities, and if we want to support entrepreneuring actors in achieving success we must develop methods for increasing their entrepreneurial capacity.

5.13.1. Empirical demonstration: the mundane details of everyday entrepreneuring

As Chambliss's story about swimmers, the empirical material of this dissertation tells us that transforming a venture is not so much about what you have, it is more about what you do with it, and how you do it – the mundane details of everyday entrepreneuring. As Steyaert and Katz (2004) put it, '*entrepreneurship is a matter of everyday activities rather than actions of elite groups of entrepreneurs*' (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 180). In the case of the empirical material the goal of all the small actions of entrepreneuring actors is to mobilise resourceful actors around the project and to gain certification from the local community. However, in order to understand how the goal was achieved we have to look into the organising of relationships that is fundamentally related to the survival and growth of the venture (Gibb 2000, 18).

One example of such small, but still important action from the empirical material is one founder who along with the establishment of the venture also spent considerable time on getting an article published in a highly distinguished journal that he hoped would put him in touch with the right kind of people to endorse his inventions. Being able to refer to the article created the kind of legitimacy that investors outside the scientific community could relate to and helped secure capital for the venture, even though it had nothing to do with the business (Com06R3).

A second example is the founder who always borrowed a certain kind of car when he went to important meetings and wanted to make a certain kind of impression (PCom10R7). A small trick of impression management.

A third example is from a conversation with one of the programme participants, who told me how he raised capital for his first venture and how he created his current venture based on savings and together with the actors from the first venture. He used some of these actors for creating legitimacy around his new venture and for standing out from the crowd of young entrepreneuring actors with no experience, since otherwise he could not get to talk to the people he wanted to meet;

Respondent: *I soon found out that if you call them up and ask if they want to talk, they're not interested, unless you look or sound like someone who's already got something – so that's what I used these guys for.*

Interviewer: *Those old guys?*

Respondent: *Yes!*

Interviewer: *With their grey hair?*

Respondent: *I've always used that, also when I was real young – I'm still young, but back then I was 14 years old, and I had to sell this crap, so then I always brought someone along who sat next to me, just sat there, and that worked a charm. My uncle has gone along for all sorts of weird things.*

Interviewer: *How did you know that that's what did it?*

Respondent: *Hmm. It's a problem when you're young, and it's a problem when you're an entrepreneur. You have to be big and established if you want to deal with someone who's big and established – so you've got to try and be that. That's my experience (PCom03R7)*

The respondent had learned that to add the qualitative difference of grey hair to his young entrepreneurial enthusiasm opened doors to him that would otherwise have remained closed. When he presented his case to the Selection Board he brought his uncle – who was presented as the finance guy of the company. He stood next to the founder during the entire presentation, without saying anything! Common for these examples is that they describe actions that are not directly related to the product being sold by the venture, but which somehow make a qualitative difference in the eyes of the buyer/investor/partner. This demonstrates how entrepreneurs can profit from being extraordinary learners in their local, social and historical context – not extraordinary people.

It is in this process that entrepreneurial actors also become managers of their entrepreneurial process, as they have to make choices about organising resources that resemble common practices of management, such as the development of resources and teams, sustaining relationships, prioritising exiting tasks and managing employee relationships. The development and maintenance of an organisational culture revolves around its cultural norms based on the available language of its actors. It should be noted that some of the most challenging times in entrepreneuring processes occur when the venture enters into new stages and therefore needs to alter existing procedures, language and division of labour, which requires actors to change the way they have become used to doing things and engaging with new approaches and procedures. Many of the entrepreneuring actors I met in the fieldwork are exactly in this situation and are having difficulties entering the next stage.

I find that if incubating management does not account for process details of the small and mundane activities of how entrepreneuring actors learn and develop, and how business incubating activities are performed and by whom, the empirical material indicates that the output of the activities may not be as expected. There is a risk that the quality of the plans, actions, tools and knowledge made available to the actors is low, arbitrary or irrelevant to the actual situation of the venture. As managerial mundaneness can secure the well-being of employees and perhaps improve the quality of the work (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003, 1451) it important not to dramatise the event of learning as something unique or special that only happens on rare occasions, as this might mystify something that is part of any process development.

5.14. Evaluating entrepreneurial learning

When we discuss the matter of entrepreneurial learning in the context of entrepreneurial support we also have to address the elements of evaluation and measurement. How can incubating managers prove to the investors (public or private) that the learning task was achieved, and how can we as researchers make judgements on whether any entrepreneurial learning occurred?

As pointed out by Gibb (1997), many cost-benefit analyses of training activities have been carried out in other contexts that failed to find a definitive answer as to whether there is a satisfying payback on training and support, which suggests that such evaluations cannot be expected to be particularly relevant. The relatively vague results of evaluating incubating activities and the lack of comparability between them tell us two things. First, conclusions should be treated as indicative, and second, perhaps it is not feasible to make this kind of comparison studies on incubating practice and performance. What kind of effects can we expect from a five-month training programme in business models and communication advice after five years? *'Summative evaluation assumes that, for example, an ability such as learning exists (ontology) and that we can know if such skills have been achieved (epistemology) by asking the "right" questions at the "right" time, in particular at the end of a learning module (methodology)'* (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 84). This kind of evaluation makes sense in a positivistic science narrative, which assumes that we can determine and measure pre-defined outcomes and related performance, but not if we intend to understand what makes an impact to future undefined conduct and what could be defined as increased potentiality and capacity to act entrepreneurially.

The lack of evaluation evidence that incubating activities pay has been used both to advocate that investment in entrepreneurship training is pointless, and that more training is needed (Gibb 1997, Gibb 2000). Cope deliberately took a qualitative approach in his search for knowledge about entrepreneurial learning. He did so in response to survey and questionnaire approaches that he found superficial (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 841). Cope argued that the methods used to evaluate and study entrepreneurship training programmes would benefit from being complemented by knowledge acquired by qualitative researchers using qualitative methods such as observations, interviews, field studies etc. This is one of the reasons why this study has sought to evaluate the impact of an incubating programme in its own context and to embrace the contextual details as they appear in the stories told by the interacting actors. This means that the evaluative accounts are constructed through social interaction in the field by the researcher and/or evaluating actors (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 86).

5.15. Concluding

The present chapter has outlined how entrepreneurship is interpreted from a process-relational perspective. The argument put forward is that entrepreneurial creation is relationally derived, hence making it relevant to investigate entrepreneurial learning from a relational perspective when we as policy makers, incubator managers or researchers seek to promote or investigate entrepreneurial processes. Entrepreneurship researchers have established entrepreneurial learning as experience and action based – and therefore also contextual and dynamic – and that it takes form as a capacity change. Capacity changes can happen both at the personal, team or contextual level, but sums up to an enlarged capacity to behave entrepreneurially and learn in entrepreneurial ways. The European school of entrepreneurship refers to entrepreneurship as mundane or as everyday activities. The learning framework and potential learning areas/ tasks summed up in this chapter, support this notion – that it is the many small experiences and actions that make the entrepreneurial creation come real. The framework has been applied in the analysis of the fieldwork material as a way of defining how entrepreneurial progress can be identified and what an entrepreneurial learning mindset means.

A relational understanding of entrepreneurial learning urges policy makers and incubator makers and designers to pay attention to the everyday details of relational mechanisms such as trust, past, emotions, expectations, power, legitimacy, authority, authenticity etc. – and all the stuff that makes a difference to the (inter) actions of human actors. Although some individuals or teams appear to have talent or experience with venture organising, there does seem to be a substantial *learning task* to define that has to do with the actual times of team, product, customers etc. in connection with every new organisational creation. This suggests a rethinking of incubating activities, not as places where 'cleaners' remove obstacles but as learning contexts – entrepreneurial learning laboratories. The task is not necessarily problem solving as much as problem setting (Shotter 2010, 258).

PART III Analysis

Part III presents an analysis of barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the context of my fieldwork. This is done through my construction of narratives, meaning my transformation of the fieldwork material (interview, notes, and texts that have actors in the field as authors) into insights and explanations. Thus this multi-voice analysis – is to be understood as the aggregate result of constructed narratives. The research question of the dissertation is, as explained in the introduction, inductively derived, indicating that the preliminary investigations of my research changed the perspective of the research question. From a perspective of how incubating activities may teach entrepreneurs to become better and smarter entrepreneurs, my difficulties with identifying impact, progress and learning with participants of the Accelerator programme, changed the focus to be on the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context.

As presented in chapter 4, the fieldwork material has been transformed into insightful and explanatory narratives. It is important to recognize that the character of narratives differs in analytical object (actor or actions) and type of presence (outspoken, silent, limited). In order to understand who operates and acts in the field I have constructed four Actor Narratives; *the Advisor Narrative, The Entrepreneurial Narrative, The Policy Narrative* and the *Critical narrative*. They can be understood as identity narratives and is my interpretation of the dominant actors in the field that create meaning. The Actor Narratives are constructed through themes and plots.

In addition, in order to explain how actors in the field act and how it is possible to act, I have constructed four types of Action Narratives; *The Best-Practice Narrative*, *The Blame-Game Narrative*, *the Future-Practice Narrative* and *the Silent-Relationship Narrative*. They can be understood as action and relationship narratives and is my interpretation of how actions in the field are performed, made sense of by the actors in the field – or not. The four Action Narratives are each constructed from a smaller number of *stories*[49], which represent single types of actions or arguments in the field that together constitute each Narrative. The Actor and Action Narratives are then building blocks in my analysis of barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

[49] In my interpretation of Czarniawska's (2004, 2008) use of narrative and plot, a narrative of a field is on a higher level and can be composed by many stories. The stories are combined and drawn upon in the construction of the narrative. The repeated stories of the fieldwork, is in this interpretation a kind of sensemaking helpers of the actors, which drives the actions. The story is in this sense less wide and elaborate compared to the narrative, and simpler in their plot (sensemaking), whereas the Narrative presents itself as complex and contains ambiguities – sometimes from being composed by a variety of stories. The silent stories make us, as outsiders/ researchers understand why certain actions are not performed.

The total of narratives and stories are depicted below in a scheme. Hence, Part III of the dissertation presents the following chapters;

Chapter 6 presents four *Actor Narratives* – representing the main actors I have found to be important in the field, and can be said to influence the actions – or the lack of them – of incubating practice. It is my finding in the field that the Actor Narratives – despite agreement on purpose and content – to a large degree clash when it comes the actual interaction between advisors and entrepreneurs – and that this clash of narratives come to act as a substantial barrier to entrepreneurial learning.

Chapter 7 presents two types of *Action Narratives* – representing the main arguments, stories and justifications in the field for methods and performance – meaning why actors are acting as they do. *The Best-Practice Narrative* concerns the assumptions about what to deliver to entrepreneurs, how the methods for support gets justified from shared ideas of entrepreneurial needs and how these can and will be accommodated. *The Blame-Game Narrative* is part of the field's reaction to the Best-Practice Narrative, illustrated by the way actors in the field explain the lack of results from incubating activities – mostly by pointing fingers at each other, which becomes a vicious, unproductive circle of support.

Chapter 8 of the analysis is a text that smoothes the transition to chapter 9 by presenting two cases of the fieldwork material that did not enact the Blame-Game Narrative, and chose to perform the incubation practice in a more open, trustful and dialogue-based way. Based on the two cases, the chapter suggests an alternative way of acting in the field – which gives rise to ask the important questions of chapter 9 – about what the field does not talk about. Chapter 8 also presents the researchers suggestion for an alternative narrative in the incubating context - *A Future-Practice Narrative*. This narrative are inspired by these two successful cases of the fieldwork and thus empirically derived as the previous presented narratives. They show how it is possible for some actors in the field to actually speak an alternative language to the Blame-Game Narrative, and exploit the resources of the programme in a valuable way.

Chapter 9 presents *A Silent Relationship Narrative* of the field, which is part of my explanation to the vicious circle of the Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives, besides the clash of Actor Narratives. Silence in the field is an interpretation of the researcher, which means that I in some ways did not hear what I expected to hear. Since they are silent, the role as analysts changes slightly and these narratives are not empirical in the same sense as the other, explicit material. In addition, this chapter discusses the possibilities of relational action learning for entrepreneurs and how a relational perspective might benefit incubating activities – with the overall goal of entrepreneurial learning.

Table 6.1: Narratives and stories presented in Part III:

<table>
<tr>
<td>Actor Narratives</td>
<td>

Advisor Narrative

Plot: ‘We are the makers of the makers of growth’
Themes:

The add-on of business competencies
Making the entrepreneurs accept the Advice Narrative
Defining value of business support

Entrepreneurial Narrative

Plot: ‘We are the makers of the world – please help us’
Themes:

You do not want to get into a system
Of course we have thought of all kinds of scenarios – please respect my work!
Defining value of business support
Who is the entrepreneur?

Policy Narrative

Plot: ‘Somebody has to do something’
Themes:

How to train entrepreneurs
Investments in certain number of ventures, within certain prioritized areas
Standardization – the basic stuff every entrepreneur needs
We are doing something to create growth
Public vs. private support

Critical Narrative

Plot 1: ‘Keep out – entrepreneur at work’
Plot 2: ‘My take on this is…’
Themes:

We did not follow the official programme – and that was really good!
Value for time
The natural order of the entrepreneurship system

</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action Narratives</td>
<td>

Best-Practice Narratives:

Add-On Story,
Access-To Story
Pave-The Way story

Blame-Game Narratives

Not-Listening Story
Marketing-Blah-Blah Story
Public-incompetence Story
Mis-fit Story
Lack-of-Professionalism Story

Future Practice Narratives

Dialogue Story
Relationship Management Story
Management expectation Story
Co-construction Story

Silent Relationship Narratives

Relational construction Story
Relevance Story
Uncertainty Story

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Chapter 6: Actor Narratives and their interrelatedness

6.1. Abstract

This chapter presents four Actor Narratives – as constructions based on the researcher's fieldwork. Each Actor Narrative represents a character in the field and is relevant when investigating entrepreneurial learning as a potential outcome of incubating activities. It is shown through quotes from interviews and other fieldwork material how the narratives have been expressing themselves to the researcher during the fieldwork. It stands out that it is a field of hope, good intentions, ambitions, official agendas and less official agendas, good and bad experiences, expectations, emotions, suspicion, prejudices – and not least – dreams of entrepreneurial success. It is a surprise how clear-cut strong the actor narratives are represented in the field. But also how homogenous they are within their own frame and how contradictory they present themselves when it comes to entrepreneurial learning. This first chapter of the analysis ends by claiming that a clash of narratives in the fieldwork works as barrier to entrepreneurial learning. The analysis suggests that one of the reasons for this clash to occur is the lack of the following: proper establishment of relationship, mutual trust and respect among actors and a learning mindset amongst the central actors in the field.

6.2. Construction of narratives – a relational supplement to managerial praxis

During the last 10-15 years, more and more entrepreneurship researchers have begun to study narratives based on the epistemological foundation presented by Steyaert and Bouwen (1997), because they offer a way to deepen our understanding of human interactions and entrepreneurial practices (Down and Warren 2008, 6). According to Somers (1994) narratives have gained terrain because they increase our ability to understand but also to change human actions. Somers arguments about how actors construct identities over time based on a repertoire of interlinked but fragmented and contradictory narratives match my fieldwork experiences closely. The narrative constructions are conceptual helpers in my analysis of barriers to entrepreneurial learning, to show how the opportunities of entrepreneurial learning are opened and closed in the field of incubating practices.

As a researcher I have paid attention to the local language of a field or industry, in order to be able to make sense of the sign dimensions of actions and words and enter into dialogues. As meaning is contextually embedded it has been required that I learned the local language, was attentive of what actors say, how they say it, and how the expressions were transformed into actions. The narratives of the analysis are my constructions based on my write-up of the fieldwork, and it is my interpretation that they construct the social and relational world of the actors I have been studying and interacted with. Even though language and stories (narratives) of actors in the field do not have fixed structures and inevitable exclusions it does not prevent actors in the field from perceiving and acting as if certain narratives constitute the holy truth and a stable structure in life that cannot be questioned (Czarniawska 2008, 32-33). What counts as a narrative, is that it performs in the context of the field in which I am engaging in dialogues. Based on Czarniawska's understanding of narratives, I view these narratives as guiding action and methods of support and view them as reasonable in their perceived construction, because they are somehow agreed-upon in order for them to perform. The narrative is not out there to be seen – it is my construction as researcher, as Czarniawska writes it;

> "*The everyday organizing consists of fragmented activities and events, apparently disjointed actions and conversations that seem to have no particular meaning. But it is in this hodgepodge of events, actions and talks that is the material for later narratives" (Czarniawska 2008, 33).*

In my dialogue with the field, it is my interpretation that there are certain repeated plots in the interviews with the respondents that they subscribe to when speaking about themselves and others, which Down and Warren (2008) refer to as the generality of cliché use amongst entrepreneurial actors. I have used the repeated plots to constitute the narratives, as I have interpreted how the narratives come to influence the incubating practice. The execution and performance of incubating processes are influenced by many narratives with different plots, which sometimes speak together, which sometimes collide and which sometimes appear paradoxical in relation to the collaborative process. Different actors perceive and interpret the same business opportunity, the same potential technology, the same ambiguity and the same messy, unpredictable circumstances very differently (Damgaard et al. 2004, 166). In the meeting of the entrepreneurial participants, the incubator management and the incubating advisors the continuous unfolding of the narratives is therefore not inconsequential, since the actors do not necessarily agree upon the purpose, potential or priorities of the venture creation (Damgaard et al. 2004, 170).

6.3. Construction of the Actor narratives

In line with Down and Warren (2008), I construct Actor Narratives based on analysis of fieldwork material to understand barriers to entrepreneurial learning and increased entrepreneurial capacity in the field. Narratives – in the sense of locally accepted ways of doing are indicators of how subscribing actors see themselves, and what options they have for acting in what they find to be an uncertain world in order to feel confident and secure about the future outcome (Bruner 2004, 701).

The Actor Narrative represents the performing actors of the field who shape the way support practices are performed in the fieldwork, are:

- The Advice Narrative
- The Entrepreneurial Narrative
- The Policy Narrative
- The Critical Narrative

Together, the four narratives represent the main actors in the field who are important to this inquiry and who are driven by strong plots. The narratives are not *true* in a fundamental sense, but are analytically constructed tools to understand a general tendency of attitude in the fieldwork (Gartner 2007, 616). Listening to multiple narratives gives us insights into the considerations in the field from multiple perspectives and into the way in which these considerations co-construct the performance of incubating activities (Czarniawska 1997). The Actor Narratives may seem solid as rocks (only few actors see alternatives), which makes it challenging to have alternative stories or processes addressed by the actors in the field, or even getting the actors to imagine other kind of narratives as potentially relevant.

It is important to stress that an entrepreneuring actor in the fieldwork is not necessarily only a co-constructor of the Entrepreneurial Narrative in his/her actions and language. In many cases, the entrepreneur or the advisor are involved in several narratives, depending on the task, time and context for conversation. This means that the actors in the industry are likely to change and alternate between activities in the forms of entrepreneuring, investing, advising, managing or educating. Also, actors may very well act according to narratives in the field because they know and act with the narratives, perceive them as existing structures and thus co-construct them without necessarily supporting or approving the performances of the narratives. Such actors have simply accepted status quo and learned how to perform within it – in order to get things done. Although the Critical Narrative is not 'officially' part of the incubation industry, I have found it impossible to ignore as an aspect of the fieldwork. In my assessment, it questions the necessity and results of incubating activities, but it does not offer an alternative; it is simply in opposition, and in my opinion creating negative vibes in the hallway.

Each of the following Actor narratives is a distillate of the multifaceted fieldwork. The distillations are an ethnographic write-up of the fieldwork (Van Maanen 2011, 4), seen through an entrepreneurial learning perspective. Each narrative is described through themes and plots in the fieldwork that I present as empirical demonstrations. A relationally informed understanding of narrative and plot, with the aim of grasping the process of interacting with and around incubating activities, centres on what it means to provide support, what is the purpose of support, and what it is like to receive support (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 51). I emplot the narratives to offer insights into the rationality and values behind actions and processes, and to show what the narratives do and do not do. In that sense my emplotment is the researcher's retrospective way of making sense, through analysis, of the fieldwork (Czarniawska 2004, 23).

6.4. The Advice Narrative

Advisors talk about growth, business plans, business models, strategy, profit, efficiency, lean, focus, revenue, data, product, tools, and solutions to problems and overcoming the obstacles in fiercely competitive markets. The rationale behind incubating activities, with the purpose of developing small and medium-sized ventures, is the belief that technically oriented entrepreneurs can be taught the basics of business; success will ensue (Lewis et al. 2011). It is anticipated that many entrepreneuring actors are confused about how to handle customers, suppliers and the timing of launch and communication efforts. However, that can be fixed with marketing models, business plans and strategies, or such is the assumption of many advisors, politicians and the Advice Narrative (McAdam and Marlow 2011, 462). It is a general perception of the Advice Narrative that it is possible to help and support entrepreneurs – and that the role of advisors is very important to the success of 'immature' ventures.

The plot of the advice narrative can be summed up to this;

Plot: 'We are the makers of the makers of growth'

The themes of the narrative are summed up to;

- *The add-on of business competencies*
- *Making the entrepreneurs accept the Advice Narrative*
- *Defining value of business support*

6.4.1. Empirical demonstration: the add-on of business competences

The Advice Narrative views business models and Best-Practice advice as the solution to the lack of competences and other resource gaps that entrepreneurs may have. These gaps are often related to lack of experience, and it is therefore seen as the role of the incubating activities to provide the right kind of experience or the right kind of people. Offering advice is part of the portfolio of services provided by incubating activities and may be interpreted as various forms of expertise, with the purpose of helping entrepreneurs. The advice, coaching and consultancy offered by incubating activities are seen as part of the deliverables to entrepreneurs that will help them become more business-oriented. The following excerpt from a dialogue with an advisor of the incubating programme, show how knowledge and competences are talked about in an instrumental way, as if they were things.

Interviewer*:* *What then, is a good team?*

Advisor respondent: *A good team consists of people with the right combinations of competences. If they are good they have technical competences, and they have business competences*.

Interviewer: *Is that what you look for when you are introduced to new ventures?*

Advisor respondent: *It is definitely part of what we look for. Then we say that even if the venture does not have business skills but meet other requirements, we'll look at it anyway. In that case we have to ask how we can supply them with business competences. This is where their personal perception of own competences becomes important. If they think they have business competences and they really do not – then we have a problem (SB2010N5).*

In this fragment, we are talking about the advisor's personal criteria for evaluating a potential company. Note how smooth and easy he makes it sound to "supply" business competencies – like providing a plug-n-play device – if only the entrepreneur accept that they need it! Such approach to advice requires skills for evaluating competencies of entrepreneurs and their venture ideas – and it is part of the Advice Narrative that entrepreneurs might be different, but there are some basics of business (modelling, strategizing, planning from data etc.) that all need to master. The next empirical demonstration supports the idea that an external evaluator is able to 'diagnose' the needs of the entrepreneurs – and fix problems. It is from an interview with an advisor who diagnoses needs and solves the problems of the venture and advocates the relevance of high-level theory in an incubating programme.

Interviewer: *How do you see the Accelerator programme's task with developing entrepreneurs? Are they supposed to learn something? Should participants use other people's competences, or should they get access to other resources, or should they be helped in the position they're in?*

Advisor respondent: *I think that you have to pick an area where you can help them.*

Interviewer: *So you use the word 'help'?*

Advisor respondent: *Yes, as I said before, we can't develop someone who doesn't have his or her strategy in place, and that's why all that high-level theory is important. It is also very important to help them, but I think we could be better at analysing where it hurts the most, and then focus on that. The area where we can move the company the most and prolong the survival time is exactly where we help, and not with all kind of other things. You make an analysis of where it hurts the most – and then you work on that.*

Interviewer: *But how are they to be helped?*

Advisor respondent: *Yes –I really believe they should be helped. I think that the Accelerator programme should be more consulting style. When you agree what the world looks like, and the things we need to do, and then remember to follow up. Then you tell them that this should be done by this point in time, and when that is done, they will get new homework, because I will be back! It's an advisor role of both stick and carrot for those people. The ones that don't understand it have to leave the programme, and the ones that do get it, should have some more (SB2010N2)*

The challenge of the advisor is to understand the challenges of the venture – and in many cases it is not only one, but a variety. This respondent advocates that one has to choose the challenge that makes the difference and then find a good way to help them with this. In my interpretation, the evaluation of 'problems' is not a learning perspective that establish a symmetric relationship (Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003), it is a classical one-way mentorship, indicated that the mentor gets to define the solution (Smith 2008). The prerequisite for collaboration that are mentioned in this excerpt is that entrepreneuring actors have to be willing to 'go back to school' and do their homework when the advisor tells them to. The respondent expects the participants to accept his analysis of their needs and his stick-and-carrot model. This reflects the classical perception of the expert advisor, where interactions are based on one-way communication, where the responsibility for leading the process rests with the advisor (Hicks 2010). As will be seen in the Entrepreneurial Narrative, quite a few of the participants reject this view, unless there is venture capital involved to influence the entrepreneurs' motivation to accept the role as passive recipients of knowledge. Another interesting element about this quote is that he does not explain how they get to agree about what the main challenge of the venture is – which obviously depends on the diagnosis – and who has the knowledge/authority to decide on that? It is an instrumental approach to problem solving – meaning that a problem and solution can be found – which does necessarily leave room for a multitude of challenges or reflections and emotions, stressed in chapter 5 as important for entrepreneurial learning (Cope 2003).

The following quote is from an interview with an advisor, which shows the complexity of being an advisor to immature ventures;

Interviewer: *What is it that the good advisor of the programme should be able to do?*

Respondent: *Well, I believe that the advisor needs to have some specific experience within the field of his ventures. In this way he is able to develop the business and open new doors that can create new customers and funding. It is not an easy task to be advisor of the Accelerator programme (SB2010N5).*

Obviously it not an easy task to give advice and "bring new knowledge or resources" to new ventures. With regard to defining the problem of the venture, it is worth noting that in their evaluation of specific participant-processes – after the participants have "graduated", quite a few advisors of the Accelerator Programme have expressed to me that it took months to get to know the venture and define their *real* challenges. The following quotes from my conversations with programme advisors about the recently closed round of participants, demonstrates this. We had these conversations for me to get an impression of the programme team's perception of their own work with the participants.

> *"This entrepreneur was not visionary enough – and it took me two months to realise that. He is a good salesman, very structured - but he is not capable of thinking abstractly. He is a doer – and we had to write his strategy" (Programme advisor, notes from conversation)*

Another advisor had the following experience;

> *"On paper the technology looked really good – and the entrepreneur were very good at shining from distance. However, with time I realised that it was a really difficult market and that they did not have a proper business model" (Programme advisor, notes from conversation)*

Another advisor expressed it this way;

"He is the incarnation of an entrepreneur, and in that sense you trust him. But along the way it was a surprise how much mess there was in the venture, especially in terms of dept – and also that his capabilities for finishing things were pretty low – he could not execute. That was the biggest surprise" (Programme advisor, notes from conversation)

Hence, the advisors expressed surprises that had made it hard to define problems and solutions as fast as the programme structure of 5 months suggests.

6.4.2. Empirical demonstration: Making the entrepreneurs accept the Advice Narrative

The Advice Narrative does not question that the advisor is capable of supporting/ mentoring/ teaching entrepreneurs and has the competences for providing something valuable to the specific entrepreneur in the form of advice based on experiences, tools and concrete deliverables that they can put to use right away. This is interesting in the light of the empirical demonstration in Chapter 2, about the programme manager who realised how difficult it was to define what the important competences of the advisor are (experienced entrepreneurs vs. generic consultants), what kind of advisors it is possible to attract and what kind of advisors entrepreneurs value as competent!

The skills that qualify the advisors to work with entrepreneurs most often are related to their previous occupations, often as entrepreneurs or otherwise long-term engagement within a certain industry. The psychological and personal interaction skills that are also needed for collaborating with others, and which are even more crucial when the task is to teach people to behave differently than they normally would (Gibb 2009), are only seldom articulated in this narrative. Furthermore, since the advisor is seen as responsible for the incubating process the entrepreneurs are expected to need the advice and 'do their homework', because the advisor's instructions are perceived as inherent correct and qualified. Even through advisors may be insecure of what to "offer" to the participants, the offering is often presented with a confident and decisive attitude, as it was also described by Hicks (2010).

Such attitude, about knowing what is right and wrong for the entrepreneur and the venture and what is really is they need and want, is sometimes expressed as "knowing better" – and that is a troublesome process of convincing the entrepreneur that he – as an example – is not going to be the CEO of the company, but should stick to being the tech-guy. The following quote is about falling in love with a technology as advisor or investor and then trying to add on the necessary business competencies and why it is difficult;

Interviewer*: What do you look for in your valuation of a potential venture?*

Respondent: *Value prop! It has to be there – and there is the human being. And that is bloody difficult, because what happens is that you fall in love with technology, and then you see that the entrepreneurs are a bunch of idiots who will never make it to the top. But we do it anyway and try to supplement them with business knowledge. It is really difficult!*

Interviewer: *Why is it difficult?*

Respondent: *Well, they have this specialist knowledge and they always wanted to an entrepreneur, and that is why they do not sell the technology, but dream about realising it on their own.*

Interviewer*: But it is not my impression that the all want to be CEO?*

Respondent: *Yes – that is exactly the problem. Even the most introverts, technically nerds want to be CEO – and sometimes it is disaster. They think – and I do not know which mirror they look in – that they are really good at it.*

Interviewer: *Just recently I conducted an interview survey with previous participants of the Accelerator programme, and it was similar among the respondents that they did not dream about being CEO?*

Respondent*: That I can tell is a lie!*

Interviewer*: What they told me was that their motivation was to about showing the world that their technology was actually working, and that it was not about money.*

Respondent: *Do you know who are the worst? People who are motivated by money we can understand. One does not have to lie and tell that money does not motivate – as if that was a "currency" for real motivation. The one who says they are not motivated by money are simply lying.*

Interviewer*: Is that what your experience tells you?*

Respondent: *Yes – it is always about money, and about prestige (SB2010N2).*

I will discuss whether the motivation for entrepreneuring should be one or the other, but what this conversation tell us something about, is this process of convincing entrepreneuring actors about the need for complementary competences and getting them reflect upon their own. The Advice Narrative is frustrated with entrepreneurs who think of themselves as superheroes, and according to the narrative, entrepreneurs should not act, as they were superheroes in the early stages, as they are not! The next quote says something about how the motivation of the participant is perceived by the Advice Narrative. In this advisor's experience, entrepreneurs are only motivated for listening when they are in need of resources; otherwise, they are self-contained and pretend to be world champions of entrepreneurship already.

Interviewer: *With regard to challenges, would you say that it is difficult to help entrepreneurs?*

Advisor respondent: *Yes…*

Interviewer: *And why?*

Advisor respondent: *Because many of them don't really want to listen. Many of them think they are world champions. And it's way too early for that, and that makes it hard. It is very easy when they are hurting, when they really need help, but the times when they don't, it's very difficult. You can tell from the number of calls you get. You get plenty of calls when they're going down, and when everything is fine, you never hear anything, and it's up to you to initiate the contact (SB2010N4).*

It is indicated here that the advisor does not meet a learning mindset with the participants either, but more of a quick-fix attitude when needed.

During the fieldwork I have listened to stories from advisors whom, probably unintended, react negatively to a strong sense of confidence in the entrepreneuring actors – when the advisor feels that they act, as they were world champions. If the participant disagrees with proposals or advice, he might be perceived as arrogant by the advisors, and if the participant presents himself as 'champion', he might be perceived as unwilling to listen to the advisor. If we think back to the traditional expert role of the advisor, the seemingly confident actors/participants somehow challenge the advisor's role as the expert who has the leading role in the relationship.

In order to be accepted into the incubation programme and qualify for support and advice, the participant has to present him/herself and his/her product in a convincing way that captures the interest of the advisor, yet still appear humble and open to learning. This mean that the strategic participants seek to master the language of the Advice Narrative as a way of getting attention, getting selected or funded - which some of them do very well. However, this does not necessarily imply that the participants trust and respect the Advice Narrative, and the underlying scepticism, may risk jeopardising the outcome of their incubation participation.

One advisor refers to the advice situation as

> '*Making the entrepreneur accept the plan we have made together as their own*' (SB2010N3)

And how do advisors get participants of an Accelerator programme to accept the plan? Some advisors refer to the importance having many meetings, using a positive questioning technique, testing the entrepreneur in situations where it is less risky to fail, making them learn from mistakes, making them learn from positive experiences and overcoming the lack of experiences by adding on the right contacts. This indicates that some advisors do have a learning perspective, but it is not systematized and more or less based on their own experiences of what works to influence entrepreneurs and make them listen.

In general it is difficult to get advisors to articulate the persuasion part of their job. One experienced advisor describes using storytelling as a way to make the entrepreneur listen and understand – a well-known strategy for securing attention (Clark 1995). There are small personal tricks that sometimes work to foster motivation and collaboration. Advisors who talk about difficulties in making the entrepreneuring actors listen see this task as their personal responsibility, not the programme's responsibility. In some ways, this might inhibit the development of relational skills and knowledge sharing about these matters at both the individual and the collective level – and that may be part of the reason why good relationships are taken for granted as something that unfolds behind the scenes. Similar to the field of incubating activities, Fayolle and Gailly (2008) claim that entrepreneurship education programmes rarely use a specific framework or teaching model, as '*there is no common framework or agreed good practices regarding how to teach or educate*' (Fayolle and Gailly 2008, 571). This means that there does not seem to be a distinct *learning model* for incubating activities. I did not find it in the incubator literature - or in the field.

6.4.3. Empirical demonstration: the value of the programme

As argued in the chapter about entrepreneurship policy, policy makers and incubator advisors do only to a small extent articulate how *content* of incubating activities is to be qualified as valuable, as it is presumed that the entrepreneurial actors' needs are well known. The expertise for selecting what to pass on to the participants is implied in the title and role of the advisor and the experience of the incubating programme. In practice, programmes typically articulate their services as knowledge, expertise and networks; thus, if the meeting or the knowledge did not prove to be valuable to the entrepreneurial actors, it is simply seen as a natural part of exploring opportunities, which it might be, and of the professional decision-making process. However, as the empirical material shows, it matters a great deal by whom and on what basis the support is offered, for the entrepreneurial actors to perceive the offer as relevant and legitimate. The advisor's self-perceived identity is that of an expert who solves problems, and in the Advice Narrative the advisor represents the professional (adult) side the relationship, while the entrepreneurs are passionate and irrational about their venture (childish) (Smith 2008). The advisor seeks to move the relationship between entrepreneur and venture past the early romance stage, where the venture is pursued as a passion and driven by a disturbing element of creativity, acting as a professional and rational partner who keeps the project on track and provides what is needed without being emotionally involved. This is also an expression of the previous mentioned managerial perspective (Hjorth 2007) that prevails within the incubator field.

The following piece of empirical material is an example of how the programme managers perceive the availability of a range of services as valuable to the entrepreneurs, how the legitimacy of the service is calculated in real numbers, and also how the support function is a business in itself – with a need for communicating with its customers and partners. The exhibit is an internal e-mail to the incubating programme team from the management team:

'Dear all,

The value of our programme has now almost tripled!

How was this achieved?

*Well, during the last couple of weeks we closed the first deal for our "Founder's Pack". This is the package of **relevant** additional services that we offer to companies in the next round. **This means that the pure monetary value of the services we are offering is now already at 80,000 EUR per company**. The package is meant to make it even more attractive to participate, make the companies happier and give us the possibility of charging "fees" for participation.*

Among the first deals are:

- *Legal counselling for all companies delivered by (...) [followed by a description of what the deal implies; ed.]*
- *PR for all companies provided by (...) [followed by a description of what the deal implies; ed.]*
- *Free hosting for all companies provided by (...) [followed by a description of what the deal implies; ed.]*

Many more deals are in the works. We are still working on expanding this package and have more meetings scheduled. ***All with great relevance and value for our companies.***

We need your input for ideas and partner leads to improve the package.

We are looking for partners within phone and internet, IPR counselling, accounting and financial counselling, marketing and graphic design, cold calling and booking of meetings, advertising, graphic design, transportation and hotels, HR and recruitment, virtual reception, hardware and software, office space and meeting rooms and hosting.

Kind regards,

X and X' (Internal programme team mail, February 2013, my emphasis, translated from Danish)

What is presented to us here is that the programme content is relevant and valuable beforehand, as these services satisfy the generic needs of entrepreneuring actors and as a profile of necessary competences for advisors. The e-mail expresses a move towards what might be called traditional consultancy (Hick 2010) with a full range of services available, which enables a customised process with free access to services and deliverables. In my opinion, this approach differs from an educational approach that aims to teach entrepreneurial actors the processes of management, decision-making, networking and strategizing; instead, this approach offers to tell the recipient what to do in terms of social media, legal issues etc. However, this is important knowledge for a start-up, and it is likely to be relevant to some of the participants.

What I find essential is to acknowledge that different kinds of services hold the potential for facilitating different kinds of learning (ex. simple or expansive). Services that satisfy immediate needs for legal counselling are about handling particular barriers to and practical aspects of running a business. Or services that support entrepreneurial actors in recognising and negotiating aspects of their social situation in order to create and operate their venture are about developing and exploiting opportunities. These are two different strategies for support!

6.5. Sum-up of the Advice Narrative

The underlying premise of Advice Narrative is that the entrepreneurs are lacking something, that they are weak and cannot make it on their own, and therefore they need advice and services from experienced business advisors. It is hard to find systematic pedagogical considerations about how to work with entrepreneurs in the empirical material, but the material does give insights into the small details in which some advisors seek to guide participants. The advice narrative leaves it up to the individual advisor to his or hers personal magical tricks for getting the entrepreneurs into a learning path. The “moving of” the entrepreneur is something that happens from the advisors feeling in the stomach about the particular case.

I find it is remarkable how little this narrative concerns itself with *the how* aspect of the service delivery – and also what happens in the afterlife of the programme – with all the tools and support that the programme has provided. What happens after the advisor has made a plan, structured the work processes and maybe even attracted capital to the venture? What happens after the programme ends to make sure that decisions are made and plans implemented when the advisor is no longer there to speed things up? Such questions lead the way to a focus on entrepreneurial learning - as the knowledge, skills and experience that make actors solve challenges on their own after the programme participation - for incubating practices to make an identifiable, valuable difference to the entrepreneurial capacity of the ventures.

6.6. The Entrepreneurial Narrative

Entrepreneuring actors talk about their creative process, freedom, disrupting the market, the customers craving their product, playfulness, curiosity, spontaneity, bootstrapping and being excited about the fact that they are starting something new and different. They differentiate themselves from the 'established', the humdrum 9-5 job and the old-fashioned way of doing business, and in the interviews they are less concerned with revenue, market analyses, five-year plans, management and realism.

Participation in an Accelerator programme with professional advisors is likely to legitimise decisions and actions (Schein 1987, 20), and having a serious business advisor attached to the company can be interpreted as part of the entrepreneurial sense- making process of making the venture real (O'Connor 2004, 121). When the project or venture is included in an Accelerator programme it becomes more than an idea. The venture's name is printed on papers, and advisors and experts in suits talk about it, making the project exist beyond the storytelling level. Nevertheless, it is not easy for entrepreneuring actors to enrol in a development support programme. The empirical material offers insights into the challenges and barriers experienced by advisors in their effort to support, strengthen and develop technology-based start-ups. Additionally, the material allows us to listen to the fear, scepticism and anxiety expressed by participants of the programme when they speak of advisors, pre-scheduled procedures and standardized public support initiatives. To this point I should add that some of the participants are already well into the entrepreneuring process – as they are already, so to speak, behaving entrepreneurially – which is that in order to initiate a capacity change, entrepreneurial praxis is itself a learning process to learn within and from (Rae 2006). In many cases, it has been my evaluation that the learning needs of participants are not so much a specific business competence gap – as the advisor narrative seems to imply – but a dynamic and contextual learning need of the specific venture.

The plot of the Entrepreneurial narrative can be summed up to this;

Plot: 'We are the makers of the world – please help us'

The themes of the narrative can be summed up to;

- *You do not want to get into a system*
- *Of course we have thought of all kinds of scenarios – please respect my work!*
- *Defining value of business support*
- *Who is the entrepreneur?*

6.6.1. Empirical demonstration: 'You don't want to get into a system'

The following demonstration contains different elements of fieldwork material. The first part is taken from an interview that shows the somewhat schizophrenic Entrepreneurial Narrative of being the maker of the world yet still asking for help. This paradoxical feeling is a central story of the fieldwork, and therefore important to understand when we investigate barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

During our first meeting, just after the Kick-Off Camp, the respondent explains to me why he is participating in the Accelerator programme, something that he was strongly encouraged to do by his Danish investor. Thus, the investor actually made it a requirement for funding the venture (approximately 1 million EUR) that the entrepreneur attends the Accelerator programme. He tells me that he is not really capable of going full-scale with his venture in a systematic way, although he is, at the same time, describing to me how he is already doing this and is obviously used to doing many of the things it takes, such as selling, attracting funding and customers and being strategic about his partnerships etc., from his previous activities. He tells me that he has a good grasp of theory and methods and has a systematic approach, which slightly contradicts his explanation of why he needs assistance. After this exchange, he spontaneously adds:

Entrepreneur respondent: *Yes – but having said that, I must say I have been pretty sceptical of a programme like this – but now I'm doing it with an open mind – and I have to say that it has been better than I had expected – or feared.*

Interviewer: *That is actually also what I would have expected from someone like you!*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Number one, when you are an entrepreneur, it might be an American thing, but you see yourself as standing in opposition to the status quo. Then there are all these business people – and that's what you would like to disrupt and change. Then you go to a place where you have to present yourself to a board of older men, silver foxes in suits, and all the red lights go on immediately. Because you see yourself as part of Steve Jobs and the guys who wants to revolutionise it all! If things go high, you wear a black turtleneck for dressing up. So that is what I have – or one has a little resistance towards. Then you have to realise that sometimes it's actually really cool to get somebody who is different from yourself to look at things. But then I have this fear that we get too local – I have tried to make this into a global company, and I really believe it should be a global company (…) I'm afraid that it will be drawn down by a given mindset, and I don't want to get pulled into this Danish system. Something that works for start-ups is that you are this bumblebee – and that you don't analyse too much. If you had analysed everything all the way, you would never have started it. And that's why one has a little resistance towards all that. I just said it was reasonable with processes and all that – but there is resistance, because we need to be flexible (…) It might be a cliché, but I am a total fan of the Apple approach where your focus is all product – and if the product rocks, then you can add all the other stuff and be successful. However, you can't just have successful marketing if you don't have a super-cool product. And I have seen examples where things have been blown up in way too much marketing and sales. And then I think – wow – is this marketing consultant going to f**k up what I am doing? That is one of the considerations you go through – because you don't want to get into "a system" (Com01R7).*

This respondent lives the Entrepreneurial Narrative as part of his personal identity construction (Somers 1994, Down and Warren 2008). I get the sense that he feels that he has to justify his participation, since being part of the Accelerator programme clashes with his personal values and his entrepreneurial identity. On my comment about him being sceptical to the programme, it floats from him with descriptions of how he almost is being violent to his self image – even though he subscribes to the outsider-view argument of consultancy theory. He seems to be afraid that being part of a system or programme is going to kill his dreams and creativity, and got get the sense that participation in the Accelerator programme was not his first choice! In terms of being open to foreign comments and suggestions, the quote suggests that he has much resistance to take in advice and act on it. He has accepted his investor because things had not turned out as he expected to – meaning that he did not see any other alternative to save his project. He is afraid of becoming "old meat" in the industry and tries to accept his destiny.

The Accelerator programme team were highly excited about accepting this respondent into the programme. Everybody at Selection Board was persuaded by his presentation, thinks the technology was promising, that he had a good track record (in terms of visionary, international entrepreneuring) and he gets perceived as the kind of *elite* entrepreneur that the programme hopes to attract. At the selection board he was voted in unanimously and with the following comment;

"It is a strong team – and he is coachable" (Board member at Selection Camp)

I interviewed the respondent three times over a period of six months. He participated in all camps and had weekly meetings with two advisors of the programme. During the programme process the venture is not progressing as expected in terms of beta-version users and functionality of the technology, and the advisors got quite frustrated with the case. In the office they begin talking about whether the technology is actually solving any user needs and that the entrepreneur is not really making progress as expected. One of the advisors expresses that;

"I do not believe this company will fly – otherwise it will have done so by now" (Fieldnotes)

On my questions, the two advisors repeat this dis-belief in the product to me before both my second and third interview with the participant. During the third and final interview, the participant is quite open about how the programme has not affected his venture as he had hoped it would, even though he has tried to be open and positive about it – and he cannot tell why. He feels that he has given the programme a fair chance, that the advisors have tested his hypotheses and that the camps were all right - but it has all ended the same place.

Many questions come to my mind when listening to a respondent like this. Did the venture not progress because the entrepreneur was too sceptical to be supported and take in external advice? Did the venture not progress because the advisors did not believe in it? Did the venture not progress because the world did not need its products? Did the advisors have the experiences, network and skills for challenging the application of the technology and the entrepreneurial behaviour of the owner? We do not know – but all that I can tell is that they did not discuss these questions; they just went on with models and theories as the programme prescribes. They did not discuss the prejudices and scepticism and in my opinion they did not establish a relationship that could hold such uncertainty and doubt. In that sense there was limited possibilities of new relational constructions and entrepreneurial learning.

6.6.2. Empirical demonstration: 'Of course we have thought of all kinds of scenarios – please respect my work!'

Through the lens of the Entrepreneurial Narrative, incubating activities are often perceived as temporary suppliers of temporary needs for a specific set-up of technology, resources and people. In their meeting with the programme (and the Advice Narrative) many entrepreneurs feel misunderstood, disrespected and constrained, even though they also express great gratitude for being selected into the programme and receiving support. To the entrepreneurial narrative it is a paradox to become part of the advisor narrative. The following demonstration shows some insightful comments pertaining to the fragile and vulnerable relationship of support – and how the respondent encourages advisors to be polite – which relates to Gibb's (2009) note about the importance of having empathy with owner managers in order to help them. In my conversations with advisors of the field, the themes of politeness or respect for the entrepreneurs' work have never come up as a key aspect of the advice performance.

Interviewer: *What is the biggest challenge when offering support to you?*

Respondent: *I don't know. You have to be polite. You have to recognise that this project has been going on for some time, and it is therefore not very likely that questions are suddenly going to pop up that we didn't think of. You shouldn't try to manipulate or offer new input. No!*

Interviewer: *On which matters should I not offer new input?*

Respondent: *I just get a little annoyed when people give me this 'hey – have you thought about this' or 'do you know that…'. Of course we have thought about all kinds of scenarios – one has to recognise that from the beginning.*

Interviewer: *So one has to recognise the effort that has gone into it?*

Respondent: *Yes, be careful, and be aware that all possibilities has been thought through, so it's better to ask me where the challenges are, and then you can support that, instead of coming in from above. We have tried everything, and we have found the right model. Back this model and focus – no more new ideas, please!*

Interviewer: *How should I approach you, if I were to work with you?*

Respondent: *Ask about the challenges I'm having at the moment – issues where you can come in and offer help.*

Interviewer: *Are you good at articulating that – so that I can help you?*

Respondent: *If you ask the right questions, then you are halfway to the answer. In a way, it's up to the person asking the question!*

Interviewer: *All right – that is your coach's challenge?*

Respondent*: I guess that is a challenge to all coaches. To ask the right questions! (Com07R5)*

This respondent needs to be invited into a room for learning and he does not want some kind of standard – and he wants to be listened to, and gain respect and trust with the advisor, and he actually tells us how – from polite, relevant (expressed as right) questions. His descriptions are a direct critique of the classical expert advisor, and he also expresses quite some resistance to learning, when he said that he has thought of almost all possible scenarios. To some extent, the respondent places the responsibility for a successful advice session on the shoulders of the advisor or coach, and it can be discussed whether this is productive or appropriate to the task (the development of the entrepreneurial venture) that the advisor and the participant of an incubating programme have set out to address. Nevertheless, this respondent is interesting in the way he expresses the emotions at stake when letting other actors in to join the project – he is vulnerable and he therefore asks for a kind of humble approach, which from an outsider's perspective is completely fair and an important learning point to remember for advisors and designers of incubating activities. In a way, this respondent describes his expectations about how to crack relationship building – that it involves certain acts such as dialogue, listening and respect.

The potential pitfall of this kind of Entrepreneurial Narrative, of asking for support wrapped in politeness, is that the narrative may not be about entrepreneurial learning from trying out new challenges, which often involves assumptions to be rejected and being provoked, and also because it is difficult for the entrepreneurs to imagine anyone else being capable of 'teaching' them anything about their own venture. Nevertheless, as I will return to, it has been my impression from the fieldwork that good relationships can change people's attitude towards taking advice. The above demonstration illustrates that part of the decision for joining an incubating programme is the hope for a qualified co-constructor who is able to respect the venture and be part of its development – in a polite tone of voice! When the participants do not meet such a person, they get very disappointed.

The following quote is a response to a question about the respondent's expectations for the programme;

> "*We believe in this – it's not for fun. We are in these economically locked-in situations, with two kids and all that, – we can't* not *take home a salary. This is a big investment on our part; we are going to spend many hours on it that we can't put into something else. We have to be sure that we're going to take something home from it*' (Com12R5)

It also stresses the need to be taken seriously and respected, as the emotional investment in the project clearly signals that it is not yet another start-up to this respondent. We sense the urgency of this venture, and how it is a deliberate prioritization of resources to participate in the programme, which has to take them to a position they could not have achieved without it.

6.6.3. Empirical demonstration: Please bring me a magic potion!

If actors of the field have not been working directly with the support of entrepreneurs and experienced that it is not as easy as that, there seems to be a standard answer to how the resume' of the really trustworthy and valuable advisor should look like – and of course it is a man! It goes like this;

Interviewer: *So the really good advisors for a venture like yours – what can they offer?*

Respondent: *Well, he has experience, he has done it himself.*

Interviewer: *(…) Okay, is that all there is to it?*

Respondent: *Yes. He has seen a salesman say it and do it. He may have seen it a hundred times, and he has tried a hundred different things, and consequently he has an idea about what works best – because you can't learn management from a book (PCom02R7)*

The empirical material shows that entrepreneuring actors seek support and advice, but they have a somewhat internally contradictory way of expressing their needs, since most of them present themselves as having everything under control and running according to plan, yet at the same time, they are asking for assistance. In many cases, entrepreneuring actors of the empirical material, mistrust business advisors and other public or private bureaucratic organisations – as they are everything that the entrepreneuring actors see themselves in opposition to (Damgaard et al. 2004, 164). Many participants in the programme I worked with seem to perceive advisors as a necessary evil that they have to get involved with, although they do so at the peril of losing their entrepreneurial identity in a web of sticky rules, regulations and plans. The internal contradiction in their confidence of being self-made and entrepreneurial, and yet not being able to make it on their own, is also reflected in the expressions of unlimited belief (hope) in what the Accelerator programme can do for them. Several participants expressed that it would be nice if the advisor could tell them what to do, provide them with a network and teach them how to sell their product. At the same time, the Entrepreneurial Narrative is also very critical of the quality of the advice as it pertains to the development of their venture and technology, as they assume that business advisors will not be able to understand the beauty of their technology, which is why they do not trust them in the first place. This means that the Entrepreneurial Narrative of the incubation industry contains tensions of whether the identity making of entrepreneurial actors could be combined with seeking support.

One participant of the incubating programme was not very impressed with the programme effect after participating and told me that he had not felt *accelerated*, and that the *provided* knowledge resources had failed to impress him. As I will discuss in detail later, I was surprised about his expectations and this attitude could be seen as a serious barrier to development and learning.

Individuals strive to make sense of their actions and surroundings through language, and the words that are used and the way they are used influences our understanding of the situation (Fletcher 2003, 128) - in this case incubating activities as providers of acceleration. I find it important to point to the constitutive elements of language as a means of understanding the assumptions of the actors of national states, regions and transnational alliances and how these assumptions produce incubating activities characterised by specific forms of practice (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 17).

In the conversation that went before the following quote the respondent said that he would like to learn something about strategy, his market, selling stuff, communication, understanding his customers and what they say, and understanding what it actually is that he is selling.

Interviewer: *How do you imagine the incubating program will teach you all that?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Well, I have seen that there are some workshops in the programme. I actually don't have very high expectations for it – or I don't really know how things are going to be. But I do expect that we'll get some knowledge, but also that we get to apply it to our company. It's also going to be good for me to see other entrepreneurs, because I haven't really met any yet. I have bumped into some occasionally, but I haven't really talked with other entrepreneurs. I am really looking forward to that. Then there's the issue about the amount of time the advisor can spare for me and help me find industry experts and seek out various areas to find out what the options are. Probably we will focus a lot on the industry, but his network and knowledge can definitely teach me a lot. I kind of see him as a mentor. I don't know exactly how it's going to work, but I kind of hope that I can be guided, because it's difficult for me to find out what is the right thing to do. (Com08R5).*

The answer shows that the respondent knows business terminology, and he knows that he cannot make a business on his own. However, going to market with his technology still seems a complete mystery to him, and his description about what is possible to learn and what will happen in the programme can be interpreted as naïve. It is going to take a lot more than guidance and a chat with other entrepreneuring actors to create a business and learn the ropes of entrepreneuring (Watson 2013a). This kind of participant is open to listening and is willing to take in all the help he can get. Nevertheless, I based on my evaluation after two interviews; he was not capable of performing the many different tasks of entrepreneuring after the programme.

The unrealistic expectations, and hope for someone to "fix" the challenges of the venture is rather common in the fieldwork material, as the following quote illustrate;

Interviewer: *From where did the idea to participate in the programme come?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *I guess it came, as was talking to The Growth House. I have been in contact with them in Odense for two years. During the first two 2 years of this company I had an advisor, who was not been able to support me – at least on the way of sparring, that I expect and hope will come now. The advisor referred me to The Growth House in Copenhagen, but also said; "Try to apply for the Accelerator programme. We are not sure, if your project fits into the programme, but try it". I have taken all the help I could get, because there is something that I would also like to say. It has been very very tough to be alone on this for two years. Seriously a lot of ups and downs! And a lot of downs as the economy has been so limited, and I have had to beg and ask people to help me with something, and they could hardly get anything for it. It is nearly impossible. There are lots of rejections on the way, so psychologically it has been extremely hard. I have just pushed myself ahead.* ***Now I hope, there are somebody, who takes care of me and the project****, to say it like this. Then it has to show if it will break or make it, and we have to see how far we can go with it now. I am very humble to this. I have nearly given up in some way, but probably I have not been there, but there are a lot of things. I cannot manage and learn so many things. You know, I want the things to be in order. It is difficult to let things flow from time to time, because you do not know if you are doing the things right. I have managed to get quite far, and I believe one hundred percent in my project, because there are no results hidden anywhere. I believe in it, but I can have my doubts, if there is something I have not seen. It is a long way to go. (Com13R5)*

With this statement, the participant is handing over the responsibility to the programme and the advisor, and as such it is clear that the expectation of an expert advisor who has all the answers is definitely also part of the field. I might speculate that the language of the advisor (and Growth House community) thus encourages the entrepreneurs to perceive themselves in this framework of having needs and being weak, which in some cases, as the emphasis of the above quote demonstrates, render them passive and needy, waiting to be taken care of and 'be accelerated'. But in other cases it also seems like unreal expectations, and from an entrepreneurial learning perspective not very dynamic, active or experimental.

The following quote is from a post-participation interview, in which we get to hear that the respondent has learned that there are limits to the capabilities of advisors.

Interviewer*: When do you need to raise additional capital?*

Respondent: *Well – all the time.*

Interviewer: *It's not like you…*

Respondent*: No – I don't think there are any breaks. Our plans depend on the amount of funding we receive. If I got new funding tomorrow we would have three more doors in the calendar to open and say – now we might do this as well. Until we receive the next funding we have these specific milestones, because that's what we can afford. If we get more cash, we may take larger steps.*

Interviewer: *Are you able to handle this task on your own?*

Respondent: *Well – I don't see any alternative. We have tried to buy help from professional consultants who are supposed to be able to attract funding. But that has been a disappointing experience. In real life it's not possible – I mean, they can't do it without me being 100% involved anyway, and the best they can do is to try and create the network and say, 'See if you can get something from this guy, because he's got money.' So that's what we buy – it's the initial introduction to see if it's possible to book a meeting. You can't have another venture find a guy who says 'Please give me the number of your bank account, and I will transfer some money.' I have to do that work anyway. Most investors look at the organisation behind the idea, and the idea people behind it. Several of my investors say that it is I they have invested in, as much as the idea. That makes it clear that there's no one else but me to sell it (Com08R5).*

During the programme participation, this respondent and the programme advisor agreed that the most important pain to solve was to attract capital. The programme advisor of this venture, explained to me, how he had tried to "*hook the entrepreneur up with someone from the industry in France*" – but according to the entrepreneur that did not lead to anything. Listening to the respondents description of how to attract funding, we get the impression that network is hard to transfer by giving a phone number – but also how the entrepreneur has learned something about getting advice, that there is no magic potion for raising capital and no else to do it but him. And that is valuable learning!

6.6.4. Empirical demonstration: The quality of 'targeted' advice

As outlined in the previous section, entrepreneuring actors search for guidance in the sense of the one golden advice or advisor that can make a difference to the venture. This demonstration is an example of another kind of attitude towards advice than we have just listened to, which is less whining, but still expresses high hopes for what qualified advice can do for the venture. The extract is from a pre-programme interview with a confident and experienced entrepreneur, who again demonstrates that it is possible to be a strong and viable candidate for growth and participate in incubating activities. Note that despite the many prejudices among the entrepreneurial community of the public sector and public initiatives that this entrepreneur is saying that privately run incubating programmes are not necessarily the answer to everything.

Interviewer: *How do you think you will benefit from this programme?*

Respondent: *Well, we have been in this start-up phase, which has been very chaotic. We have actually been in a private incubating programme, where we had some mentors attached, but that was very sporadic and a lot of input – great to get a lot of input from different people and see lots of different approaches. But it was also good that it only lasted 3 months, since we had so much input that we had to say, 'now we need to get ourselves on track and get going.' And then we look at this programme, which is also a programme where you get external input and get others to look at your things, but it's more focused and targeted to what your firm wants. And if we tell this programme that this is our goal, then they will do what they can to support and coach us to help us reach the targets and give us feedback on how we could do better. They have some contacts they can bring in, who can help us get things done, as none of us are totally experienced. If our core competence were to write business plans, then we wouldn't have done this. But that is not our competence.*

Interviewer: *It doesn't necessarily need to be your core competence.*

Respondent: *No, but you might say, there are still things that we miss, and we don't have much experience in business development, and that is what we think this programme can give us.*

Interviewer: *Is that different from the privately run incubating programme or other programmes you have done?*

Respondent*: Yes, the first was more of an inspiration, as we see it. It's a lot of inspiration, and there's good advice and things are good, but it is not as targeted to the business and to the firm's focus. It takes a long time to get to know the firm, and to know and understand the business so profoundly that you can do anything for it, and this is different with this programme, as we see it. That they actually spend - I don't know how many hours, but many hours just to get to know and understand the business, and then spend so many hours on trying to help us in the right direction. This is different from the other places, where it's always something like, you give them a pitch, and based on this half hour you spent talking with them, they give you some advice on what to do, and they don't really know what the firm is doing, the market figures etc., so it's a bit superficial at times... Then, of course, you'll have to choose – does it make any sense, what they're saying. Some of it doesn't make any sense, and you can easily pull it apart, and then you can listen to those who did make some sense, and who gave you something. So I see this programme as more solid. They go deeper and get knowledge, so they can more easily assist the firm on an ongoing basis. This I have not seen in other places. So I think it will be great value, or we hope so, because we don't know yet. But we hope that there is something that will really give us something, compared to the superficial. I'm tired of all the superficial advice. There is too much, far too much in Growth houses and in the Danish entrepreneurship forum.*

Interviewer: *… where you get?*

Respondent: *It is always some standard solution, and I am so effing tired of that.*

Interviewer: *I understand.*

Respondent: *I believe in quality. And generally, I'm more sceptical of the quality of the advice you get from the various publicly supported solutions. I think this programme stands out, because you get something that's more qualified. So that is why we chose to join. We were very conscious about whether we should do it or not. We thought hard about it, whether we should apply at all, and whether we had the energy to apply, because it takes time. Just for this programme along, we had to go through several admission tests (PCom10R7).*

This respondent is interesting for many reasons. First of all, it is obvious that the design of the programme and its attempt at being something new in the support market as well received by this respondent He talks about customized advice, and has experienced that such kind of advice takes time and effort – and cannot be delivered from hot shots entrepreneurs in a Spring Board session. Targeted advice equals quality to him. As described in chapter 3, the Accelerator programme of the fieldwork differentiates in its approach to the entrepreneurs, and based on this respondents experience with private incubators, the value proposition of this programme is attractive. The respondent is only showing an implicit learning perspective, as it is the advisor that is expected to perform the quality and deliver something that can solve problems or ease the process – which still is a solution perspective. Nevertheless, one may read between the lines that he expects to learn from the process and in that way be able to write solid business plans on his own later on.

6.6.5. Empirical demonstrations: Who is the entrepreneur?

From an entrepreneurial learning perspective, it is relevant to know which resources, in the sense of people, capital, experience, and so on that each participant of the Accelerator Programme can activate, in order to comprehend their learning task. Hence, this is not always as easy as that. During my fieldwork I have had a hard time identifying the precise actors of the individual ventures, where I typically interviewed the founder or one or two of the founders. That is also the case with the Selection Board members and advisors, as many of them serve in different roles as investors, entrepreneurs, advisors and board members of various organisations. Respondents tend to say 'we' when they speak of their venture or organisation, even if only one person is working on the project. At other times, 'I' represents an entire organisation of employees, partners and production facilities. It depends on the story the respondent want to tell, and how weak or strong they wish to appear, as the following excerpt demonstrates;

Interviewer: *When you say 'We' – that's a reference to the group of people you have just described?*

Respondent: *Yes, but I often say 'We' about myself, just to make it sound bigger.*

Interviewer: *Yes – I'm beginning to realise that (PCom03R7)*

We here listen to show-off and pretend elements of the Entrepreneurial Narrative – which is that entrepreneurs tell a story about their venture, as they would like it to be perceived in the present situation. In the context of Selection Camp, I have experienced entrepreneurs coming in and presenting themselves as less experienced or more "needy" as I have regarded them in the interview situation. The next excerpt is from my first conversation with another participant of the Accelerator programme, which demonstrates my attempts at understanding who and what he understands to be the venture. In many of my interviews with entrepreneur participants, the respondent works together with several actors on the project, e.g. family members who handle the administrative tasks, outside partners, affiliated technologies and investors, but still only speaks of 'I.' Either, the respondents do not consider these actors a part of the venture, or they are reluctant to share the real structure of their venture, network or previous experiences with other entrepreneurial ventures, as they are participating in a support programme and want to make the most of it.

Interviewer*: You use the term 'we.' Who is Venture X?*

Respondent: *Right now, we are five owners of Venture X. It's me, and then I have four investors, two are coming from the software industry and run some large software houses today. Two are capital partners.*

Interviewer: *So the other partners are organisations?*

Respondent*: Yes they are.*

Interviewer: *How about physical human beings?*

Respondents*: Well (laughs), we are four people in Venture X. We have a head of IT, a technician and a marketing girl, and then there's me. Then we have some strategic partnerships. We have also entered into a very close collaboration with a developer house in Aalborg, where we use part of their organisation, and that is 6-9 software engineers who are developing our platform. Our head of IT is physically located in that place 2-3 days a week. In the same manner, in order to create some traffic on our site, we made a deal with a marketing house in Copenhagen, and they have a team that runs all of our marketing. This means that a lot of people are working on Venture X, but we have only four employees.*

Interviewer: *All right – thanks, and are there some of your investors or employees that you have worked with before?*

Respondent: *No – it's all brand-new. (Com08R5)*

This respondent sees the venture from a holistic point of view, including partners, investors and employees, which is a rare description to get from the respondents in general.

From such a multifaceted description of who the venture is, we may also ask who and what should participate in incubating activities with the purpose of entrepreneurial learning? Another relevant question is how we can make sure that the individuals physically participating in the incubating activities are able to transfer their knowledge and learning into the venture, as he/she/they alone is not the only entrepreneur. From an entrepreneurial learning perspective it is crucial to ask - who and what is it that incubating activities are aiming to support? This supports Karataş-Özkan's (2011) suggestion about applying a multi-layered approach to the study of entrepreneurial learning, as learning transcends the individual, the team, the firm and the network level of venturing – and the same could be said about support for entrepreneurship with a learning purpose.

6.7. Sum up on Entrepreneurial Narrative

When we listen to the Entrepreneurial Narrative as constructed from entrepreneuring actors who speak highly of themselves; they believe they are important, and that they are doing something important. The plot of the narrative, suggests a kind of a mixed confidence, as the narrative also contains stories about how very difficult it is to be *entrepreneuring*, and for the same reason the actors of this narrative accept to enter a public accelerator programme, because it would be nice to get some help. Some of the incubator participants express fears prior to their programme participation concerning bureaucracy, lack of global foresight and slowness; factors that they as true entrepreneurs steer clear of by definition, in their own self-perception, but which they associate with a public programme like the business incubating programme.

The literature on entrepreneurial learning generally seems to propose a link between the uncertainty of entrepreneurial creation and the role of personal exposure. As mentioned early, Cope in particular is interested in risk (Cope 2010) and in how the identity construction and emotional state of entrepreneuring actors affect their actions. In the empirical material, risk plays a role in the mind of the entrepreneur respondents: They feel that they are putting themselves at risk because they do not know the future – compared to people employed by large organisations with a monthly salary, pension savings and benefits. From my outside perspective as researcher, this Entrepreneurial Narrative of risking it all can be hard to understand, since their stories also show that if they do not succeed they will find another job, and if the technology fails, and if they do not disrupt the market place, their lives surely go on. One might speculate on the connection between an entrepreneurial narrative involving risk – and the feeling of being at risk, because that is part of being an entrepreneur (Down and Warren 2008). Interestingly, some researchers, including Stevenson (1985) and Sarasvathy (2008), do not find risk-taking a key entrepreneurial phenomenon or find that entrepreneurs are risk-takers in particular, as the entrepreneuring actors in their studies do not invest more than they can afford to lose and seek to relay risk – to investors, partners, lenders and others.

6.8. The Policy Narrative

The Policy Narrative is constructed around an unquestioned need for commercial support and is part of the incubation industry description outlined in Part I. As demonstrated in Part I, the design and content of incubating activities tends to be based on assumptions about what it means to provide support and about what the needs of entrepreneurs are, which the following quote from an e-mail correspondence between the incubator manager and me shows. In my e-mail I share my observation that,

> *'The Accelerator programme and its advisors seems to have specific assumptions about how entrepreneurs ought to act and what it takes to achieve success.'*

I ask for his comment on this observation, and he replies,

> *'Regarding your last comment, it is correct that behind the incubating programme lies a number of assumptions about what it takes to create success, how entrepreneurs ought to act, etc. This is intentional. It is not cut in stone that these assumptions are correct, but without them it would be impossible to create a programme.'* (Quote from e-mail correspondence between the manager of the incubating programme and myself).

From some of my dialogues with advisors in the programme office, it was my impression that the advisors had clearly defined ideas about who the entrepreneurs are, what they need and, even more puzzling to me, how they ought to behave to become successful, which in many ways seemed to be modelled on being an American man working 24/7. In retrospective studies of the successful entrepreneurial ecosystems or industry-specific clusters in the world, it is often possible to pinpoint the important actors, the important decisions, the critical incidents and the systemic interactions that led to success. Nevertheless, it has proven very difficult to plan and create a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem – especially because such systems or clusters in many cases have been built over decades. Nevertheless, it is the dream of the Policy narrative to be able to construct standardized programs or even educations that can produce successful entrepreneurs – as it would be nice to be able to plan growth – and not least, measure the productivity and, effectiveness of programmes and educations. The narrative draws its legitimacy from the shared ambition of growth, and it is widely accepted in the public that *more* should be done to enhance entrepreneurship, even though many initiatives already exist.

The plot of the Policy narrative can be summed up to this;

> ***Plot: 'Somebody has to do something'***

The themes of the narrative can be summed up to;

- *How to train entrepreneurs*
- *Investments in certain number of ventures, within certain prioritized areas*
- *Standardization – the basic stuff every entrepreneur needs*
- *We are doing something to create growth*
- *Public vs. private support*

The underlying belief of the narrative is that *it is possible and necessary* to remove obstacles and create structures or programmes to help entrepreneurs and motivate more people to engage in entrepreneurial processes and also to spare them some of the potential hardships of entrepreneuring.

6.8.1. Empirical demonstration: How to train entrepreneurs?

As the following quote from the incubator manager illustrates, this narrative is focused on what the supply side can do for entrepreneurs, what kind of training to deliver and how to remove of obstacles;

> '*We are going to build an infrastructure that enables us to teach people this and take them through the process again and again – at a fast pace, cheaply and with better results than if they were to struggle through on their own. We reduce the cost of being a start-up and increase the likelihood of success (…) Infrastructure includes all the things we do to teach them the method, which may include camps, springboards, customer boards and internal war rooms, and focuses on what we can do with the companies, such as models for war rooms, models for experimentation, organising dialogue with international experts etc.*' (Quote from internal e-mail correspondence (2012) between programme advisors and the programme manager).

This quote shows that the incubator manager is applying models and frameworks for training, and the ambition is that the programme will *train* entrepreneurs how to organise their venture by providing the right structure and the right experts, and that entrepreneurs will learn from the process. The Policy Narrative has a training perspective on entrepreneurial learning – as training sessions is supposed to equal praxis learning. Many entrepreneuring actors do not see themselves as students or have not articulated that they have learning needs, which make me think that it is taken for granted that entrepreneurs are motivated and open for being trained, as it has already been touched upon. The Policy Narrative implies that it is possible to educate the future generations of entrepreneurs and train existing entrepreneurs to be more effective and achieve more. Thus, in many ways, the necessary support revolves around predefined deliverables to an entrepreneurial community that is in many instances in opposition to structures and programmes. Pittaway and Thorpe (2012) claim that it is an outcome of a monologue approach from policy makers that too often make incubating activities supply-led and fail to reflect fully the values that entrepreneurs are able and willing to learn from, and the means by which they are willing and able to engage in learning.

The Policy Narrative is a reflection of the political system it is part of, including the procedures of choosing among various initiatives in the incubation industry. Various organisations make bids for being chosen as providers of entrepreneurial services that are funded the Government, the EU or private organisations, which makes for a competition about who can promise to produce the largest number of growth entrepreneurs. In the empirical material this is exemplified by incubating programme's ambition of "*being the world champion of training entrepreneurs*"; this indicates that incubating activities are also a business in themselves with their own narratives that it is very hard to act outside, if a programme still wants to be accepted inside the narrative![50]

6.8.2. Empirical demonstration: Investments in certain number of ventures, within certain prioritized areas

The plot of the Policy Narrative – that somebody has to do something, is further stressed with regard to technological innovations, which have been regarded as more important than other industries due to an assumed greater growth potential, even though assumption has not gone unquestioned (Mason and Brown 2013). An important story in this narrative is the need to sell technological innovations, which do not sell themselves and thus the need for somebody to make sure that potential entrepreneurs receive training to transform the invention or technological idea into an operational business concept. The assumption is that many potential ideas and inventions are gathering dust around the country in inventors' and engineers' desk drawers[51]. The Accelerator programme of the fieldwork is founded on the basis of such assumptions. Nevertheless, there seems to be a risk – a potential backfire risk that the plot of the policy narrative leads to something being done without the proper quality assessment – as if the perception of support gets to be too simplistic. The following respondent fits the much cared about tech-entrepreneur description, which is in need of business understanding and management skills. He tells his story about receiving funding from a public/private funded investor, and how the capital to some extent did not satisfy his needs for making a profitable business out of his inventions in the lab. By the time of the interview he has just finished his participation in the Accelerator programme and he tells me his story of being part of the Danish incubation

[50] It is very typical in business language to encounter sports metaphors, often as examples of excellence. In sports, time is always of the essence, and speed matters. In the field, action is everything, but business leadership and creation require critical thinking, debate and exploration – and not always more of the same. No one values the runner who stops to think or the player who takes time out for reflection – only the heroic soloist who singlehandedly triumphed and had the medal hung around his neck. But if business is a sport, then the score is everything. The analogy breaks down because in sport the game ends when time is up. Healthy companies, however, live longer than people. To me, artists and scientists provide more inspiring models. Both art and science acknowledge that as human beings we can do nothing alone, and real invention comes through exploration together with others and over time.

[51] The evaluation of the large-scale Danish initiative '*From Research to Invoices*' after 10 years found that this is not the case, and that it is much more difficult than assumed to turn these assumed dust-collectors into commercial success stories.

industry. He has both participated in competitions (and won), spring boards (got investors) and been in contact with three Danish Seed environments (public investors). Here he tells me about his experience with the Danish private investor he chooses to go with, and we get to hear how political decisions about prioritizing certain technological areas – as bio-tech or med-tech – devoting certain amounts of capital to these areas – and then investing in ten companies each year, no matter if it is possible to find ten new potential start-ups with that area. It becomes a matter of policy, much more than it is a matter of counselling, learning or relationship. The respondent tells me that he has recently bought back his venture from his investor;

Interviewer: *Why?*

Entrepreneur respondent: "*I think it has something to do with their investment strategy. With each investment they put in 10% and get 90% co-financed. This means that if as the investor put in €13500, then they get €120.000 from the state, i.e. their risk is low. They have given me €135.000, but they only have 10% at risk. And if it turns out to be good, they can harvest the whole of the profit. There is a very big up-side, if it is good, and they just have tell the State, that they have a certain number of projects in different areas and different stages of development. I think that I fell into a category, and fitted well into some political goals at the time, but they were not really interested in the project. I felt like I was a bit lost. Kind of- here is the money – shut up- we will spend as little time on you as possible".*

Interviewer: *It does not sound very nice!*

Entrepreneur respondent: "*No – it was not – especially when you is a newcomer, so I made all the classical mistakes and at a certain time they said; now the money is about to run out - what are your plans? And I had hoped they would have helped me. They would not, but I could buy back the business for a symbolic amount. And then I bought it back (Com04R3).*

If what he describes is true, in terms of receiving that kind of capital without any real follow up or requirements from the investor, we get a sense that he has been part of entrepreneurship policy strategy that was not fully developed in terms of making the capital work. When entrepreneuring actors and other outsiders to the industry hear stories like this one, all prejudices and fear about public incompetence and lack of "intelligent money" and proper business acumen in the Danish investment sector is supported. This is an example of how the plot of the narrative, despite the good intentions, probably has to be qualified better to secure that the "something" being done is not a waste of resources. As I will return to in chapter 7, investing in early biotech is a complicated game, and when the project does not progress as planned (and hoped) – the actors of the industry seek to find explanations. In this case the entrepreneur partly blame the lack of involvement from the investor side that he spent all the money, making mistakes as a newcomer, without having a proper proof of concept.

6.8.3. Empirical demonstration: Standardization – the basic stuff every entrepreneur needs

It has already been stated that incubation and entrepreneurship support are political tools. One consequence is the industry's need for legitimization from positive evaluations. For the same reason policy makers acknowledges that entrepreneurship cannot be standardized, but it is a strong story in the field that there are basic business knowledge that all aspiring entrepreneurs should know sooner or later – and they might as well learn it from the beginning. This is part of the training for becoming successful entrepreneurs. The number 1 question is how this is done. Even though the field has many varied answers to this question, a common understand of a preferable advice process does like this;

Interviewer: *But how do you teach them to do things on their own?*

Advisor Respondent: *It can be done in the same way as a consultancy firm does it. A consultancy has some tools that is presented and implemented. Some generics tools - I prefer the ones that can be applied tomorrow – it should not be too high level and it have to be action oriented (SB2010N3)*

During the fieldwork I experienced the balancing between a standardized programme and customized programme as a central conflict among incubator managers, advisors, selection board members and entrepreneurs. Most actors in the field agree to some point, that there is no programme that fits all. However, it is especially the need for being able to evaluate the programme through quantitative surveys that contradicts with advisors who wants to work outside a fixed programme structure and entrepreneurs who wants customized service. The political aspects of incubation are also central in the next demonstration, showing the need for success-cases, which again is about the legitimizing the resources being spent on incubating activities. As mentioned in chapter 3, incubators have different strategies for selection of incubates. But as it is shown here – different sets of justification and evaluation criteria are at stake – depending on which narrative actors subscribe to.

6.8.4. Empirical demonstration: Picking the winners – a learning perspective?

This demonstration show a conflict between the advice narrative – of having a genuine ambition of making a difference to the entrepreneurial venture, and the policy narrative – of believing that entrepreneurs want training and having a need for success-stories and justification of the spending of tax-payers money.

The scene of this demonstration is at the twice-yearly Selection Camp process in the incubating programme. The ventures/projects that have gone through the screening process of application and team selection are invited to make a 15-minute presentation to the Selection Board. Besides the six board members, the programme management and consultants, a few actors from other Danish support initiatives were also present. I sat next to a person from one of these initiatives.

After yet another male entrepreneur had presented his project, taken questions from the board and left the room, the members of the board began to discuss whether this applicant, his venture and the technology were suitable for the programme. Several minutes of discussion followed, and most board members agreed that the idea was interesting, the applicant was clearly experienced and well-connected and had great potential, and then the following four statements concluded the discussion.

Board member 1*: 'This isn't going to produce any workplaces in Denmark'*

Board member 2: *'Super-sharp guy, but the idea and he will probably be hard to coach. The business model is difficult'*

Board member 3: '*He has too much self-confidence to be receptive to the programme – and he is probably un-coachable'*

Board member 4: '*He seemed pretty self-assured, but I think he has potential (Fieldnotes from Selection Camp)'*

After the last remark a collective vote accepted the venture into the programme. Note how the fragmented form of discussion as individual outbursts rather than direct replies to the previous statements show that it is not entirely clear what the decision is to be based on. Is it the number of potential workplaces in Denmark, is it an easy business model, is it the coachability of the participant, is it individual confidence – or is it an easy win for the programme?

How to analyse observations like this from the point of entrepreneurship and incubation policy? In my first interpretation of this situation, I – as well as the person sitting next to me - found it peculiar that the board reacted so strongly to the applicant's confidence as something problematic, when the design formulation of the selection process is to select strong elite entrepreneurs with proof-of-concept technologies and great potential for growth. It can be interpreted as slightly arrogant that because the applicant did not agree with the board on certain matters, he was considered un-coachable and almost failed to be accepted into the programme.

In the perspective of consultancy theory, the statements signal a traditional view of the advisor's role as the expert in all matters, and the participant (client) as the passive, weak person who needs to be empowered from above; it also implies a clear absence of a learning perspective (Schein 1987). Whether we accept such a divide between roles as appropriate depends on context and time. However, post-modern consultancy theories with a focus on the collaborative relationship would advocate that an unequal relationship in terms of activity and responsibility is bad for progress and learning (Smith 2008, Buono and Poulfelt 2009).

The person sitting next to me paid great attention to this decision process. He somehow represents both the Entrepreneurial Narrative – that entrepreneurs are superheroes with need for help, and the Policy Narrative of supporting the elite and produce good role models for future generations of entrepreneurs. During the next break we discussed the situation and he said to me;

> *"It would have been pretty wild if they had rejected this guy – I almost think it would have created an outburst amongst the Danish entrepreneurship environment because people know him. What is this programme if they do not accept persons like him?"(Field notes from Selection Camp)*

From a relational learning perspective (Hosking 2007) and the perspective of entrepreneurship training, board member 3's concern is a very relevant concern that they should care about. If the programme is supposed to make a difference to the entrepreneurial capacity of the venture, enable it, support it and enable other possible constructions, participants of the programme it must be open to input and willing to listen, share and learn. This is in line with Hjalmarsson and Johansson's findings on the importance of openness and a symmetric relationship between participant and consultant (Hjalmarsson and Johansson 2003, 96), which suggests that it is relevant to ask whether the participant is coachable[52].

In this particular case, the applicant was accepted into the programme, and I did three interviews with the founder of the venture during and after the programme. It is interesting to see how the entrepreneur respondent evaluated the impact of participation seven months after Selection Camp and one month after graduation.

Interviewer: *OK, now we will talk a bit about the programme. How did you experience the programme?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Very, very good, I would say. I have also recommended it to others. It came at the right time for us, before I had a board, and there was actually only myself and an IT-developer, so it has been really good and an opportunity to actually exchange ideas with others. We have managed to qualify some things that we may be better at now than we could have been at the time.*

Interviewer: *What would that be?*

Respondent: *But I didn't say that we wouldn't have got there without the help.*

Interviewer: *Okay*

Later in the interview…

Interviewer: Okay – I will return to matter of the impact of the programme. What did you learn?

Respondent: *Overall?*

Interviewer*: Yes…*

Respondent*: Well - I've learned a lot about my firm – funny enough.*

Interviewer: *Yes, what did you learn about your firm?*

Respondent: *Well – I do not know, we have become much sharper. The whole formulation, both at the high level, at the business level, product, features etc. – It's become sharper all around.*

Interviewer: *This sharpening - how did you do this during the programme? – Was it through discussions with the advisor or because of other elements?*

[52] As a comment, based on the fieldwork – being present at several Selection Camp processes and interviewing the ones who got accepted – It is my perception that it is difficult to evaluate the "coachableness" of the participants based on a 15 minutes presentation. Quite a few participants know how to speak a language "of the weak" that will get them into the programme, even though they are quite skeptical to the value and content. This means that that they may appear more coachable at Selection Camp than they act when the programme is running.

__Respondent:__ Yes, primarily, but also the workshops and camps. But again, I think we could have done fine without [the programme, ed.], but I know a lot of start-ups that would benefit from such a programme. But you have to go all in, and many of those, or the few I know that have had a bad experience with the programme; these are people who weren't ready to go all in. I have spent 12, 15, 20 years in some school system and later the academic system, where it's about sticking to something and doing it, so I don't know how much the programme could do for me. It reminds me of this cool Einstein quote about people who never make mistakes, they have never tried anything, and it's cool to fail. So to be able to fail at the theoretical level based on your analytical framework is cool, before you throw millions and lots of time after features that you could actually calculate to be a mistake.

__Interviewer:__ All right, what kind of assumptions about your venture or market did you have that were rejected?

__Respondent:__ Rejected! That can't be many.

__Interviewer:__ Ah, yes, I'm aware that you are pretty much on top of everything (irony and laughter)

__Respondent:__ It's more like being sharp on what is essential, because I had a lot of things in my head, and most of the best is real, and you have to cut to the bone. You have to do this, and then it's really cool to get the different frameworks and models put up, because it's like these boxes, so there are some things that stay and others disappear, and in the end you have the 'right things' – then you have a good sense of what it is you should go for. That is cool. Not because we had any 'far out' ideas necessarily, but we were forced to focus on the right ones.

__Interviewer:__ Cool! Was the advisor able to challenge you enough?

__Respondent:__ Yes, I think so. But the funny thing is that you find out, what it is being part of a start-up, that it is up to you to find the answers. In fact, if you had to be totally honest, the challenges are inside you, and it's up to you to find the answers, and many of the answers did not come because of the programme.

__Interviewer:__ So what did you learn?

__Respondent:__ To choose what not to do and to focus.

__Interviewer:__ Yes, well, that is a very good thing.

__Respondent:__ Yes, that's a super good thing. But this is not something you learn, it's something you get the opportunity to do. What the hell did I learn apart from that? (…) I got some network and met some cool people (PCom03R7).

This kind of respondent is hard to pin down, as he appears to subscribe very strongly to the Entrepreneurial Narrative and the clichés of disrupting entire industries. He says the programme is good and relevant – but probably more for other ventures than his, and it is really difficult to get him to specify how and on what areas the programme made the venture sharper – whatever this means! In my evaluation, this participant knew beforehand how to use the opportunities and resources of the Accelerator programme, which in many ways also is one of the purposes of the programme. He has a hard time articulating exactly how the programme has affected the venture – although he expresses great enthusiasm for the programme, in what I also interpret as an attempt at being loyal to his new investor, which apparently he felt that I represented.

It is difficult for the respondent to attribute any kind of development of the venture to external sources in general, but nevertheless, I can tell from our conversations that the venture is affected by negotiations with the external environment – and that he is learning from his entrepreneuring process. The respondent did take advice during the time of the programme interaction, - but not very much from the advisors of the programme, but from other actors and events in his network. However, the participant's coachability – his ability to listen, take on criticism and collaborate with the programme was very much as the Selection Board predicted. It is clear from our conversations that some people and events have impressed, interested and impacted the respondent, but the programme never gained respect in terms of entrepreneurial credibility, and the respondent only partially saw the value of being coached by his advisor

It is hard to determine how learning occurred in the making of this venture, as I did not get the sense that the respondent credited the programme with much identifiable difference or that his way of acting or thinking was challenged. Drawing upon Gibb (2009) I would say that respondents like this actor are '*constrained by their own culture*' (Gibb 2009, 114) and therefore not open to being trained in any way. The Accelerator programme does not change this as long as its designers focus primarily on learning about business and business management – numbers 2 and 4 on Cope's list of learning tasks, which was presented in Chapter 4 – instead of working more specifically with managing the environment and relationships of the venture – or rethinking the business idea, as it has not yet soared as expected. Nevertheless, the investment that was secured for this venture during the incubation process made the entrepreneur capable of performing other kinds of entrepreneurial activities than before - and enabled new learning opportunities. Furthermore, from a policy perspective – this participant acted as a success story of the programme – which is important in terms of branding and further attraction of potential, elite entrepreneurs.

As a note, this demonstration also highlights the methodological strengths of a longitudinal study and of being part of several contexts as a researcher, as the material gives insights into several perspectives, voices and paradoxes on the process and on different ways of evaluating the eventual performance of the programme. The material makes it clear that the complexity of selecting potential ventures and of choosing selection criteria in light of an unknown future is not only about picking or building the winners (Baum and Silverman 2004) but can also be about whether the prospective winners are willing to listen, collaborate and learn – depending on the success criteria of the narrative.

6.8.5. Empirical demonstration: public vs. private support

It would be easy to interpret the Policy Narrative as a 'publicly' based narrative, but the understanding that 'something that needs to be done' is clearly present on both the public and private side of entrepreneurial investment. However, as public incubating activities are not based on delivering any kind of profit to their investors, the goal-setting for the activities may differ from goal-setting in the private sector of venture funds, industry seed units and business angel investments. The following quote from a conversation with an investment manager, who acts as board member of the Accelerator programme, illustrates a general perception of the difference between public and private investment in entrepreneuring ventures – that if the government is to support entrepreneurial activities there has to be some kind of societal outcome for the greater benefit of all citizens.

> '*The incubating programme should have some kind of impact on society and create workplaces – and not just create profit, as our venture capital company has to. The incubating programme should affect behaviour; entrepreneurs should **learn** something that is transformed into action. Our company has to generate a return on investment for our investors, unlike the incubating programme, and that is why the time frame is different – and it would be a pity if it was all about creating exits*'. (Board member and Investment manager of private venture fond)

This respondent has a learning mindset on behalf of the Accelerator Programme – but not for his own activities. This illustrates the paradox that policy makers and incubator managers tries to gain legitimacy of the same character as private programmes and investors has. Hence, they seem to be operating on different standards – as the public aspect affects expectations about both methods and purpose, which can be interpreted as both good and bad. In general "public" is regarded a bad name, even though most actors acknowledge how unique it is to have public initiatives for supporting entrepreneurship. Some of the advisors of the Accelerator programme have a hard time justifying that they work for a public employer, as one of them said to me one day over lunch;

> *"I feel weird about working for a public programme – but luckily it does not feel public" (Fieldnotes)*

This means that part of the policy narrative is also the struggle of not "*sounding*" or "*acting*" as something public, with too many standards and procedures, but trying to speak the entrepreneurial language of freedom and disruption. It becomes a central task for policy makers to convince entrepreneurs and investor that they really want to support entrepreneurial activity and is actively working for lowing barriers for start-ups and venturing in general – and is not only thinking of regulating and taking home as much tax as possible. The prejudices in this area are substantial. In addition, I find it problematic that some advisors of the programme express such scepticism of "public" initiatives, and therefore has to justify working for such – similar to the scepticism of the entrepreneurial narrative. Recall the quote from the entrepreneur who has participated in both public and private initiatives, saying that the public has the possibilities of being something else – free support for everybody – similar to the private investor above. Imagine if both advisors and entrepreneurs were proud of that!

6.9. Sum-up Policy Narrative

In my fieldwork, it has been my impression that in the corridors of the seats of power, it is not difficult to get the decision-makers of the incubation industry to say that we do not know what works and that incubating activities are to some degree (necessary) experiments – but somebody needs to do something. However, official statements and presentations are much less open about this uncertainty, as this narrative is highly political – a negotiation game of attracting substantial funds based on promising to deliver impressive results. Personal reflections about whether incubating initiatives make a difference, or whether the construction of services is appropriate, goes unmentioned, and the overall narrative of growth and workplaces comes to justify all activities and defines how its subscribers see themselves and how they act in the world. Entrepreneurial activity is a kind of national currency that national states and regions can use to brand themselves, which suggests that incubating activities are about more than the success of its participants – it is also a political symbol that 'something is being done'.

6.10. The Critical Narrative

This Critical Narrative is constructed even more between the lines than the three first narratives, as the actors constructing this narrative are most likely also co-constructing one or two of the others. The Critical Narrative is an underlying figure in the incubation industry, like the little devil on someone's shoulder whispering that; incubating activities do not make a difference - that the basic support format is wrong – that the design ought to be different - that the selection process should be changed – and that Denmark's immature ventures do not have the potential we think they do!

The Critical Narrative is a collection of critical voices in the field, and it contains at least two strong and irreconcilable plots. The first plot paraphrases a criticism of support initiatives as something that disturbs the natural forces of entrepreneurial creation and destroys the natural ecosystem of entrepreneurship and the marketplace in general. Entrepreneuring actors who cannot imagine that a pre-designed programme can satisfy the needs of their unique venture support this view. The second plot is a phrase that I have heard quite often in my fieldwork, especially in conversations with experienced advisors but also from less experienced and more model-based advisors or entrepreneurs who believe that there is one right way to teach entrepreneurs or work with them, and that it is *not* the way that is used in public intervention programmes.

The two plots of the Critical narrative can be summed up to this;

> ***Plot: 'Keep out – entrepreneur at work'***
>
> *(Inferred by entrepreneuring actors who do not want to participate in public programs or investors who do not believe that entrepreneurship can be taught and is arguing against artificial support)*
>
> ***Plot: 'My take on this is…'***
>
> *(Inferred by advisors who 'know a thing or two,' and who do not believe entrepreneurship can be taught, but have instead developed their own favourite consultation approach to mentoring).*

The themes of the narrative can be summed up to;

- *'We did not follow the official programme – and that was really good!'*
- *Value for time*
- *The natural order of the entrepreneurship system*

The critical stance of this narrative is demonstrated well in the following – in a somewhat reluctant example of participation.

6.10.1. Empirical demonstration: 'We did not follow the official programme – and that was really good!'

This excerpt is from a double interview with two founders of a company. It is our second meeting, which takes place 6 months after they completed the programme. The conversation clearly illustrates their scepticism towards the advice paradigm with pre-defined schemes, again reflecting a fear of not being seen as unique and special but just as another start-up with pre-defined needs.

Interviewer: *And were there any meetings with industry, customers or others set up?*

Entrepreneur respondent 1: *Yes – we visited a couple of factories – and yes, there was actually a lot of that. Everything that had to with the product was definitely evaluated. We did not follow the Accelerator programme very strictly. We sat one on one with the advisor and agreed upon what was really important to our company. And he helped us enormously with the things we needed. And then we probably did not follow the official programme as much as the others. And that was really good, because if we had, I'm not sure we would have gained much from it. And then we probably would have quit; because we couldn't spend time on something we weren't going to benefit from. But we benefited a lot, because the advisor helped us with those things.*

Entrepreneur respondent 2: *It was a great strength of the advisor that he dared to go beyond the programme. Compared with an advisor who might just say, 'We have to follow this – fill out these forms.' For us it was very important to get something out of it to be able to really take it seriously (Com04R5).*

To some extent, these respondents distance themselves from the programme and were positively surprised by the contributions of their advisor, saying that they were reluctant about committing to the official programme. They see their advisor in opposition to the programme structure – almost like a rebel who dares to do what is necessary to make a difference to their particular venture. They accepted him and through dialogue and relationship building they let him in to help and guide them. They want customization, and that seems to come from dialogue. Note that this type of customization on the advisors side of performing the programme support provides a problem of assessing the programme as a training session. In chapter 8 I return to the subject of dialogue as a remedy for respect and openness between advisor and participants.

In other support or service industries (transport, accommodation, entertainment), customers are not slow to complain if they do not receive the standard package – or what they have been promised. Nevertheless, this is the same story as we listened to in the entrepreneurial narrative that these respondents cannot imagine a standardised package being appropriate and valuable to them. This illustrates a clash between the working practice of support between advisor and participants, and the incubator management's ambition of delivering standardised services.

The quotes also illustrate a calculating orientation (Gergen 2009, 22) to the relationship, as the advisor is viewed as an instrument to provide value and bring access to networks. The participants use their advisor for knowledge and network access and are grateful to him, but it is not necessarily a relationship based on trust and mutual obligation. This became obvious from my second meeting with the same respondents, where I asked them whether they were still in contact with their programme advisor – to which they replied that they were not, as they had gotten from him what he had to offer, and now they had to move on.

As referred to earlier, the first three narratives imply a strong need for meaning-making, which makes it hard to discuss issues such as form, content, didactics and goals of support, as the initiatives are described as the road to prosperity and growth. Critical voices are silenced with a '*So you might have a better idea of how to save society*?' by policy makers when someone is asking about effects and results, or when someone suggests an alternative approach – such as a learning objective – it is silenced with a '*How are you going to measure that*?' by incubating managers. Obviously, such suppression to criticism leads to small talk by the water cooler, as advisors, entrepreneuring actors and researchers try to channel their doubts and frustration into something else – that often ends up signifying a form of distance to programmes and support. This distancing is expressed when advisors say that they have a different idea about how to perform the services of the programme, when politicians say that entrepreneurship cannot be taught and argue that we should just lower the taxes, when entrepreneurs says that useful advice can only come from other entrepreneurs, and when academics says that incubating activities are making entrepreneurs passive, since true entrepreneurs will make it on their own, as that is what entrepreneurship is about.

6.10.2. Empirical demonstration: Value for time

The participants of the incubating programme enter the programme with a feeling of investing a great deal of time and energy in the programme, and they are constantly considering whether they might have spent this time better elsewhere. They are, so to speak, calculating the alternative cost: how much they could have sold in a day spent instead on incubating activities. During the selection process they have pitched, submitted lengthy applications with confidential knowledge and signed various kinds of contracts with the programme. They feel vulnerable, not in control, that time is money, and that now is the time for the programme/advisor and experts to bring some value to the venture. If that does not happen, the participants are frustrated, as the following excerpt from a post-programme interview reveals:

Interviewer: What has been the most challenging part of being in the programme?

Respondent: When you're really busy, you don't want to listen to people who are incompetent. They have to go! All the participating companies have plenty to do, and spending a half a day on something meaningless makes you very frustrated.

Interviewer: What could have been better?

Respondent: I would say a little less and a little better and making sure that everything is high quality. Also with regard to the network they bring in. You need to be sure that they are good people. It's better to get one good advisor than three poor ones. Sometimes I felt that the advisor and the rest of the team felt that they had to provide a certain number of industry experts, and that doesn't work (…) I think they have to make sure not to waste our time and to respect our time. Sometimes, I did not have that feeling (Com01R5).

This sceptical attitude is important to note, both for a researcher of entrepreneurial processes and definitely for an advisor of entrepreneuring actors. This respondent from the above quote is very concerned about not wasting his time – much alike most participants. Other participants, as demonstrated from the following conversation express that they feel that the advisors and industry experts are holding back information and not really exploring their network as the participants had expected;

Interviewer: *What about industry experts and relevant contacts and network opportunities, how much of this was presented to you? Were there established any new contacts?*

Entrepreneur respondent*: There were not … not any relevant industry experts at least - I do not think we had a delivery on that part. The Connect Denmark Springboard was good, but again we had selected the committee ourselves. But the Accelerator part - nothing came out of this. Our experience with our advisor was that he was hiding his good advice for a time after the programme, so he could be hired as an external advisor. It was clearly our feeling that there were some things, where he would say -"I know a product similar to yours, and I can find the documentation that you need, but we can talk about that in September". It was my very clear perception, also based on his later reactions that this was about getting into a well-paid consultancy job afterwards, where he could deliver. He seemed to be conscious that as advisor you can only sell your knowledge once, and when you have emptied your bag - it is empty. And he had no plans of emptying this bag during the programme, but would rather hide it for the period after. So, things we thought we would get from the programme as marketing plans and such things – we did not get, and this was actually what I thought an advisor consultant to help make, or at least help make drafts.*

Interviewer: *I am sorry and surprised of what you tell me. It is role of the advisor to share their knowledge and network during the 5 months of the programme, and most of them also do that"*

Entrepreneur respondent: *That might be so, but for us it appeared as something we could get afterwards, when the official programme had ended (PCom10R5).*

This is an example of a bad experience with the advisor and a process that has not endured trust and respect, but mistrust in the advisor and the programme relevance, and as it appears from the quote he is quite angry about the performance of his advisor. The respondent did not 'get' what he expected from the programme or the advisor – and has left the programme with a feeling of having been too early in the programme and having wasted time, which could have been spent better on developing the product. He says that during the participation he felt that the development of their product was sat on hold;

> *"I have been a feeling as if I was taken away from development, and that I did not move our development project in that half year we did the programme. In any case not enough in relation to the conditions that I knew that it was necessary in order to begin the serious customer dialogue." (PCom10R5).*

On the other hand the respondent also describes how the meeting with the American associate professor at the Value Proposition camp inspired and provoked him go back to an old project, which he clearly thinks was a valuable process.

> *" I think that the systematic model of the customer driven innovation was interesting to get into words and the systematization which it opened up to. The Value Camp presentation of entrepreneurship was interesting and actually the direct course for me to go back and make a new invention, even though I basically had berufsverbot in relation to get new ideas on anything. But we met a good problem raised by a customer that is related to what we do and to which I could feel I could come with a solution. I used 14 days to come up with something, which proved to be possible to patent, and we are now making a concept…. It came when the presenter provoked me, by asking if we were a One-Trick-Pony or if we had other things to provide" (PCom10R5).*

These quotes illustrates how the evaluation of value for time very much is subjective and related to the feelings of the participant – whether the questioning and the input from the programme is seen as relevant and useful, or whether it is seen as side-tracking their venturing process and a waste of time. The meeting with the American presenter shows that the participant does have a learning mindset – at least when he is provoked by someone he respects. This is also an illustrative example of how important the timing of support is in order to be granted as relevant by participants.

During my fieldwork, a colleague (from the Accelerator team) and I did a phone-survey - where we called 100 Danish companies (SMEs or start-ups) that for some reason had declined participating in the Accelerator programme[53]. The goal of the survey was to investigate the reasons for their decision not to participate. The most common answer was lack of time, but another common reaction was scepticism towards the programme because it was free of charge and publicly funded. A prevailing notion was that something free of charge could not be worth their time, since the value obviously had to be low, and furthermore that something public cannot be sufficiently professional and goal-oriented. If such a programme were worth the time, people would be paying for it. These presumptions do to some extent resemble myths that are repeated over and over again in the field, which I have listened to during the fieldwork – also from the ones who decided to participate. I believe it is fair to say that this considerable scepticism in the field, towards the quality and relevance of incubating activities, may function as a barrier and resistance to a close, trustful and collaborative relationship with the advisor and the Accelerator programme – and therefore also as a barrier to entrepreneurial learning. One of the Selection Board members sums up the challenges of the Accelerator programme well;

Respondent: *I think there is one really important thing to consider when you are part of making the Accelerator programme – and that is whether there might be some people out there who do not see the programme as a good place to be.*

Interviewer: *Okay, why?*

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[53] The questionnaire, data sheets and sum-up papers were properties of the programme, and are in that sense not part of the dissertation material. Nevertheless the conclusions of the survey is still part of my fieldwork experiences as team member of the Accelerator programme, which is why I find it appropriate to refer to it.

Respondent: *Well, because you have to evaluate the time used on that all that fuzz of performing this and that. You have to think about that as an entrepreneur. "Is this an investment that pays off?" And the people who are working for the programme –do they really have something substantial different to offer? In some ways we still lack documentation that the Accelerator programme makes a difference for to the entrepreneurs.*

Interviewer*: I guess that is also part of my task*

Respondent*: Well yes, or at to least document, where the limitations are. I do not think that we have made a big difference until now, but I guess you can document, where we have been on the right track, and where this is not the case. I am convinced that it is not easy what the Accelerator programme is trying to do (SB2010N5).*

What we listen to here is doubt about the effects of the Accelerator programme made by one of the Selection Board members, but also recognition of the ambition. It is not my impression that it was something he has discussed with the programme management.

6.10.3. Empirical demonstration: The natural order of the entrepreneurship ecosystem

The Critical Narrative contains many stories indicating that public support destroys the natural ecosystem of entrepreneurship. For example one of the Board Members of Selection Board said to me when discussing the need for incubating activities;

> *"The thing I feel weird about is that suddenly it's taken for granted that they can't do it on their own" (SB2010N1)*

This refers to the 'weak – but potential'- definition of incubator participants from incubation theory presented in chapter 3. It is a common understanding in this narrative that incubating activities disturb the natural order of the entrepreneurial ecosystem – and this perception comes from both entrepreneurs as advisors and private investors. Entrepreneuring processes are so unique that only certain kinds of people are capable of pulling it off and should not be drawn into the ordinary management universe – and for God's sake not into an educational framework!

Over lunch one day during the fieldwork, I was talking with two of the programme advisors about some of my initial reflections about the scepticism and reluctance I had heard from the participants about being in a standardised programme. They more or less agreed that this can be problematic but argued that there is still stuff that everyone can benefit from knowing. Then one of the advisors declared that I needed to understand that he was not doing the official Accelerator programme; he was supporting the participants where they needed it! This is the kind of advisor, who typically, at some point in our ongoing dialogue, tells me that they have a specific take on advising entrepreneurs – as this particular advisor telling me that:

> *'My take on this thing about supporting entrepreneurs is that what they need is to get their first sale – that is the most important thing – and the thing I focus on' (Fieldnotes).*

In a sense, actors of the Critical Narrative are critical of and in opposition to the Policy Narrative of the incubator management and the programme design. They do not buy into the policy argument about the many potential entrepreneurs who are out there, waiting to be spotted – because in their own work life they have not found them! Instead, this kind of advisor or investor believes that potential entrepreneurs can be created, and that they, as experienced advisors/ entrepreneurs /investors and facilitators, with gut feelings and savvy, have a role to play in the construction of prosperous ventures. That is the motivation of the critical advisor speaking the language of the Critical Narrative, which in some cases comes to act as the rebel of the field.

During a presentation at Investor Day (the closing event of the Accelerator programme), I happened to talk with a man who introduced himself as a business angel for start-ups, who had previously been an entrepreneur himself. I asked him what he thought of the event and the ventures that were presenting, and he stated that he did not really know what to make of these sorts of things, and that he thought it was difficult to see what the programme had done for the companies. He questioned whether the services of the programme were really suited for future entrepreneurs, and whether the people (the programme team) working there actually knew anything about what it is like to be an entrepreneur. In other words, he was sceptical. He then told me that he and some of his friends (also experienced entrepreneurs and investors) had been thinking about creating a simple mentoring organisation that could offer advice young promising entrepreneurs;

> *'Me and some guys, we know so much about what it's like – and we have already done it, and we want to share this knowledge with young people in order to do something for society' (Field notes from Investor day).*

Again – the overarching idea is that something can be done for these hopeful, but still immature entrepreneurs. However, as we have listened to by now, and as most scholars and practitioners would tell him – it is not as easy as that. He anticipates entrepreneurial knowledge to be something generic that can be transferred, but fails to take into consideration the local-historical importance of relevance, the uncertainty of the process and also the relational aspects of advice. This approach is no different from the assumption-based initiatives by policymakers, as this respondent does not know whether his hypothesis about his own mentoring skills will stand or whether his experience as entrepreneur is relevant to other entrepreneurs. In that sense it is here illustrated that even though some actors in the field of entrepreneurship support, are sceptical towards public initiatives – their own solution the "the problem" is quite similar.

This is a good illustration of why the Critical Narrative is not capable of breaking free from what it opposes – the idea that entrepreneurs can be trained, as the idea of mentorship is still an expert who guides the novice, without going in detail about what it means to advice in a world of uncertainty, how knowledge is created and transferred – and how it may be transformed into new, relevant perspectives for immature ventures. Even though some of the relational elements of advice seem to be easier to establish in a private context, it is my analysis that the performances framed by this narrative does not go into depth with the creative and relational needs of learning to behave entrepreneurial and learn through entrepreneuring.

6.11. Sum-up on the critical narrative

The Critical Narrative implies a frustration with the ineffectiveness of intervention initiatives, as everybody agrees that society needs more successful entrepreneurs. This obviously sparks criticism but also considerations and explanations about why support initiatives are not producing sufficient entrepreneurial growth. Despite this scepticism towards programmes and education for entrepreneurs, the Critical Narrative still supports *advice* as the best solution to entrepreneurial incompetence and lack of growth, which is to say that any entrepreneur can be guided to success with the right kind of advice – typically from an experienced entrepreneur mentor. Advice is still needed, and it should be ‘given’ to the apprentice, who per definition will listen, as long as the advice is private and bottom-up.

My analysis suggests that the sceptical considerations of the field are part of the Advice, Entrepreneurial, Policy and Critical Narratives and produce what I have constructed as the Blame Game Narrative in chapter 7.

6.12. The clash of the Advice Narrative and the Entrepreneurial Narrative

The four Actor narratives presented in the previous are interesting in terms of investigating the learning mindset and capacity of the field. As it stands out, I have found it difficult to find a particular learning mindset – even though training and learning are mentioned every now and then as goals of incubating activities. There are only few considerations in the field of the means to learning – and obviously this is a barrier to learning. From the Entrepreneurial Narrative and the Critical Narrative of the fieldwork we get insights to why advisors are often met with resistance and disrespect, or are evaluated as less useful or competent by the participants after programme graduation. The Advice Narrative is likely to make the participants defensive, because they are afraid of or do not trust pre-defined schedules and methods. It is fundamental to understand how the clash of narratives in this study forms a barrier to a wider and more effective use of the resources provided by incubating activities. From a learning perspective I have been looking for positive clashes of opposites acting as supplementary to each other as a co-constructive force of cross-disciplinarily and complementary resources – but as it stands out, I have met a lot of resistance and lack of acknowledgement of what it takes to learn.

According to Gergen (2009), human actors, groups, societies have at all times defined their identity by what or who they are *not*. He explains how self-esteem is sustained by mutual social comparison through inner pep talks to remind ourselves that we are smart, good-looking, popular, generous and successful. The arguments in these kind of conversations comes from the comparison with others whom we find less smart etc., and Gergen argues that people construct worlds where others are seen as stupid, unreliable and greedy etc. The consequence is that *'there is a close relationship, then, between our presumption that we are "self-contained" and the quality of our relations to others'* (Gergen 2009, 13). Continuing with Gergen (2009), he writes that one of the problems with social comparison is that we can never fully grasp others' underlying reasons, motives and desires, and that we are therefore likely to display distrust when we enter into relationships, until something changes, and trust is established. Trust is the by-product of participation in social interactions, making the active interaction of participants and advisors very important. Incubating actors must know that trust is not to be taken for granted (Gergen 2009, 15), even though the setting is a free-of-charge incubation programme. This illuminates why the matter of supporting and receiving support is delicate, and as a first step, the supply and demand sides have to agree on a form of communication, before they can agree on goals or content. '*The highly personalised nature of relational organising means that emotions are a central element, both sustaining and being sustained by relational activities*' (Salipante and King 2010, 80). This implies that the emotions of actors in the 'construction team' (incubating relationship), which can be expected to be central to the ongoing construction of the venture, remain at the level of personal and social emergence but fail to enter into the contextual and negotiated enterprise level of entrepreneurial learning (Rae 2006).

6.12.1. Empirical demonstration: The perception of the other

In the box below, short sentences based on the fieldwork demonstrate how the two main actors of the incubating relationship perceive themselves and the other[54]. The box was made for a presentation at programme office, in an attempt to communicate the differences between advisors and participants to the Accelerator programme team. The clashes of the Advice and Entrepreneurial Narratives are summed up as interpretations in the figure below and are based on quotes from interviews and fieldwork notes.

Table 6.2 Clashes of Narratives

	Perception OF Advisors	**Perceptions OF Entrepreneurs**
Perception BY Advisors	We are the real experts The world needs us – and we are here to help Business is necessary and the most important feature of entrepreneurship The goal is growth and capital Planning, methods and strategy are everything Without us, no growth Customers are more important than product We bring professionalism to entrepreneurship Generic models are better than industry-specific lingo– and we know how to apply the model to your situation Rational realists Money and prestige are good motivators for hard work	Nerds living in their own little world – think they are world champions Naïve and over-optimistic about the go-to-market process – believe product is everything Entrepreneurs do not know what is in their own best interest Do not listen and do not do as they are told – unless they need capital Not interested in learning from others Do not understand that business is the most important thing Suffer from inertia and cannot be reached pedagogically Withdraw from collaboration, lose interest If they do not learn from advisors, it is their own fault Irrational dreamers Bad at combining things – too narrow in their focus
Perception BY Entrepreneurs	Business is the necessary evil – but connections are important Business is boring – Marketing is blah blah	We are heroes and the ones who are really saving the world and driving growth and development To be or not to be an entrepreneur – that is the question

[54] The sentences are not direct quotes, but my interpretations of voices in the field. They are slightly caricatured, but nonetheless a descriptions of the large differences between actors in the field. At the presentation of the box to the Accelerator team most members of the team and management recognized the division.

	Standardised plans and strategies are bad, time-consuming and useless because they do not work – MBA is crap Capital is a means – not an end Business is immoral – does not care about quality, functionality or customer needs – only capital Advisors do not understand us or listen to us, and they try to sell themselves Don't trust business people – they are dishonest Business plans kill creativity You can only learn from someone who has done it himself	We make quality and decent technology Science, technology and products are good We are creative disrupters If the product is good enough – the world will want it We want to earn money on technology so that we can make more wonderful technology We want to show the world that our ideas work The coolest people in the world are entrepreneurs It's tough being an entrepreneur – but we are in it together This is not a path that normal people take

This interpretation of the relationship between advisors and participants is somewhat primitive, as it does not take in their perception of collaboration and learning. However, I believe it is important to understand the "we/them" – mentality of the field, because new relationships and a shared community of practice begin from the identity of the actors and what they do not like about others. When actors in the creation of their own identity display distrust and lack of empathy, according to Gergen (2009), they end up focusing too much on themselves. To protect themselves and to gain confidence, they distance themselves from others and are not capable of appreciating complementary competences. Argyris (1991) describes similar reactions from professional advisors who have participants who are unwilling to listen: '*In effect, the professionals asserted that they were helpless to act differently – not because of any limitations of their own, but because of the limitations of others*' (Argyris 1991, 101). The construction I make with the box of perceptions above is to demonstrate how confidence seems to be based on social comparison, which appears to put down other actors' competences and values.

The interesting thing here is that the box demonstrates a *clash of narratives*, and from a collaboration point of view, it is problematic when two parties who are supposed to interact, trust and create new ventures together feel this degree of scepticism towards each other. In the case of incubating processes, this stance does not help to move the entrepreneurial learning process along. Nevertheless, I find that the opposition to the other narrative acts as an even greater obstacle to productive collaboration than is intended – in that sense, the field underestimates the power of language and how it constructs the world we live in. The meeting between participant and advisor comes to express itself as a clash of two superhero cultures, with strong presumptions about the other. It becomes obvious from the differences in goal orientation and priorities how the collaboration between the two can be a challenge. This potential clash of narratives emphasises the need for managing expectations, since in many cases, – in most cases, actually – advisors and participants share the same interests, but the managerial language, methods and tone of voice about five-year plans, standardisation and professional methods on the one hand and the entrepreneurial language of independence, disruption and saving the world on the other, drives them apart. The Entrepreneurial Narrative and Advice Narrative in the incubation industry is not productive in this case, as the idea of the incubation industry as delivering a solution or a formula for opening doors produces inappropriate expectations.

In the following demonstration we listen to scepticism and also disrespect for the way the communication and motivation have been handled by the programme actors, and again, the Entrepreneurial Narrative of self-sufficiency and lack of respect for the communication and performance of the Advice Narrative inhibits collaboration. It never becomes a learning situation for this founder, as he is too busy establishing his own identity, as Down and Warren (2008) would put it, and confirming that there is nothing wrong with the way he does things – and it seems that the personal and social emergence of the venture (Rae 2007) never leaves 'the garage'.

6.12.2. Empirical demonstration: What's in a stage gate?

One way of motivating the participants of the Accelerator programme, and of incubating activities in general, has already been described as the stick-or-carrot model, where the stick is either no funding/no second-round financing or a stage gate model, and the carrot is the free advice/activities or the opportunity of funding. The following empirical demonstration shows how the stage gate process is viewed by the participant, as a pathetic attempt at making the programme into something that it is not – and can be interpreted as a failed attempt of relationship management on the advisor's part.

Interviewer: *During the incubating programme there was a time where you were about to be terminated from the programme?*

Respondent: *(…) I haven't heard about that.*

Interviewer*: You hadn't heard about it? That there was a stage gate? (Surprised)*

Respondent*: I didn't perceive it like that. Maybe some people perceived it as such.*

Interviewer*: But how did you perceive it?*

Respondent*: I felt that it was a joke*

Interviewer*: A joke? (Surprised)*

Respondent: *Yes, it's probably because ... I couldn't imagine that we weren't going to make it …. Maybe not, but we have contributed with everything we should, goddammit; I can't imagine that we were ever in danger of dropping out in any way.*

Interviewer: *All right. This means that you didn't perceive yourself as being at risk of dropping out?*

Respondent*: No. I know that there were some vague discussions about some gate we had to go through.*

Interviewer*: That's it, but there were different stage gates.*

Respondent*: I saw it more as a kind of play-acting or theatrics on their part.*

Interviewer*: So you never thought they would expel you?*

Respondent*: No.*

Interviewer: *So it didn't mean anything for the way you acted, and whether you did more or less?*

Respondent: *I think that a lot of that programme stuff is window-dressing – a game, show-offs in some way or another. It was theatrics.*

Interviewer: *How was it theatrics?*

Respondent: *I think it was like ... their setup was like some form of Navy SEAL training in economics. We had to be whipped and crawl on our bellies, and Jesus, I don't believe in their setup for this. This form of pushing you through (…) I'm 50 years old, and I'm too old for that. (Com02R5)*

The above quote illuminates a dilemma for the incubation programme between being a subcontractor on current needs and the policy ambition of teaching entrepreneurs about business and making them complete the full learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, theorising and planning (Mumford 1995, 5), when the participants do not enter with a learning attitude. It is obviously challenging for the advisory function of the incubating programme to teach entrepreneurs how to organise their venture on a generic level. Participants do not see themselves as students, as Rice (2002) puts it: '*Common wisdom is that entrepreneurs do not want to study entrepreneurship; they want to do it*' (Rice 2002, 185). What we listen to here is a huge clash between the design of the programme as stick-and-carrot and the self-perception of the entrepreneur – the respondent simply does not respect the premises (The stage gate) of the programme. There is not a match. Similar, the following demonstration show how this lack of match may stem from a clash of narratives – or we can call it two different professional mindsets.

6.12.3. Empirical demonstration: a Clash of two 'professional' mindsets

The next excerpt is from a post-programme interview. The respondent has a technical background, and his thoughts about receiving advice and help from other people or organisations highlight the potential conflict when two sets of professionalism meet, in this case the scientist and the marketer. The conversation also exemplifies the participants' high expectations of the advice they will receive. The respondent expects to receive advice on what he finds relevant at the moment, indicating that it is up to the advisor to figure out what kind of credentials this respondent is likely to be impressed by and how to demonstrate it, which has clearly been a the challenge in their collaboration. The respondent wants something that he cannot get himself, and he wants it to come from someone he respects – otherwise he is not going to listen.

Interviewer: *Can you say something general about what works for you when you get feedback on your venture, presentations and ideas?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Well, it has to provide input on the problems that I find to be present. It's not always interesting to get input on something you don't find relevant. It works to… It's important to me that it comes from people whom I find more knowledgeable and competent than I consider myself to be.*

Interviewer: *Are there many people like that?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Of course there are, there has to be within the fields where they are the experts, because there are lots of things that I don't know anything about. That said, I am also good at getting the grasp of things and I will soon find out if somebody is faking it! And that is probably the core of it. It has to be someone who is very well prepared and has many years of experience with what they do, for me to trust that their thinking is better than mine. Creating this company has taught me that there is no replacement for thinking yourself. You can't buy people to do your thinking for you. I realise that again and again. They have to be really clever to be able to help, but you still have to think for yourself.*

Interviewer: *Are they a certain kind of people or professions?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Well, as a starting point it may be related to our challenges with the advisor we worked with, that we didn't… Our entire company consists of people who are very research-oriented, who are very nerdy. And they have a very natural distrust towards people who have some kind of sales orientation in life. That whole value system is troubling, and that form and approach to the world is difficult. It's a difficult match; it's tough field – the meeting between the nerd and the salesperson. And I think that's part of the reason why we have had some challenges during our programme participation. It's difficult because we basically think very differently, and what matters to the nerd is substance and depth. To really understand something is to have in-depth knowledge, and to the salesperson it might just be a matter of knowing just enough to get through.*

Interviewer: *It is a feeling of selling for the sake of selling*?

Entrepreneur respondent: *Yes - or it's like they don't have a deep understanding of what the product is about, and what the customer might need. Or maybe they don't have the talent or the will to understand it. And that is what the nerds are reacting against (Com10R5)*

This respondent is not entirely the picture of the nerdy entrepreneur, even though he describes himself as the nerd. In terms of behaving entrepreneurially (Rae 2006), he has already shown himself to be good at negotiating his venture and attracting investors, partners and potential customers – meaning that he is not an introvert who cannot sell. In many regards, he is a confident entrepreneur with a science background who knows that he has be more systematic and strategic about his marketing efforts and his value proposition, and that is why he and the venture applied for the accelerator programme. Their expectation is to meet competent (in his assessment) people who can make him see the value in the offerings they present to him. In that sense he is not an easy customer. If successful collaborations are based on mutual trust and mutual benefit, this empirical demonstration show that misplaced or misjudged expectations, as the relationship develops, can undermine fragile trust and reverse any potential gains. The above quote gives insights into a low degree of acceptance of the advisor's profession as a marketer and thus a low degree of acceptance of complementarity that the respondent does not understand or sees the benefit in. The accelerator process has not been without challenges to this venture, and at least one reason that is suggested in this conversation is that, despite the apparent wish for new 'original' input, which the founder could not himself have come up with, there is little respect for other kinds of professionalism outside natural science.

Following Wenger (1998) some of the largest barriers to learning is barriers between different forms of practice – in this case the entrepreneurial praxis and the advisor praxis – and in that sense the clash is not that surprising. However, in the incubator context it is exactly different competences that have brought the actors together – to align and upgrade competences, at least on one side of the relationship, but it could very well be on both sides. For that reason I still think the degree of clash is a surprise. It seems that the identity of each Actor Narrative, the Advice Narrative and the Entrepreneurial Narrative, come to act as barrier for the creation of a shared community, which inhibits the learning possibilities as it is the connection between the identity and the relationship that determines the ongoing development of the actors (Wenger 1998).

6.13. When a platform for learning is not established

During the fieldwork, I found that the participants expressed high expectations for the programme and their advisors – and the idea of the golden advice or advisor that can make the venture. In the context of entrepreneurship, advisors are expected to be *experts of the unknown*, because we are dealing with how to create a new organisation – not how to fix an ineffective IT-system for logistics. In general, participants expect advisors to be more knowledgeable and competent than they consider themselves to be, which might be a rather vague blurry expectation for the advisor to live up to, as the participants of this programme in many cases are confident in a wide range of areas –as they should be. For a majority of the respondents, expertise implies entrepreneuring experience, which means that advisors who have built and then sold a start-up are seen as more credible and relevant to the participating start-ups. This applies regardless of the industry the advisor has explored – having been there and knowing what it is like makes the advisor part of the family. If the advisor does not have any entrepreneurial experience, he or she will have to build legitimacy, respect and trust based on other types of credentials, which the particular participant finds relevant (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012). In other words, incubating actors deal with demanding customers, as was discussed earlier in connection with other consultancy relations.

From the empirical material we hear that the communicative relationship with an expert-advisor is not necessarily the road to productive collaboration if legitimacy is not established. As Mumford (1995) found in his research on relationship and mentoring, many mentors are inclined to stick to their own experiences and to offer solutions. They may be less concerned with evaluating the participant's needs and experiences and what that might means for future actions (Mumford 1995, 7). Greiner and Poulfelt (2005) write about the importance of business consultants having a solid base of services and skills in order to provide something meaningful to all participants. It is crucial that this base is solid enough to '*prevent advisors to instinctively dive in and apply one's favourite approach to consulting to a particular participant'* (Greiner and Poulfelt 2005, VI). I find this description of a *favourite approach* spot-on in relation to the field I have been a part of, as the lack of explicit pedagogical tools and methods or disagreement with the scheduled model causes advisors to develop their own little tricks and procedures that they have previously found to make a difference for the ventures they have worked with. This means that advisors are likely to use the same tools and networks for all their 'clients', even though it seems that in the industry of making ventures, the devil is very much in the detail when it comes to success or failure (Gartner 2008), and that makes advisory processes hard to standardise.

In Chapter 3, it was presented how consultancy in many cases is based on the idea that an outside view is relevant and positive, especially when it comes from *professional* advisors. Nevertheless, similar to Norrman and Klofsten's (2009) observation, the empirical material gives insights into participants' experiences indicating that '*Not all external advice is of indisputably good quality. A number of shortcomings concerning external advice: for example that the consultants suffer from capability constraints, that they serve their own interests, give generic advice and put the venture into a dependency relationship*' (Norrman and Klofsten 2009). The empirical material shows that it is a risk that advisors, due to a lack of industry-specific knowledge, cannot judge what is relevant or not for the company – or that they are not capable of convincing the participant about the relevance. They risk wasting the time of participants by setting them up in situations that are evaluated as meeting irrelevant contacts or being exposed to irrelevant tasks. Such experiences damage the credibility of the advisor and the programme, since the participant finds that the advice is not based on relevant industry knowledge.

The learning style of management-designed programmes may be inappropriate for actors who see themselves as learning-by-doing people and not as people who belong in a classroom (Klofsten and Mikaelsson 1998, 72). The above demonstrations give insights into the substantial amount of resistance, which I was quite surprised to listen to in the field. As it was also touched upon in the description of the Entrepreneurial Narrative, some of the participants have quite unrealistic expectations and display a lack of respect (or understanding of the necessity) for complementary resources and resistance towards the 'training' form and language of the programme. As a result, the failure to manage expectations and relationships in the programme praxis leads to resistance and does not create a good environment for exchange – or a shared repertoire of what works for this venture, and where the limitations are (Rae 2006). Some of the respondents seem to be too busy in their *personal emergence* as entrepreneurs in contrast to being students in a programme or letting in partners to co-

construct their venture! With Rae's entrepreneurial learning framework in mind, we get the sense that an environment of exchange was not created, and in some cases it seems that it did not cross the mind of the participating actors that they might have a shared responsibility for entering into the contextual learning of the venture.

Challenging and impressing the participants seems to be important for legitimacy building and the development of relational reality and for entrepreneuring actors to relate and co-construct in a cyclical process of value creation (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 43). If advisors do not actively set the scene of the relationship, in terms of legitimacy building and relationship and expectation management, it is my analysis that that there is a huge risk that resistance and fear or the unknown come to dominate the incubating interactions (Gergen 2009). Even though they have high hopes for the outcome of the programme, entrepreneurial actors fall back to the so-called *interpretative templates* of the field, where legitimacy in the incubation industry is defined as first-hand entrepreneurial experience as the only viable currency of advisors – besides investment funds. This is a theme developed much further in chapter 8.

6.14. The capacity of technology-based entrepreneurs of today

According to Prodan, technology-based entrepreneurial actors usually know nothing about business (Prodan 2007, 27), which might be true when it comes to university spin-outs or some technology-based entrepreneurs (Bruneel et al. 2012, 112). The narratives of the fieldwork is in part also underpinned by the perception of technological inventors as being incapable of performing management and strategy and therefore needing help to get into the helicopter and see the bigger picture. However, most of the potential growth entrepreneurs I have met during the field work differ from the traditional understanding of technology-based entrepreneuring actors, even though it should be mentioned that the bio-tech firms are less prepared for business than the rest of the group, as they are, at the present stage, more inventors than entrepreneurs. Most of the participating ventures I have interacted with have already begun the transformation from one stage of business to another, and the skills, experience, resources and internal and external capabilities vary greatly, but few of them are as completely unprepared as the entrepreneurship policy and incubation literature suggests (Prodan 2007, Warren et al. 2009).

According to the empirical material, most respondents have some basic business information/ knowledge/training, either personally or attached to the venture – indicating a considerable *stock of entrepreneurial experience* (Cope 2003). They have been in contact with investors; they have written a business plan before and engaged in the reflections that such a process requires. This relates to my preliminary findings referred to in chapter 4, that the participants were better equipped in terms of entrepreneurial experience and resources than I had expected.

In this regard, I find the literature to be affected by research on university-based incubators and the usual presumptions about tech nerds who never leave the lab. One example is a study of a British university-based incubator that identifies the incubatee as the *'inexperienced aspirant entrepreneur'* (Warren et al. 2009, 486). Another example is Looy, Debackere and Andries, who state, '*it must not be forgotten that innovative or high-tech entrepreneurship calls for solid management expertise. An entrepreneurial attitude and high-tech know-how need to be complemented by skills in professional management'* (Looy et al. 2003, 198). This description is probably suitable in some cases, but as mentioned earlier I have found it to be too crude in its understanding of the wide variety of tech-based entrepreneurs in my study of a growth-oriented accelerator programme. I also find a great difference in whether the *learning task* (Cope 2003) of the venture is professional management expertise or whether it needs its founder and supporters to attach relevant resources to the process for further development and learning. In many cases, it is a matter of timing in relation to market and resources when the transformation of the start-up phase is superseded by a take-off phase on the edge of survival (Gartner 1993, 233). The 'nerdy' entrepreneur does exist, but I find that this perception of tech-based entrepreneurial actors is too narrow and limiting to capture the actual actors of the selected ventures I have met in my fieldwork, and even more important it is not conducive to creating and collaborating.

Why this discrepancy between literature and practice? I speculate that the amount of popular start-up literature, entrepreneurship sites, online entrepreneurship forums, entrepreneurship conferences and competitions, TV-shows as Dragon's Den, entrepreneurship courses at universities and general hype about entrepreneurship as the dynamo of our future society makes it easier to access information, advice and stories about the basics of starting a company and also inspires the initial idea of pursuing entrepreneurial adventures. Maybe the political agenda of enhancing the entrepreneurial spirit has had an effect and has made many people better prepared for thinking in terms of monetising ideas and projects. Based on the empirical material, I find the technology-based entrepreneur in 2015 to be quite different from the descriptions of technology-based entrepreneurs in 1995 and even 2005, better prepared and equipped – theoretically, relationally and socially – for planning and understanding business ventures, without saying anything about the actual performance. In addition, Klofsten and Jones-Evans (2013) claim that the increasing complexity of technology-based ventures in terms of competition, technology and time make immature ventures prioritise the participation in incubating programmes as a way of handling their lack of competence and resources (Klofsten and Jones-Evans 2013, 299). If this change in the entrepreneurial capacity of society is true, it should be reflected in the way tech-based entrepreneurs are targeted by incubating activities and how incubator management understands entrepreneurial needs.

The empirical material displays the individualistic, almost cliché-like (Down and Warren 2008) narrative of entrepreneuring, which includes a very persuasive and convincing individual under heavy emotional pressure and sets the stage for the variety – or lack of it variety – of relational connections for the venture and thus also for the performance of the venture (Down and Warren 2008, 14). The risk is that they become too focussed on their own creation as entrepreneurs – which they overlook that this is not necessarily the same as entrepreneuring – in the sense of learning to learning to act and learn entrepreneurially. In most cases, the entrepreneuring actors' previous experience and career are important for the entrepreneurial formation (Gibb 1997, Rae 2005); however, according to the empirical material, the value of previous experience – also on the advisor - side may be lower than expected, as the new venture activities are always situated in a different time and perhaps in a different industry. The entrepreneuring actors may feel experienced and expect to be able to activate a large network, but their network or experience may not be useful in relation to the new venture. In an incubating perspective, contextual learning implies that entrepreneurial actors are open to outside intervention. In his studies, Rae finds that it often is the *participation* in the local context of the venture or the industry-specific knowledge from previous experience that facilitates learning.

6.15. Concluding

The construction of this dissertation is made from an inductive approach, to grasp the knowledge that is circulated in the field. The argument for applying a narrative approach to the fieldwork is that it brings us to a better understanding of the actors and their actions in the local context of the incubating industry. The 'small stories' that show how actors do things and reason about their everyday, are by the researcher, re-read and constructed as they make sense from an entrepreneurial learning perspective. Narratives, then, become the analytical strategy that both researchers and practitioners can learn from. Apparently it is the perception of the field that the relationship between advisors and participants is open and fruitful, which, as shown in the fieldwork, results in inadequate attention to the expectations and the possible constructions of relationship; this is in spite of the many prejudices and assumptions that I heard about *the other side* from both the advisors and the participants. According to Somers '*the capacity to act depends to a great extent on having an evaluative framework*' (Somers 1994, 617) and in the case of collaboration we can say that it depends on having *a shared* evaluative framework. Narratives have evaluative criteria, so when narratives clash they do not have the same evaluative criteria for relevant/not relevant – or good or bad ideas – and that is bad for interaction, listening and collaboration.

The clash of narratives presented in this chapter displays resistance towards the other narrative – especially between the Advice Narrative and the Entrepreneurial Narrative. The actors seem to disagree about important elements in the support process as responsibility, purpose, specific task, language, but also what support means when it has to become more than promises and dreams. As the entrepreneurial learning perspective presented by Rae (2006, 2007), inspired by Wenger (1998), is inherently social – we have listened to serious barriers to constructive social interaction between the actors, and a community of practice for shared learning that is only established to a small extent. According to Wenger (1998) learning is not likely to occur if the *distance* between the community and the competences is too large – and looking at the Perception By and Of matrix in this chapter it is a serious risk in the field of incubating practices, with the existing Actor Narratives, that a proper community of practice for entrepreneurial is not created.

Chapter 7: Action Narratives – when Best-Practice becomes a Blame-Game

7.1. Abstract

Based on constructions of Action Narratives, this chapter further elaborate the clash of Actor Narratives, presented in previous chapter and strengthen our understanding of some of the biases and resistance for entering into a co-constructive support process, as outlined in chapter 6. Biases – in the sense an intuitive way of acting in the field, are in this chapter translated into two types of Action Narratives, which I have named the Best-Practice Narrative and the Blame-Game Narrative. Each of these is constructed from stories. Intuition can be said to be necessary in the presence of uncertainty, but – as it will be pointed out – the fieldwork material contain certain biases for the way entrepreneurial support is produced and received that does not make sense from an entrepreneurial learning perspective – as a *productive learning environment* only seldom established. The use of Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives by actors in the field, give some explanation to the question of why entrepreneurial organising (new/different/better equipped ventures) was not performed from entrepreneurial learning processes, as presented by Rae in chapter 5, to a larger degree in the fieldwork as expected. The remarkable paradox is that most actors in the fieldwork agree on the legitimacy of the Best-Practice Narrative and the practices they produce – and their appropriateness is not questioned.

7.2. Construction of Action Narratives

From the write-up of Actor Narratives in chapter 6 it was shown that the collaborative process in the Accelerator programme rarely begins on neutral ground but is performed, enacted and unfolded in the local-historical context, as the programme moves forward (Damgaard et al. 2004, 171). The fieldwork material is full of ambiguities about goals, roles and how to interact – which calls for individual sense-making about why to participate and which kind of effect the advice and tools from advisors actually make – in order to produce meaning (Czarniawska 2008, 38). The Accelerator programme engages with the start-up process of ventures in a setting of actors coming from various backgrounds with various rationales and individual sense-making, as the demonstrated clash of narratives showed us in chapter 6 – even though the actors of the field are quite homogenous seen from a broader demographic view.

That something must and can be done to stimulate entrepreneurial activity is the general thesis of policy makers, but as it was demonstrated in Chapter 2, practice can be a matter of trial and error in a search for a Best-Practice recipe for making the next Silicon Valley. For good and bad, we may say that practice is influenced by the ontological and epistemological starting point of entrepreneurship policy– which means that policy makers and incubating managers operate within a managerial understanding of entrepreneurship (Hjorth 2005, 387). There is a distinction between entrepreneurial and managerial functions of business processes. Hjorth (2005) argues that mainstream management thinking, in academia as well as practice, is preoccupied with existing organisations – not with those that have a need to be something else. The implication of traditional management thinking seems to be that '*soon enough creation processes are taken over by the strategic concepts and a definitions of what a start-up is and how it should be managed, efficiently circulated in most capitalist economies*' (Hjorth 2007, 718). In the case of incubating activities the empirical material suggests such thinking is not as effective for entrepreneurial support as policy makers, incubating managers and entrepreneurs expect it to be. Continuing with Hjorth (2007) he argues that entrepreneuring activities have both a strategic (managerial and theoretical) and a tactical (organising and local) side, and that the field delimits themselves from the tactical interplays of local creation by only favouring the reductionist and simplistic view on entrepreneurship that the management literature traditionally represents (Hjorth 2007, 719).

I find this analysis to be relevant for contemporary incubation theory and practice as well, which is also an argument for this dissertation exploring a relational stance of incubating activities. Parallel arguments are made by Norrman (2008), who posits that the epistemological stances of institutional, economic and network theory are dominant in policy documents, taking certain interdependencies for granted (such as what an expected outcome will be), being normative (with regard to what actors are like, and how they should behave) and goal-oriented (rather than process-oriented) and overlooking that the initiatives are based on intentions and not research-based theory (Norrman 2008, 27). In addition, Gibb argues that much management and business education is designed for large corporate businesses, which impacts the use and effects – or the lack of it – of such education in entrepreneurial processes aimed at creating new ventures (Gibb 2009, 210). Gibb (2009) and Hjorth (2007) suggest that the traditional approaches to incubating activities, both in practice and academia, could benefit from perspectives that take in the processual, tactical and educational aspects of entrepreneurial support.

An argument for my choice of the narrative approach, as it allows us to get into the 'messy' details of the more mundane practices of incubating activities (Hjorth 2007, 713) and with the Action Narratives I present how the field act and talk about support – and react when the support is not interpreted as supporting or making the much desired difference. The position within the relational constructionist thought style means that the world is understood as constructed through relations, including human language. This is crucial to a study like this – of good intentions, which are sometimes not fulfilled – as the language actors have for and use for support might not be appropriate for the result they seek. My interpretation of language and interactions in the field have made me construct narratives that tell us about how actors engage in the field and how their stories are "*a collection of subjectively spun stories*" (Czarniawska 2004, 6) – meaning what they do when they seek to support entrepreneurs, or what they do when they meet an advisor for a meeting. The Action narratives in this chapter are therefore linguistic interpretations of how actors in the field act, constructed as Best-Practice Narratives and Blame-Game Narratives.

7.3. The Best-Practice Narrative

How support is performed in praxis, and the assumptions and biases they are based on, is in the following, captured under the overall Best-Practice Narrative – demonstrated through the stories of Add-On, Access-To and Pave-The-Way. It refers to actions performed with a shared reference to *Best-Practice* – which is a common business term for saying that we know this worked for others - it is probably good – let us do more of that! The practices produced from the Best-Practice Narrative are based on expectations about what will happen if resources are delivered or made available to entrepreneuring actors. The Best-Practice Narrative is important to the research question, because it reflects relatively few considerations on the pedagogical and psychological aspects of entrepreneurial learning, but tell a wide variety of stories about specific deliverables, contents, designs and methods to be applied for entrepreneurial support.

As mentioned, it was a key surprise during the fieldwork that the venturing actors of the field were much better equipped for entrepreneuring in terms of the classical 'needed' resources, than I had expected from the policy and entrepreneurship literature and my initial conversations with the incubating programme team. Another surprise was that many of the entrepreneuring actors still needed proof-of-concept and proof-of-market, which made it a little early for them to participate in a go-to-market programme – and also conflicted with my expectation (again based on previous research) about the abundance of ideas out there just waiting to be commercialised[55]. An additional surprise was that, although the venturing actors had resources, some of them

[55] An interesting comment to a central story in the incubation industry about Denmark as the land of many great ideas (inventions) but with the lack of actors to explore or exploit the ideas (entrepreneurs) is that the interviews show a difference in perception across advisors. Advisors working with early entrepreneurial projects in student incubators, tech-transfer offices or pre-seed environments express that they think there are a lot of great ideas to be explored, whereas advisors from the later stages of investment, venture capitalists and business angels express that "*the number of great ideas is low, but that is how it is everywhere in the world – except for San Francisco, because every aspiring individual in the world goes there" (SB2010N1)* What is worth noticing is that the actors who invest their own or larger

did not seem to know how to apply them or make them work as resources in the context of their new venture. In our conversations and the stories that were told to describe processes and reflections, there was a lack of efforts to activate the network and resources – and the question came up, whether the existing resources of the ventures were appropriate for their task, whether the participants had the necessary competences to apply the resources, or whether the delivery of support from the Accelerator programme could be said to be appropriate?

On the basis of these experiences and surprises (see also Appendix I), the fieldwork enabled me to look into how the support was performed and I have summed up three stories, which characterize the support actions – the Best-Practice Narrative. These stories capture how the management and advisor side of incubating activities *design* and *perform* incubating activities, and also how the entrepreneuring actors expect to receive the service, which the field generally agrees upon, as that is seen as *Best-Practice* within entrepreneurial support. The Best-Practice Narrative represents an economic and managerial approach to entrepreneurship, which implies that the overall rationale is to answer the question, 'how may entrepreneurship benefit from management?'(Hjorth and Johannisson 2006). Nevertheless, my comments and presentation are based on my relational reading of the learning conditions in the field. The three stories are further exemplified through three empirical demonstrations in the subsequent pages.

7.3.1. The 'Add-On' story

In my interpretation, we can talk about an assumption of policy makers, advisors and entrepreneurs that new (business) knowledge can be put into – or *added-on* the heads of entrepreneurs, and they will learn and act. When we know what entrepreneuring actors need, it seems to be assumed that a plug 'n' play method is sufficient for the application of added knowledge. As it was described through the Advice Narrative and Policy Narrative, such understanding of needs takes for granted that a "problem" can be defined and that the knowledge needed to "solve" it, exists! When policy makers and incubation managers tell the story of Add-On they assume that business planning tools are key to effective business organisation, and that there are basic management and marketing theories that all entrepreneurs should be familiar with, which can and should be applied in the entrepreneurial process. The way actors speak about these objects constructs a story, which somehow takes it for granted that the needs of entrepreneurs are known, and that the Add-On's of programmes and support units are useful and relevant to these entrepreneuring actors. This story is therefore very concerned with *what* to provide and *what* kind of (universal) needs entrepreneuring actors may have. The

amounts of capital in ideas are more critical than the earlier stage actors or the incubating industry, who are primarily investing public seed money or supported by or part of public policy initiatives.

Add-On objects may come in the form of; *tricks for making a sales – or elevator pitch, sales models or advice on social media management, knowledge about customer behaviour, instructions to make a Gantt chart and set milestones, instructions to select beachhead segment or to write a business plan, industry facts, and feedback from experts, services and tools as Osterwalders Business Model Canvas and capital.*

The add-on story is less concerned about *how* to provide the add-on, and *how* needs of entrepreneurs may be constructed in the specific context of support, which from a relational learning perspective is important for learning to happen at all (Rae 2005, 2009). It is also less concerned with the implementation of the Add-On, and for example what kind of knowledge about markets and industry production that is needed to make *relevant* and *realistic* milestones. If we look at the setting of Add-On's, as one-way communicated knowledge, advice, pep talks or capital they are typically delivered or staged in the form of;

- Advice situations as one-on-one meetings, and other kinds of written or oral information and instructions
- Seminars, workshops, camps or spring boards
- Books, slide-shows and other written materials
- Capital as a loan or funding from public or private investors

Within the practice of the Add-On story, advice situations and workshops and so on, is primarily performed by one active actor (advisor, speaker, teacher, facilitator or mentor) who add on knowledge, information, theory, models and one passive actor – who receives it. Even though such situations of Add-On delivery obviously can be used for dialogue, discussion and mutual interaction as well, it is not a central part of the Add-On story. The story of Add-On in the field operates with the premise that the expertise and commitment of incubating advisors and managers are critical to success. The effectiveness of entrepreneurial ventures depends on external expert knowledge together with basic management theory, which can be strengthened from marketing tools, business model frameworks and stories about industry Best Practices.

7.3.2. The 'Access-To' story

This story operates with the assumption that being introduced to or having access to people, technologies, knowledge, capital and other resources will make entrepreneurs interact with and use these resources. A premise of this story is that entrepreneuring actors must develop strong linkages within the local business environment, and that incubating activities should contribute to creating linkages, as many entrepreneurs are not very good at that (Mønsted 2003). This fits well with the contextual learning arguments from Rae (2006). Furthermore, part of this story is that resources, especially financial, are hard to get and one of the obvious reasons why there are not more successful entrepreneurs in Denmark – indicating that there is a gap to fill[56]. The Access-To story implies that if resources are made available to entrepreneuring actors; the resources will be explored and exploited. It is assumed that advisors and their networks are effective sources of advice, and that access to this kind of '*knowledge containers*' will be valuable. It is my interpretation that the relevance of networks as an entity to hold, the possibility of transferring it from one actor to another and the ability to use it are taken for granted. Along with the Add-On story, the Access-To story also assumes proof-of-concept and even proof-of-market in small scale to be in place.

Again, this story is more concerned about *what* kind of access entrepreneuring actors need, rather than *how* the support is transferred/ communicated and works in practice. Typical Access-To objects are; *access to industry network or entrepreneurial experience network, invitation to springboards, access to capital network of business angels, innovation environments or venture capitalists.*

If we look at the setting of access-to, as the transfer of exclusive network and capital, it is rather difficult to say how it is delivered or staged, but it may come in the concrete form of;

- Phone numbers, e-mails, contact info, endorsements
- Set-up of meetings with potential partners, industry experts, customers and investors
- Access to market research and reports and access to industry data-bases
- Introductions to resource people at conferences, spring boards or industry events

The tricky part here is that the actual process of making networks work is often a long, complicated and relationally dependent affair, which can be accelerated by endorsements and references. Nevertheless, participants of the Accelerator programme experience that gaining value from network it is a matter of the individual performance of the entrepreneur and the technology. In many ways my fieldwork experiences has revealed that the transfer of network and capital is much more complicated than the Access-To and Add-On stories seem to suggest. No one disagrees that contacts, network, endorsements and resources are crucial to most start-ups – but it could be more thoroughly discussed by advisors and entrepreneurs what kind of network that is relevant to the particular ventures, how it is made relevant and how it is made accessible to the participants. One challenge could be the implications of funding and gaining access to networks, which set

[56] It is an ongoing debate in the broader entrepreneurship field – both in practice and academia – whether young ventures actually need funding. In the incubation field, most actors seem to agree that attracting funding is one of the most important elements of entrepreneuring, which is a strong story in the empirical material. Nevertheless, outside the incubation industry, venture capitalist (VC) funding is the exception – not the norm. According to Diane Mulcahy, director of private equity at the Kaufmann Foundation, only 1% of US companies have raised capital from VCs. This at least suggests that the actors in the incubation industry ought to discuss the need for funding and when prioritising time and resources.

new demands for the ventures about progress, knowledge sharing and interaction – as this has huge strategic implications for the venture. Another is example the loss of ownership ventures experience when they take on investors and the need for comprehensive negotiations skills when making contracts and term sheets. As far as I have listened to, the participants are only to a smaller extent prepared for the interaction with the resources and expectations that follows when they get Access-To.

7.3.3. The 'Pave-the-Way' story

The Pave-The-Way story for entrepreneurs is basically about making it less troublesome to be entrepreneuring – at least from a structural and practical perspective. The Pave-The-Way story is based on the belief that if obstacles (taxes, institutional barriers, resources constraints etc.) are removed, lots of entrepreneuring actors will jump out of their closets explore opportunities and start new businesses. What is being removed by policy makers as a consequence of this story are structural barriers to entrepreneurial activity, such as regulations, taxes and the lack of venture capital in society. The way actors construct this story is also based on the belief that the more actors take on entrepreneurial endeavours, the better, and the increase of entrepreneurial motivation and action are taken for granted as an outcome of removed barriers. This latter assumption has been questioned in the course of the last five years, as research has found that the more entrepreneuring ventures, the merrier is not necessarily the case; however, the notion has not yet been very influential in relation to policy initiatives worldwide (Mason and Brown 2013).

If we look at the praxis element of the Pave-The-Way story, it may be exemplified as below, but the list of how to remove barriers to entrepreneurial activity could be much longer.

- Shortening of time it takes to get VAT-number, incl. digitalization of documentation
- Easier access to information about requirements when running a business in Denmark
- Shorter or less documentation to fill when paying taxes or applying for participating in incubating activities, funding or patents
- Lowering of taxes or support for hiring foreign staff
- Removal of regulations in specific industries and alignment with EU standards

All actors in the field agree that obstacles should be removed – and it is therefore a powerful and strongly supported story in the field. Nevertheless, I find it important to remember that the making of the successful venture still is the exception to the rule – and also that the overcoming of obstacles often can be seen as an important learning experience.

7.4. Best-Practice Narrative demonstrations

According to Dachler and Hosking (1995), we have to look to the underlying epistemology of a literature tradition or field of practice if we want to understand it's practice, as '*diverse epistemological assumptions result in very different understandings of leadership, networking and negotiation*' (Dachler and Hosking 1995, 1). In this analysis, the Best-Practice Narrative entails an entitative and possessive perspective of management and organisation literature, which has as one of its central assumptions that individuals have access to the contents of their mind; this mental content is viewed as an individual possession similar to other properties of the individual, such as the person's hair colour (Dachler and Hosking 1995). Knowledge is perceived as an objective entity and as something that can be true or false, right or wrong – and which is thus independent of both messenger and receiver and can be transferred without changing meaning or form. This means "*relations are considered only from the point of view of the entity considered as the subject in that relationship. Relations, and therefore knowledge and influence, are understood as more or less instrumental for the subject's understanding of order*' (Dachler and Hosking 1995, 3). I find that such underlying epistemology is reflected in the language and actions of the fieldwork – which indicate that from within a Best-Practice Narrative social relations are enacted by the active individual that has planned to acquire knowledge about something specific and with this knowledge single-handedly practices influence over other actors. In this process I understand entrepreneurial learning as taken for granted, as something that automatically happens from Best-Practice performance

In the following I will show the how the three stories of Add-On, Access-To and Pave-The-Way is expressed in the field of incubation.

7.4.1. Empirical demonstration: 'Remove all obstacles – entrepreneur coming through'

As a demonstration of how the Best-Practice Narrative co-exist with the Actor Narratives presented in chapter 6, I will summarise an article published in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* on 18 November 2013 as part of the global annual entrepreneurship week (week 47). The article exemplifies what Gibb (2000) is saying about new incubating initiatives: that the last 30-40 years of incubating initiatives are based on the same recipe (A managerial Best-Practice Narrative), and that they are a political tool rather than a productive system for making successful entrepreneurs. In addition, the article supports my arguments about the existing Action Narratives of the incubating industry being strong and hard to challenge and making it hard to conceive of incubating activities outside the paradigm of Best-Practice support.

The newspaper article sets the scene with a story of a 30 year-old Danish man who recently changed his title from 'unemployed' to 'entrepreneur.' After graduating from university, he has been in and out of the social welfare system. He has been nursing a dream of becoming an entrepreneur but has been through;

> '*A troublesome process, which was more likely to inhibit than promote his passion of founding his own company.*'

Already here, the article sets the tone: This man has been exposed to something unfair, which has held back his passion for entrepreneurship. Furthermore, in his struggle for gathering support for his idea and in his position as unemployed, receiving benefits[57] from the state,

> '*He also had to concentrate on writing weekly job applications, irrelevant training courses and meetings with job consultants who, despite their well-meaning intentions, were unable to provide any counselling about entrepreneurship.*'

We, the readers of the newspaper, are now perfectly aware that the tasks he had to do, in order to be entitled to social benefits is somewhat meaningless and time consuming. It would have been better if the Danish State had not burdened him with such requirements. According to the following quote, he is almost upset that the right kind of counselling and advice did not drop from the sky (was added-on) when he needed it in his attempts at generating growth. He said;

> '*It did take a long time to develop the concept, and it's hard to pursue the idea 100%, since as the recipient of unemployment benefits I lacked feedback and counselling, but luckily it all worked out in the end.*'

The new entrepreneur of the article is held up as an example for a new political initiative from the Lord Mayor of Copenhagen City, which aims at allowing people to receive unemployment benefits to skip the mandatory training courses and other requirements and instead work on their entrepreneurial idea for a period of 40 weeks. The lord mayor's initiative implies that 'entrepreneur consultants', who will assess the ideas and act as advisors for the entrepreneuring endeavour, can evaluate unemployed actors and their ideas. The unemployed prospective entrepreneur will receive education on a range of predefined topics, including budgeting, law and business development. The lord mayor of the City of Copenhagen is also interviewed in the article, and advocates the approval of such a scheme, based on the following argument:

> '*We have many unemployed people who have business ideas with great potential, and we need to help them. I have spoken to many entrepreneurs who say that it's a great barrier to have to fulfil the rigid demands of the unemployment system instead of working on the development of their business.*'

The article does not provide any facts to suggest that it actually takes 40 weeks to develop a business idea, or whether a project necessary develops better or faster if the entrepreneur spends 100% of his time seeking to

[57] Unemployment benefits for newly graduated academics in Denmark, member of an A-kasse (unemployment insurance system), are approx. EUR 1400-1600 a month. For that kind of money, some would argue that it is fair for the State to claim certain requirements – especially if we look at the unemployment conditions of other countries.

realise it. Nor does it say anything about how the quality of the entrepreneurial ideas is evaluated as having great potential, or the entrepreneurial capacity of the entrepreneurs. The article goes on to describe how a similar initiative has been tried out in Northern Jutland, without saying anything about the results or experiences from this project. It also mentions that a similar scheme was tried out on a national level in Denmark in the 1990s – allowing people to receive unemployment benefits while setting up a company. The initiative was discontinued, because the newly established ventures almost all closed down when the unemployment benefit period expired. These experiences do not dampen the mayor's enthusiasm, as he states,

> '*Unlike earlier initiatives, the unemployed will be screened carefully and followed much more closely by entrepreneurship consultants. We must not be frightened by our own shadow due to previous bad experiences with some different initiatives. Obviously, we are going to need competent entrepreneurship consultants*' (Berlingske Tidende, 18 November 2013, section 2, pp. 12-13),

Somehow this quote suggests that non-competent advisors who did not screen properly and did not follow the ventures closely handled the previous initiatives. Nevertheless, the article does not bring any information of how incubating initiatives in the future will ensure competence!

Based on the reading of the entrepreneurship learning literature, life for a start-up entrepreneur is a huge mess of existing (rigid) processes that one has bring together with the development of the business idea and learn how to manage, which is actually not so different from the process that the mayor describes as being *incompatible* with entrepreneuring. The entrepreneurial learning perspective suggests that it is from acting within existing processes and contexts that people learn the ropes of entrepreneuring (Watson 2013a, 23) – and that they grow from the experiences of success when they overcome barriers and of failure when they hit a dead end and have to find other avenues. It is these successes and failures that enable them to handle the next ones. Furthermore – and even more interesting it would be if the mayor had spoken to some of the advising actors who have worked in the field for years, as the following quote from an advisor in my fieldwork demonstrates, they might have told her that;

> '*There aren't a lot of great ideas out there – I know it, I have lived in many great cities in the world and worked with this. Entrepreneurs all over the world complain that it's difficult and that are barriers to their success. To be a successful entrepreneur is the exception to the rule; people forget that when they try to produce them*' (SB2010N1).

With this demonstration I seek to problematize a one-sided Best-Practice Narrative when it is applied to incubating initiatives as a political tool, without taking into account the experiences both researchers and practitioners actually have about what works to support entrepreneurs. As many of the intuitive solutions and initiatives for – as adding on expert knowledge or removing obstacles – which in other contexts are sound solutions to challenges – but in this field sometimes is incompatible with the task – there is a serious need for questioning the intuitive approach to entrepreneurial support and ask how the Best-Practice Narrative can become more productive and relevant for entrepreneurs. The newspaper article is a good example of both the Add-On and Pave-The-Way story, saying that we have to remove obstacles to entrepreneuring – somehow implying that this is the recipe for success, and not really taking into account how complex it is to create an entrepreneurial venture, and therefore also to support it. Furthermore, entrepreneurship is referred to as a generic discipline to be taught and can be added-on through predefined topics we expect to be relevant for entrepreneurs in this situation.

7.4.2. Empirical demonstration: A Best-Practice advisor

Recall the empirical demonstrations in chapter 6, which on the entrepreneur side indicated a dream of the golden advisor and the golden advice that can change the path of the venture, and on the advisor side – that there is a certain take on entrepreneurs that can teach them a thing or two (the personal Best-Practice of the advisor!). During the fieldwork, in a setting of many trial and error's and uncertainty, I found there to be a longing in the field for routines, standards or models that can signal validity, security and effect on the incubator side. I as a researcher, employed by the incubator have been searching for this as well in my attempts at writing up the fieldwork material and communicating with the incubator management and Accelerator team. This demonstration exemplifies this well, together with the challenges of standardizing collaboration, relationships and needs when it comes to entrepreneurial creation.

During the fieldwork I have interviewed participants and interacting with advisors – and listened to and observed how they communicate and interact. As it has already been described, many advisors develop their individual strategy for interacting and creating a relationship with participants (Buono and Poulfelt 2009) – and that this so-called strategy varies among the advisors of the Accelerator programme. Advisors have various experiences with 'what works' to give advice, and participants have various ways of receiving advice. It is worth mentioning that the advisors' descriptions of how they interacted with specific participants in many cases are quite similar to the descriptions offered by the participants in question. The participants' and the advisor's perception of how productive/ relevant/ important/valuable the collaboration was varies, but the material conveys that they went to the same event – so to speak. It is my interpretation of the empirical material that advisors make conscious choices about the attitude, mechanisms and 'tricks' they apply in their work – they sort of develop their personal Best-Practice for enacting the advice situation. This tells me that advisors make certain conscious choices about how to transform the participant's Entrepreneurial Narrative into a more business-oriented. The following except demonstrate how entrepreneuring actors of the fieldwork might receive this type attitude;

Interviewer: *You also said recently that you really didn't expect that much from the programme, and that you were generally a little sceptical of advisors – is that still the case?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *I am very sceptical of advisors, unless they have a good track record and have done something.*
Interviewer: *What are you sceptical about?*
Entrepreneur respondent: *If they only talk and talk, doing out their homespun philosophy on how to run a business. There are many like that, and they waste your time. A good example is the fact that, of course it's necessary to report results and set up a budget etc., but ultimately that doesn't move the venture. The venture moves if you take the time to sell, and it's typical for an advisor to say that now we need to create a budget, and now we meet the budget, and of course we have, but in the end, it doesn't change anything to spend time on the budget. It's about what comes first (PCom02R7)*

This quote is yet another example of how important it is to be on the same page in the context of support. Schein (1987 argues that advisors can and should change roles according to the participant's needs but also according to participant's expectations. The alignment of expectations seems to be very important for a well-functioning relationship; it is also important to remember that any position in a social relationship is negotiated in the process of actors positioning themselves (Clark 1995, Smith 2008, 46).

In my early analysis of the fieldwork material, I constructed four types of advisor/ participant relationships from interviews, conversations, observations and field notes from my daily work around and with the Accelerator programme. These advisor roles constructed from the fieldwork were primarily *caring*, indicating that in my interpretation the advice situation were performed within the classical perceptions of advisors and participants as respectively giving and receiving. This was reflected in the names I chose for the four advisor roles;

- The teacher
- The nurse
- The mentor
- The mother

The categories can be seen as stories about *how* advisors and participants of the Accelerator programme communicate and therefore also tell us about their relationship. They are not exact representatives of advisor-roles but served as an attempt at capturing predominant thematic strands in the descriptions and performance of the collaboration in the interviews and conversations with advisors and participants (Smith 2008, 24). The four roles reveal that the advisor/participant relationship is, to a large degree, performed as a relationship between one active and one passive party, and the expectation about an omniscient, quick-fix advisor clearly exists on the participant side in the empirical material.

During my research process I wrote an article about these and presented the preliminary write-up of the advisor roles to the Accelerator programme team and incubator management at a seminar. At the seminar I primarily focussed on the advantages and pitfalls of each advisor approach, but also on some of the clashes between Actor Narratives. The advisor roles came to serve as a medium for communicating with the Accelerator team and management! My intention with the relationship roles was for the advisors to see the relationship between different types of interaction and the advantages and pitfalls of each role in the performance of the advisory process, in order to be able to think differently about and vary their advice practice.

Responses from the advisors were mixed; most advisors could recognize the roles, but is should be mentioned that one said that he did not feel that they were a fair picture of his personal way of working with his participants. In general they liked the descriptions I gave of advisor behaviour together with the various reactions of the participants and thought them funny! Hence, my audience were puzzled about how to apply these insights to their work with the participants. One shared response from the audience at the seminar was that I should make complementary categories for the participants and point out the best generic fit between advisor and participant types for interaction – as that would make them much easier to apply. This is in my interpretation a wish for standardization. This response made me want to immediately delete the advisor roles again, as I replied that the participants were much too different to categorize like this, and that I did not want to offer the programme team an alternative scheme for matching the advice practice that perpetuated an unequal, one-way relationship of incubation. I wanted to challenge the nursing attitudes of advisors and the whining and critical attitudes of participants.

Nevertheless, I went back to my desk and thought about categorizations of the Accelerator participants in terms of roles. It was easy to think that participants who acted as student, patient, apprentice, and child! But this was not the case.

The advisor role had to do with the way the advisor communicate with the participants and the kind of tricks, tools and methods used for 'affecting' the participant. The participant role is also related to a certain way of communicating that advice and expertise is needed, and this is obviously done with a certain attitude and language. Still, the participants did not fit into the roles of only receiving knowledge, as the nursing roles of advisors seem to indicate. The interviews show that the participants have many different faces/ roles and attitudes during the interviews depending on the subject and the situation of the interview, and I came up with four participant roles that I found to be present in the field, which was;

- A world Champion
- A seeker
- A whiner
- A goal-oriented

Without elaborating on these beyond the obvious meaning, I am just going to stress that participants may take on two or more of these attitudes during the interview and my other interactions with them and were therefore much harder to put into fixed boxes than the advisors – at least based on the field work material. I knew that if such roles were "put on" new participants, they would miss out the opportunity for acting out as some of the other categories and as with the advisor categories, it was my purpose to get the advisors to be able to mix the different kinds of pedagogical approaches to counselling and collaboration, not stay on one.

Johansson (1997) constructed three 'client identities', based on his work on advisor-client relationship. These are the anti-client, the consultant modifier and the ideal-client. I can recognize these identities from my fieldwork and see the benefit in knowing them, but the Accelerator programme participants do not stick to one of these identities either. The participant can be both a so-called whiner and a world champion – as we saw it from the schizophrenic tendencies of the Entrepreneurial Narrative, which makes them hard to categorize. This means that I unlike Rice (2002) would not suggest that one match (Best-Practice) between participants and advisor types are better than others before we know the entrepreneurial stock of experience, context of the venture and have established some kind of relationship of respect.

In my research the four relationship roles turned out to be insufficient for the analysis I wanted to present and the dialogue with the field that I was aiming for, about the importance of relationship management and of managing expectations for entrepreneurial learning processes to be present. They have therefore not been given an important role in the dissertation. It is not my impression that advisors do *not* want participants to learn, but it is my impression that learning and the expansion of possibilities for action are expected to happen inevitably when the programme is constructed as tools and concepts. I see this as having too much confidence in the tools and paying too little attention to the power of well-designed processes of interaction with a relational focus on what may make actors collaborate, listen, learn and act differently. As it is outlined in the introduction, I decided to look for another way of understanding the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context.

It is a paradox that the incubation industry asks for Best-Practice standard solutions to be able to deliver a pre-given perfect match, and that the entrepreneur asks for customization, as he cannot imagine a standard solution being relevant to him.

7.4.3. Empirical demonstration: Best-Practice expectations and biases

The empirical material contains many accounts indicating that the participants do not know what to expect, because they do not know what the programme is offering – or we might interpret it as reluctance on their part to share their hopes with me in the interviews. The problem arising here, when expectations are low, not shared or not really considered, is that it somehow implies that the trustworthiness of the incubator is low in the eyes of the participants (Coleman 1990) – and that is bad for collaboration. On the other hand, some participants of the incubating programme express rather high expectations about gaining access to a broad network that will be able to resolve all sorts of challenges and about having answers and solutions Added-On while they continue to work and develop their technology and business.

The next excerpt is from pre-participation interview. The respondent is determined in his articulation of his company and perceives the Accelerator programme as a subcontractor to his present situation. He does not want theory and seminars; instead he wants help to solve immediate problems in his company – which is not a learning mindset, but more of a Best-Practice Narrative that wants something. This contrasts with the ambition of the programme; to strengthen entrepreneurs by providing them with the basic tools for managing a young venture, which is more of a training mindset, than an entrepreneurial learning mindset:

Interviewer: *Why did you apply for the incubation program?*

Entrepreneur respondent:' *When it comes to becoming international we think we can only take the company to a certain point through networking. It's an ambition to move faster into more markets. What I see in the future for the next six months, after we launch, is to make a 'go-to-market strategy,' and here we can use professional help. Hopefully, we'll be attached to experts with knowledge that we don't have today. On the one hand, I have been very sceptical of the programme, I mean, with the launch, which is where we're at; we don't have time for a lot of seminars and a lot of theory, because there has to be 'action'. We have to do something – all the time. And that was what convinced me that this programme is something I want to spend time on, since it's my impression of the programme that it contains a lot of practical stuff. What I am doing with the experts now is what I was doing anyway. I could see the logic in that (PCom09R5)*

This respondent has many things going for him, as a good idea, the ability to attract funding and is in many ways entrepreneuring and learning from entrepreneuring, but that is not what he expects from the programme. His attitude towards the programme is very much like; please Add-On and gives me Access-To. He wants expertise, but he does not want theory – and one year later – in the post-participation interview he tells me that these expectations were not really fulfilled! Thus, what he had learned from the programme was that there is no short cut to funding or hard work – he has to do it himself.

From the pre-participation interviews with participants, it is striking to listen to statements about seeking answers about what is right and wrong, reminiscent of the answers many people seek from a wizard or a priest. Similar perceptions of advisors have been found in other empirical studies of the advisor-participant relationship, where the advisor is attributed with special powers to establish legitimacy and respect, and maybe there is also a hope for the one piece of advice that can be added-on and will solve any problem (Smith 2008, 61). It is also remarkable that many participants expect to be guided down a hallway with doors of opportunity opening up just as they are passing by as they are given Access-To. It seems that many of the respondents expect to *be* accelerated and not accelerate themselves, and I wonder why these high-striving respondents express such expectations. What is expressed in the above quote is not exactly a learning perspective but more of a hope for a quick fix and complementary skills provided as Add-On's or as Access-To as they exist undependable of the participant. Sometimes, without realising it, I find that participants appear to want an omniscient superhero with an extensive network and the recipe for a magic potion to turn participants into marketing wizards fast. The challenge for the incubating manager is that both superheroes and Miraculix are hard hires.

The methods stemming from the Best-Practice Narrative may also conflict with the Entrepreneurial Narrative of *not* seeing oneself as a student – even though there are expectations of being introduced to some kind of best Best-Practice. This paradox became well illustrated at a Lean Start-up camp I attended during the fieldwork. The teacher, a hot shot American speaker with a good name within the start-up community presented his power-point as it would have been taught in business schools all over the world – as traditional one-way monologue with few predefined questions to the audience. The programme participants were asked once in a while to tell him back the obvious answer to the next slide, and 'the teacher' would not go on before someone in the room had bothered to raise his hand and repeat what the teacher had just said. People were falling down the stairs as the well-known Best-Practice case of Apple was outlined in details to an audience who seemed to be very familiar with the story of Apple's success – and for whom many of them are very far from being Steve Jobs. To me as an observer of this two-day event for entrepreneurs, I found it striking that the "service" of the programme was this traditional and school-like and in that sense confirming some of the prejudices of entrepreneurs towards incubating activities - as theoretical and way too little hands-on! One of the participants of this event commented on it in this way, on my questions about the output of camp participation and content;

> *"It was something I had looked forward to – both the Lean-Start Up Camp and Crossing the Chasm Camp, and I did learn a little, but it was a VERY long workshop, which was not fit for entrepreneurs, if you ask me. It was not fully adapted to somebody like us. This was the case for several of these camps! And also this thing about spending an entire day on each camp or workshop - it is too long time. Some people just stay away, and of course I could have done that as well. The times*

> *of learning for me was when I had my own product up for game against a theory or model that I could use. Generally I think there have been some good speakers, but some of Speaker X's own models were quite confusing, even though he as a person is cool enough. I have seen Speaker Y before, and he runs his show, and it is totally cool, and Crossing should just have been a one day event, when it was only the theory being introduced" (PCom03R7)*

This respondent likes the speakers – he keeps referring to them as 'cool', and in that sense they have gained his attention. However, it was not my impression that this respondent increased the entrepreneurial capacity of his venture much more than he would have done be reading the book about Crossing the Chasm. The camp situation becomes an Add-On service - which it is up to the entrepreneur to turn into new constructions related to his venture. The following passage from another interview also illustrates the importance of how theories – in this case the most popular entrepreneurship model the last 5 years – is presented to participants;

Interviewer: *Based on your understanding of the concept the camp and other sources, what is your definition of the term "business model".*

Respondent: *That's a good question. The business model canvas is one of the concepts we haven't been using actually. Even though I'm pretty sure we should have. I know the business model as far I remember the business model canvas is something about mapping your partners, your customers, and actors in your context. I remember some drawing. I think we tried to do it in the beginning but I think we just basically skipped it because there was not enough focus at that point. Our customers are very simple, very simple segment. We have direct sales, but I think we mapped it, but then it turn out to be very simple so we didn't move on using it. I'm pretty sure we could have used it and maybe mapped out that we forgotten something.*

Interviewer: *Yes okay. Was the business model canvas helpful in clarifying or communicating the model?*

Respondent: *It didn't really get me – but I probably did not give a chance.*

Interviewer: *Why - was it difficult to use or was it not useful to you?*

Respondent: *My understanding is that the reason why we didn't end up using it a lot in practice was because we believed our business at this point was very simple and we had to just focus on continuing what we already did and I if think back to that camp there was an information overload in general. I think we went through 100 of slides and in my opinion a lot of different models and I think I was just falling asleep at that point (PCom01R5)*

My analysis of the above situation is also that the programme designers have a hard time 'escaping' the traditional ways of presenting knowledge – and they end up teaching business theories as it is done at business schools. They gain the attention of entrepreneuring actors by drawing upon some well-established names and theories in the field – but this does not make up for how the workshop is run or how the knowledge is transferred. From a relational point of view, the static assumptions of the Best-Practice Narrative, including their needs and wants and structural assumptions about the design of incubating activities only partially makes room for productive interactions between entrepreneuring actors and incubating activities. As a result, the assumptions are incomplete because they fail to incorporate the preconditions of entrepreneurial learning. According to Gibb, '*Learning starts from what the learner already understands, knows and internalises, not what the teacher knows*' (Gibb 1997, 15) and I find such recognition to be neglected in the Best-Practice Narrative, which take the needs and absorptive capacity of immature ventures to be known. With this quote, Gibb points out that entrepreneurial learning is not just about adding on what policy makers and incubator management find relevant, since we need to consider how entrepreneuring actors will interpret the offer.

7.5. Sum-up: Best-Practice Narratives

The dissertation posits that in the case of the fieldwork, from an entrepreneurial learning perspective, the Best-Practice Narrative do not produce a satisfying identifiable impact for the participants of an incubating programme in terms of increased entrepreneurial capacity. For the same reason one of the main interests in the research process has been to find explanations for why this is the case, to figure out what is blocking such seemingly well-planned and well-intended support initiatives from having an impact, and what kind of alternative processes might lead to increased entrepreneurial capacity. As mentioned earlier, I suggest that the Best-Practice Narrative of the fieldwork conform to managerial thinking, not to an interaction-oriented entrepreneurial learning mindset. This can be interpreted as the capacity of learning of the field as being low (Wenger 1998). In their article from 2006, Hjorth and Johannisson seek to outline what is entrepreneurial about entrepreneurship, which they describe as being associated with '*creation, desire, passion, play, spontaneity, immediacy and intensity*'. As management is described by '*efficiency and control*', they posit that what is entrepreneurial about entrepreneurship is very different from management (Hjorth and Johannisson 2006). The concept of the Best-Practice Narrative is an attempt in this dissertation to encapsulate how the content and deliverables (the what) of incubating activities assumes to be transferred to entrepreneuring actors in a one-way process, a monologue. Moreover, they also demonstrate the underlying entitative and passive perception of constructs such as knowledge, networking, needs and barriers as things that can be stored, removed and given to other actors.

Over the past 30-40 years, network and social network theory have received much attention in the fields of organisation and business, and also, to some extent, within entrepreneurship and incubation theory (Hansen et al. 2000, Fletcher 2002). The network perspective in the incubation literature and thus also the relationship perspective have focussed on networking in terms of gaining access to complementary resources and external partnerships (Granovetter 1985). Networks have been depicted in maps or diagrams with dots/nodes connected by lines/ties, outlining a network as seen from a bird's eye perspective but without any regard for the actual interactions and networking activities among the interrelated parties in the incubator (Johannisson and Mønsted 1997). An understanding of networking that is mainly interested in nodes or individual stable actors is insufficient for the creation or maintenance of a network, as it will often be retrospective and thus by definition out of date. Only rarely is this understanding supplemented by a close description of how the nodes and ties are established and maintained – and of the importance of emotionality that also influences connecting processes in both enabling and disabling ways, as Burt (1992) and Steyaert and Van Looy (2010) point to.

The view of knowledge as something independent and objective that can be conferred from one actor to another implies that knowledge is static in relevance, that it is a 'thing,' and that it can be stored (Hosking et al. 1995). I find such a view too simple in its implications for how to support and help someone grow stronger and more independent, because it neglects intermediate actions and methods for personal growth and development. It implies a taken-for-granted analysis of entrepreneurial action, entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial knowledge creation, since individual capacity change cannot be separated from the relationship in which the individual is engaged. Bouwen refers to a distinction between *knowledge-as-substance* and *knowledge-as-participation* (Bouwen 2010, 31). The former refers to knowledge as a thing that can be transferred from one box to another and leaves it up to the capabilities of the exchanging actors to define how the transfer should be performed. The other, knowledge-as-participation, stems from the social constructionist literature, which understands the creation and application and knowledge as relational processes.

> '*People create knowledge by engaging in joint action as forms of participation in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This leads to quite different concepts of learning (…) whether it is about a child learning to speak a language or a surgeon acquiring highly sophisticated skills; learning always means in effect integration into a particular community of practice. Learning in this way is a concrete developmental aspect of relational practice*' (Bouwen 2010, 32).

Being able to apply the deliverables of the Best-Practice Narrative therefore implies paying attention to relations. Bruner (1990) emphasises that knowledge is contextual and does not reside solely in the actor's mind but also in the way in which they use and access it (where they store it – e.g. notebooks, e-mails, networks, phone numbers etc.). That is why relevance of knowledge/expertise is relational in nature, and in line with my interpretation of the incubating processes in the field acquiring any kind of knowledge '*is both situated and distributed. To overlook this situated-distributed nature of knowledge is to lose sight not only of the cultural nature of knowledge but the corresponding cultural nature of knowledge acquisition*' (Bruner 1990, 106). I find that when we lose sight of the relational prerequisites of knowledge and support, which is contextual, historical and relational, there is a great risk that the services offered by incubating activities end up being irrelevant – and then we are likely to end up in a Blame Game.

7.6. The Blame-Game Narrative – explanations to lack of impact

The Blame-Game Narrative sums up the existing explanations in the field, through the lens of a managerial epistemology, as of why incubating activities are not producing more successful entrepreneurs and growth, as they were designed to do.

According to Cope (2010), it is because failure is painful that people will do virtually anything to avoid it. It is in this learning arena that incubating activities seek to tap into: incubating in the sense of failing faster and more productively, i.e., making failing into a more productively used learning resource. That would, however, require a constructive and trustful relationship with the advisors and fellow participants of programmes. The subjective assessment of external resources, risks and future decisions plays an important role in the construction of the Entrepreneurial Narrative, and it might also be part of the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context.

By now it is clear that a central theme during the fieldwork has been the lack of impact of the Accelerator Programme on entrepreneurial praxis. As it has been stated, the substance of impact is highly difficult to talk about – whereas I have listened to an abundance of stories about the lack of impact. When the Best-Practice Narrative does not produce the expected outcome the field has an intuitive way of entering into stories, which blame the other party involved, to explain why! The Blame-Game Narrative is rooted in the clashes of Actor Narratives presented in previous chapter, as is constructed from and five stories that are particular strongly represented in the field; the Not-Listening story, the Marketing-Blah-Blah story, the Public-Incompetence story, the Mis-fit story and the Lack-of-professionalism.

As with the Best-Practice Narrative, the Blame-Game Narrative is my way of describing actions in the field, which in this case to a large degree is a matter of attitude, tone of voice, what actors talk about (and not), how they interact, what they share – and also what they do not do, as a consequence of the Blame-Game Narrative.

7.6.1. Empirical demonstration: the Not-Listening Story

Both the incubator and the incubatee side mutually accuse each other of not listening to what is being said, and it is my evaluation that how simple it may be *to listen*, this is a central barrier to entrepreneurial learning in the field. Sometimes, this story can also be expressed as the feeling that the other side does not really understand what is important about the venturing/incubating process – at this very moment, as it has also been expressed in some of the previously presented quotes! This means that this story is about not being on the same page and not agreeing on the task that at hand, which is closely related to a lack of engaging in joint forms of praxis's (Bouwen 2010). The following quote is taken from a dialogue with an advisor. He works with investment and has been investing in and working with technology-based ventures for more than 20 years. We talk about the challenges involved in supporting entrepreneurs, and the excerpt reflects how difficult it is to make a lasting impact on other people's actions and decision-making and when I ask him to explain why – he enters into a blame-game. Note that what he says is likely to be true – at least from his well-meaning point of view - but we may also question whether he engages with the entrepreneurs in a mutually constructive way;

Interviewer: *Is it possible to learn how to network, or can networks be transferred?*

Advisor respondent: *Maybe. It is easier to maintain a contact that you have been given than finding it yourself. But I do believe that it's difficult to maintain contacts. I also believe that for many of the companies that have been through the programme, if you look at them with critical eyes one year later, the change in behaviour has not been very significant.*

Interviewer: *Why not?*

Advisor respondent: *(Deep sigh) (…) (…) I don't know. Maybe there really has to be a focus on what they can get out of it. People make decisions about what they want and do. And then there is this programme, and this programme sets a lot of things in motion, but they have to believe that it's the right thing to do. I think that all the thoughts that an entrepreneur has had over the years produce a huge amount of inertia. We can see that in all the companies where we have a seat on the board. In that situation, the board can decide that now things are going to be done in another way, and still it's difficult to get them to change. They have to be able to see what 'the benefits' are.*

Interviewer: *Is that the main challenge in working with entrepreneurs?*

Advisor respondent: *Yes – so maybe the first thing to do in the programme is to sort out, together with the entrepreneur, what it really is that they want out of it.*

Interviewer: *Do you think they are able to articulate that?*

Advisor respondent: *(…) (…) I don't know, but if there's no purpose with it.*

Interviewer: *That may be why some of it doesn't succeed?*

Advisor respondent: *Yes, they come in with this vague idea about needing something. Here's something that's free and prestigious, and on the top of it, there's a contest to win. There are many good reasons to join the programme.*

Interviewer: So - *why is it difficult to help entrepreneurs?*

Advisor respondent: *Well, it is difficult because there is a lot of inertia and conventional thinking, even though people say that they would like to change. It's hard for anyone to change the way they work. That's why it's difficult to help entrepreneurs (SB2010N3).*

This conversation gives us a sense of how the Advice Narrative emphasises *task* – a functionalist understanding of what the entrepreneurs want out of the programme, defined as a specific need or problem that should be targeted. The advisor's contributions suggest that it is hard to get entrepreneuring actors to listen, and that they are the ones held back by inertia and conventional thinking – when they fail to appreciate the solutions or do as the board instructs them. There may be a lot of truth in what he is saying about people's willingness to change, but he is not pointing towards his own deficiencies or lack of capabilities in his own organisation. What the advisor says here is that when the participants do not follow the advice – do as they are told – they do not listen – and to some extent the advisor blames the entrepreneur. Some of the misunderstandings and feelings of being misunderstood in the fieldwork, signals that some participants do not feel listened to as well – we saw that from the Entrepreneurial Narrative. The likelihood of learning to occur and immature ventures to be supported, rises when both parties agree on the problem and the solution – which calls for some kind of mental relational agreement (Bouwen 2010), and the clash of Actor Narratives generally suggests this agreement to be hard to reach. This advisor's description of the Entrepreneurial Narrative, that entrepreneurs feel that they need *something* is also spot on, as entrepreneurs also fall into the functionalist approach of claiming to want marketing competences as if the art of selling and gaining attention that can be added on from a one-week course.

The construction of challenges in the field that is accepted by the majority of its actors, which to a large degree are part of a shared frame of reference of what constitutes Best-Practice support. Nevertheless, it can also be tricky for the incubator managers and advisors to accept that the entrepreneuring actors are able to define their own needs, as it is part of the traditional approach to consulting to be the expert, and the support process is largely designed as a one-way conversation. The empirical material reflects the notion that 'elite entrepreneurs' selected for a special Accelerator programme is actually less receptive and listening to input than expected. They already have knowledge and do not feel a need for learning as they feel a need for receiving something, and learning is associated with theories they do not want. As one of the slideshow pages from The Value Proposition Camp of the Accelerator programme says; *"Launch and learn, works better than learn and launch".* No need to listen!

Participants that do not accept the Advice Narrative's established expert position may be perceived as arrogant and unwilling to listen – since they obviously do not share the interpretative templates of the incubation industry about entrepreneurs being potential, but weak!

7.6.2. Empirical demonstration: The Marketing Blah Blah story

The need for complementary resources is central for the justification of incubating activities. Nevertheless, most entrepreneuring actors favour the part of the entrepreneuring process that they are already familiar with, as illustrated by the following quote from an advisor in the Accelerator programme who has been working with the development of new ventures for at least ten years.

Interviewer: *What challenges do you encounter when you work with entrepreneurs?*

Advisor respondent: *They have a hard time focussing on what's really important. Many entrepreneurs come from a technical background, and they have a tendency to focus on technical problems, and then they miss out on the business part. And then again, the entrepreneurs who come in with a sales background, they only focus on the challenges the company is facing with sales (SB2010N4).*

The advisor finds entrepreneuring actors with a sales background just as narrow-minded as technology-based actors, which is interesting in relations to the prevailing presumptions from the policy level and academia. In his experience, it is not only the (presumably introverted and narrow-minded) engineers who act as if their share of the entrepreneurship equation is the most important but also the (presumably extroverted) MBAs. The quote is a good example of what the Marketing-Blah-Blah story is about – which is the scepticism towards the unfamiliar and unknown and especially the value of it (Gergen 2009). It is fair to say that for many of the participants, in their entrance to the programme, they have not yet fully accepted the premise of the programme – that complementary resources matter, and may be as important as the ones the venture already has. The consequence is that they do not take responsibility for their own learning process; hence there is a risk that the knowledge, advice and experiences are not implemented properly and adopted to the venturing project;

Interviewer: *If you were to start a new business, would you do anything different today?*

Respondent: *I would probably find a different market if I wanted to make it a profitable business. But I guess it's like that in any market, it's super-complex, and you're constantly meeting people who can't really see how perfect your product is - but it's probably just me; I don't enjoy selling the idea, but you have to do it.*

Interviewer: *Did you gain or learn anything from the programme?*

Respondent: *Yes, I definitely think so. Especially some insights into the 'black boxes' of the process. This means that you can act in a completely different way instead of sitting in the corner with your own thing, where you are the specialist.*

Interviewer: *What are the headlines for these black boxes?*

Respondent: *It's pretty much the programme workshops. It's all these blah blah blah – create an atmosphere, and everyone acts crazy – Woo-hoo – in a highflying gear!!! Of course, it's stuff about marketing and strategy – and what is that? It's all these buzzwords like 'value proposition' – and then the all that strategy ... corporate strategy and development, which, of course I had a sense of what that was about, but I wasn't that familiar with it. Now I've seen how some of those tools can be used, and that demystifies it somewhat. (Com0203).*

This excerpt gives insights into a narrative that is more of an attitude or a basic opinion about what is valued as important – and big flashy marketing campaigns are not. This participant is not that interested in marketing and strategy, but he has accepted that it is important and tries to cope with the task. However, from my continuous dialogues with and observations of this actor, it is clear that it does not happen the way incubating managers and politicians imagine it would, as he continues to handle his venture the same way he did before the programme. Furthermore, he has not been convinced of the need for business competences that forms the backbone of the Advice Narrative; although it is the second time he starts a company. This participant is primarily inventing his technology more than he is entrepreneuring, and throughout the programme he listens to lots of commercialisation talk, but in my interpretation he remains unconvinced. At some point, he agrees, it would be nice to make some money from his venture, but that is not urgent for him.

This story is not necessarily in opposition to the Advice Narrative, but in my interpretation of the above excerpt, the respondent is still sceptical, and the way that the Accelerator programme is performed has not changed his attitude or his approach to performing his venture – which indicates that his entrepreneurial capacity has only expanded to a minor degree. It is an implementation deficit. It is not enough to be told that something is important; this story suggests that the benefits of random networking and sales exercises have to be quite clear in order to constitute an entrepreneurial learning episode and make a set the scene for a learning context.

7.6.3. Empirical demonstration: the Public Incompetence Story

It has already been touched upon in previous chapter, that a central argument among the participants of the programme for not trusting or expecting too much of the programme, is that it is publicly funded. Some advisors, who express that they have the feeling that some participants see the programme as a free meal, support this. Such participants are referred to as free-riders! The following quote represents a scepticism that is common in the empirical material, as it has been demonstrated both in the Entrepreneurial and the Critical Narrative; the scepticism pertains to the incubating programme as a public service that is out of touch with the start-up environment.

Respondent: *There are some things that I think you (the programme) could have addressed. Would you like some input on that?*

Interviewer: *Sure, it would be very welcome!*

Respondent: *But actually, I already told them. It has to do with the branding. It smells of public sector, which of course it is to some extent, but it's a private institution that is partly based on public funds.*

Interviewer: *It is publicly funded.*

Respondent: *It's public, but it's cool, and they have the right attitudes. It's just the signals they send to be public. And I know several start-ups that have had a real bad experience with the programme, also recently!*

Interviewer: *So do I!*

Respondent: *All right, say no more! I think you should work more with the branding and focus more on the effect, and, like, if you take something like this private programme I have been in contact with, who just hit the interactions with the entrepreneurs spot on; in fact the programme itself smells a little bit like a start-up. That's something you could work with. Also, the communication and the coordination have been quite uneven at times, but that's also because I focus on things like that (PCom03R7).*

I wonder how the public sector smells? Furthermore, I wonder whether he would expect a privately run start-up programme to be timely and streamlined in its communication – as that is not the typical 'smell' of start-up, or whether he has these expectations because the programme is publicly based. At least, when the programme does not "pay off" the way he had expected, it is easy to blame the inconsistencies on the public aspect. I speculate whether this blaming on the public elements of the programme is an excuse to distance him from the fact that his own venture did not progress as expected during the time of programme. It is an easy blame game to participate in – since many actors in the field tell this story. Even policy makers draw on the shoulder as an excuse – as they cannot help it being public – but still "*somebody has to do something*". The scepticism found on the participant side can also be listened to from the advisor accounts. Some advisors try to make excuses for themselves by saying that half of the money comes from private funds or refer to the greater good (growth) that they are producing for society. Other advisors conclude, as we listened to from the Policy Narrative that when an initiative is publicly funded one can expect a focus on the public good, and that different goals and expectations (workplaces and learning) should be guiding the outcome compared to a privately funded programme (value to investors). This is a dilemma also among advisors. Only a public supported programme can provide these kinds of resources.

The sceptical attitude towards a public programme that is free of charge is widely expressed among the participating entrepreneurs, advisors and the programme ecosystem. The problem with this Blame-Game story is that it mainly produces resistance and distancing, not alternative ways of collaborating. In addition, and even more important – I find that the public incompetence story takes away focus on the real challenges and paradoxes of incubation, including conflicting interests – which both public and private initiatives face. And is does not create an open, learning attitude.

7.6.4. Empirical demonstration: The mis-fit story - timing and content were not right

This story is constructed from some of the most common explanations in the empirical material concerning the outcome of the incubating process – about the venture participating too early/too late or being too fast or too slow, in relation to the programme offering. Essentially they are saying that the content is not relevant. Another explanation is that the programme content and focus are too generic in order to work for the development of the individual venture; on this note, some respondents state that camps or sessions were interesting, but that they were not able to implement the models or theories in their own process.

In their evaluation of the programme process, both advisors and participants express that it probably would have been better to be at a *different stage* of entrepreneuring to achieve the maximum benefit of the programme. The programme participants are in many cases grateful for the effort being done by the advisors, but it is clear that the programme loses some of its legitimacy if the participants are exposed to too many situations where they feel their time is wasted. The following excerpt demonstrates the respondents' feeling of having a venture that the programme cannot really support, given its content and the advisors' experience; this suggests how industry expertise may be a relevant qualification for advisors on the broader level of start-up advice, but not specific enough in the development of any given new start-up.

Interviewer: *Okay, but the camps were useful to you. What did they give you?*

Respondent: *Good question! I think that some of the things about documentation, funnels and the start-up thing with a canvas, different things, all these different terminologies and tools, that's been pretty cool to see. But I think it's difficult to say precisely what I've learned. It's something much more general, also meeting some of the other participants and talking about some of the more intangible aspects and the knowledge sharing that occurs.*

Interviewer: *Yes, and it's different to discuss it with them than with the advisor?*

Respondent: *Yes, in fact it is. It may be because I didn't use him in the right way. But perhaps it's because it makes a difference where your experience lies, and my advisor has done different types of start-ups, so I can discuss start-ups with him on a general level, but I can't talk about the specific challenges that come up in a company such as mine.*

Interviewer: *So you're facing some very specific challenges?*

Respondent*: Yes. I find that to be the general challenge in the programme, that it's so broad in terms of who is involved. And of course there are some general things you can discuss with entrepreneurs, but there are also plans where everything becomes a little pointless in relation to my product – it's just that the companies cover such a wide span that our entire culture and all that... that there are certain things that are just incompatible. That's a challenge sometimes (PCom10R7).*

This story about lack of timing or relevance makes it possible, in retrospect, to explain – or blame – the structure of the programme for lack of impact. As said, substantial amount of participants and advisors express the feeling of the venture being too early (or late) in their process for the programme, which in my opinion is too many. That would indicate that the screening process was inconsistent and poor, and I do not find that to be the case. Even though a screening process is complex in many ways, I do not think it is the screening process of the Accelerator programme that is the (only) challenge here. Again, I see this story as way of distancing to the fact that a substantial amount of neither participants – nor the advisors – have difficulties in articulating the exact benefits, outcome or product from the Accelerator process.

I take into account that it is difficult to articulate significant contributions or impact-moments when I as interviewer pose my questions – but I still find it interesting how they chose to answer. In that sense I have also been listening to the kind of conversations that the field was interested in having, as a reaction to my questions.

The following quotes are from my conversations with advisors of the programme just before my final interview with the participants. The theme of the conversation is a short evaluation of the Accelerator programme process and I ask them directly whether they think the particular venture was a good fit for the programme. The six quotes concern six different participants and are from different advisors of the Accelerator programme. It is worth mentioning that the quotes represent a collective of 15 ventures, of which I did not get the chance to speak with the advisor of two ventures, which means that six out of 13 ventures had an advisor saying, in retrospective, that the participant should not have been part of the programme or did not gain substantially from it.

> *"It went alright – but the case was too early for the programme. They did not have a product yet, and the product was very far from market. I actually doubt their competences, they lack knowledge about their market - but it has been a much-hyped case. I arranged one sales meeting and the customer was interested and I think they learned something from that. Bottom line – they should not have gotten in – they did not gain from it"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

> *"I think they had a slow process of acknowledgement – there was a long way to recognition, and they did not fit the programme. It was a bad case"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

> *"On paper it looked nice, but they did not really have a product yet – and in that sense it was too early. It should not have been part of the programme"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

> *"I think this case was too early – and that it could be spotted. They were very hard to move – all they came with was a drawing, they had no product and were too far from market. At our meetings they were primarily confirming each other, but there was no sense of reality. It was just talk, talk and talk"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

> *"I some ways it went okay – he picked from the programme what he wanted – but he did not listen. The product was dull and there was not a match with the market he wanted to target. But I know that they changed a lot of things afterwards, got a new business model and a new business partner. So – should he have been part of the programme – in some ways yes, but he did not have anything, it was all up in his head"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

> *"This one was difficult because the entrepreneur had to decide upon an academic or commercial career – and they were not ready for seeking out opportunities and were not able to network. We delivered things to them – but they did not learn how to apply it. Maybe it could have been a good match with the programme, if other resources had been assigned to them"* (My notes from conversation with programme advisor)

In my analysis, these quotes are a symptom of the advisors not being able to point to significant changes from the process – and maybe also that some of the collaboration processes are quite frustrating to the advisor. Again, the descriptions from the advisors may be 'true' in the sense that it was how the experienced it – and some of the cases might have poor products/ services. Thus, it is still my analysis that the "mis-fit"-explanation is also a way the participants and advisors express themselves about something they do not fully understand – as why actions based on the Best-Practice Narrative do not to a larger extent accelerate the ventures. Nevertheless, from some of the cases where the relationship was open and mutual I did not hear such statements, even though it may be as hard to evaluate outcome of their process, and even though there was no direct match in industry experience. In many of the cases that the above quotes refer to, it is furthermore my evaluation, based on the interviews with participants that a proper relationship and space for knowledge and competence sharing was never really established during the 5-month programme.

7.6.5. Empirical demonstration: the Lack-of-Professionalism story

This story also stems from the Critical Narrative and the post-programme interviews and can also be seen as a story to explain or justify disappointment. The Lack-of-Professionalism story reflects biases and critical attitudes towards incubating programmes but also unfulfilled expectations held by both programme participants and advisors. Recall the empirical demonstration in chapter 2, in which we listen to some of the experiences from two advisors who were part of making the programme during the three first years. Part of their story about the participants were that they were not ambitious enough in dreaming the venture, not serious enough in their devotion of time and did not fully understand what it takes to become successful – and in that sense not professional from the advisors point of view. Blaming *others* for lack of professionalism and ambition is a shared story in the field, when one actor does not act according the narrative of another actor.

Advisors express that they think participants of the programme act unprofessional, do not prioritize strategic work accordingly are not willing to give what it takes to become truly successful. The lazy entrepreneur is a figure in this story that is satisfied by having a big car (often referred to as the Mercedes-syndrome). But he has no higher ambitions than that, which is also part of this Blame-Game story of lack of professionalism. Many participants join the programme with high expectations about 'getting' a network, which may be somewhat naive when one considers what network is and what it takes to establish trustful and sharing relationships. Nevertheless, the programme does market itself on offering contacts, and as a go-to-market programme it does hold up explicit expectations about international outreach. The following respondent has had quite mixed experiences with the network promises;

Interviewer: *12 months ago you had quite high expectation for the network of the Programme?*

Respondent: *Yes, I do not have that anymore. When you get a little closer, you realize that the programme does not know everything. I guess in terms of network the Accelerator programme is a little second rang, and the ones that does not get accepted into a private programme, participates here. I do not see the programme as the best in Denmark to attract foreign investors.*

Interviewer: *But what kind of expertise were you introduced to?*

Respondent: *There was this advisor telling us something about conversion rates, and it was all right, but in retrospect I can see that he was not very good. It was kind of second rang consultants – with a two-man consultancy from Roskilde. If you are serious about being an offer to the best growth companies, then you have to find the best consultants. With regard to that I also find it problematic that the programme primarily uses advisors who are only interested in being advisors.*

Interviewer: *All right, it did not entirely fulfil your expectations.*

Respondent: *No, but we did get in contact with a substantial part of the Danish investment scene, and that was good – and we gained valuable experiences from that, even though many of them are quite incompetent. Our advisor was not capable of advising us on some of the terms we were offered, but luckily we have some very good people in our board with experience from the venture industry. Some was good and some was a waste of time. One time we were set up with a guy who did not even speak English (the partner of the venture is English speaking. ed). I was like what the hell is happening? In such a case the advisors need to think. On the other hand, the network of the programme and Connect Denmark is not relevant to us. Our important investors are in Italy, London or New York.*

Another source of scepticism is that the participants do not understand or have insights into the rationale of the programme, for example which ventures are accepted, who gets the best advisors, what kind of network the advisors have, and how professional – meaning fair and structured – the management of processes is. The participants are welcomed as Danish elite entrepreneurs, and that is also how many of them feel. Therefore, some of them are puzzled when they feel that the camps and other activities introduce them to basic business knowledge and standard theories that they are already familiar with. Here, some management of expectation might help! The following excerpt is from a double interview with two founders of the same venture, conducted half a year after their participation; the excerpt demonstrates many of these concerns;

Interviewer: *You had pretty big expectations about the network of the programme when we spoke last year?*

Respondent 1: *Yes I did, and it didn't quite live up to that*

Interviewer: *It didn't?*

Respondent 1: *No, when I can only think of one person that we have maintained in our sphere, and then no – this is not what I had expected – to only get one more qualified person in. I guess I had expected to be exposed to a whole array of new people on the investor side, both domestically and abroad, and that is not what I think has happened. It might be because we had a rather extensive network when we began the programme, and if we hadn't made the effort we did before the programme, then we would probably have meet more new people – so probably, other participants will answer differently (Com12R5).*

This expectation of being exposed to a range of new investors is maybe unrealistic, but somehow the communication of the programme has given him such expectations. Note that he also refers to the previous Blame-Game story of a particular mis-fit between their venture and programme, since the programme cannot offer what they need because they are somehow at another level. The conversation goes on about what kind of network and what kind of people they would have liked to be introduced to. They name-drop a couple of Danish and international investors and state that this is the kind of network that they would have liked to be introduced to, and I reply,

Interviewer: *I guess it's also rather difficult to get into those circles?*

Respondent 2: *Yes, but somebody has to succeed, and it's a matter of knowing the way in…*

Respondent 1: *It's obvious that… well, when it comes to the international investors it is crucial to have someone who can introduce you. We see that when some people call an investor in London, or even in the US, and say – 'Listen – I know this venture, and you really want to talk to these folks.' Then you get a meeting right away – and you don't get that from e-mailing them your business plan! It's important to have someone who steps up for you.*

Interviewer: *All right – so this is one of the areas where the programme did not meet your expectations. Based on these experiences, was there anything you could have done differently?*

Respondent 2: *Well, if I am going to answer this and it is not finally tested, but it seems that the key to this environment is to identify a particular small selection of people, who have been in this game for the last 8-10 years. Find those people, get them hooked on the idea, and get them on board. We should have focussed more on that from the beginning, but I don't think the programme has that kind of capacity.*

Interviewer: *And do you think the programme could have done anything differently?*

Respondent 2: *Well, the setup of the programme is completely unclear and not very professional with regard to who owns who, and what are the decision-making forces in the programme. I think it's really important that the cards are laid on the table much more than we have experienced – and this is both in relation to the practicalities of the programme and in terms of who the investors are, and whose interests they serve. What is being prioritised, who is allowed into the programme. It's also related to the loan-thing – which nobody really could explain, and I'm not even able to say who is the face of the programme is. Who is in command of what is going on in the programme? It's possible that the programme employees know it, but it is not clear based on the website. And if you try to look it up in an industry database or the official corporate register, there is still very little information about that owns who, and who the ultimate managing power of the programme is.*

Interviewer: *I am sorry to hear that that is your experience…*

Respondent 1: *I have to say that it is lacking in transparency, and that is a problem! (Com12R5).*

These statements also express a sense of urgency as the respondents gets frustrated when they do not understand the set-up of the programme, and cannot navigate how important decisions are made or which participants who gets selected for investment. Because of the 'mess' they almost feel that their time is wasted – which produces this story. In Chapter 5, I briefly discussed what advisors signal when they talk about *being professional* the way a doctor or a lawyer would do it, and how professionalism is interpreted as something solid, trustworthy, competent and beyond the capacity of the 'client.' In the case of the Accelerator programme, the participants talk about lack of professionalism when the programme does not deliver what they had expected – meaning the services are seen as not being relevant, not having an international outreach or not being on the expected level of quality. The evaluation of "professionalism" is thus subjective, as the participants are their own reference for authority, relevance and reliability. If it feels reliable to them, it is true and good, meaning useful and valuable, hence professionalism is defined by what is perceived at being valuable from a return of investment perspective.

7.7. Sum-up on the Blame-Game Narrative

To me, as a fieldworker, the Blame-Game Narrative is out in the open when actors of the field discuss the difficulties of supporting or receiving support, and why the Accelerator process was not as fruitful as expected. As the names of the stories suggest, it is more common to blame other actors for the lack of impact than to look into the lack of competencies or performance in one's own performance or organisation. There is one certain characteristic of the Blame-Game Narrative that I have found to be remarkable – and that is that it does not question the Best-Practice Narrative i.e. the actions and methods applied for entrepreneurial support – it is typically just calling for better quality, and therefore it preserves existing structures and procedures. In my analysis of the fieldwork material the narrative therefore fails to enable other interpretations of how support and interactions may be performed.

In theory, there may be an endless number of ways to describe the field of incubating activities and therefore an endless number of ways to perform it. However, as I am arguing throughout the dissertation, I find that some of the narratives that are repeatedly re-constructed in the field are so common and familiar that they have become canonical narratives (Bruner 1990, 47): They are accepted as truth, which stands in the way of other narratives – as for example an entrepreneurial learning narrative for entrepreneurial learning practices. The unquestioned perceptions about new ventures, support, people, power, technology and processes make certain narratives very powerful in terms of defining the possible range of thinking and acting, and as such they play a big role in structuring the performance of the field. When the narratives are not questioned it becomes hard to act outside them, since acting outside the narratives does not make sense to the field and is therefore not approved, allowed, accepted or noticed (Møller 2012, 72). With regard to the fieldwork I have only seen few examples of actors being able to challenge the interpretations of Best-Practice support – or the resistance of the Entrepreneurial Narrative – which I return to in the following chapter 8.

Participants and advisors are likely to have different perceptions of the purpose of the incubation process – in a continuum between immediate solutions and long-term learning. Substantial presumptions about the other can be found among participants, incubator managers and advisors – of varying legitimacy. As constructed from the Blame Game story No-Listening, it is very frustrating to the advisors and a barrier to productive collaboration when the entrepreneuring actors seem unwilling or unable to listen. It can be formulated as being difficult for advisors to make participants accept the Advice Narrative as a long-term perspective for entrepreneurial learning (and success). According to other incubator studies (Rice 2002, McAdam and Marlow 2011), many participants of incubating activities do not have a learning focus (Rice 2002, 184), and the incubating programme is more likely to be perceived as a subcontractor fulfilling current needs. That is also confirmed by this study. In many cases, the respondents are not very tolerant or open to the idea of learning – in sense of changing behaviour based on theory and advice, unless advice comes from an experienced entrepreneur who has tried it first-hand and 'knows what it is about' – regardless of industry, context and time. They stay true to the mantra of *"the market being the wisest teacher".*

Rae's framework (2005, 2007) of entrepreneurial learning is useful for understanding entrepreneurial learning as an outcome of personal and social becoming that is driven by the input of the entrepreneuring actors' past and present contexts. Furthermore, the consolidation and growth stage in the entrepreneuring process requires learning to play the game of continuously engaging with and attaching relevant actors in the context and developing on an interpersonal, cultural and economic level. In my fieldwork, my focus has been on identifying this kind of development, social becoming, and engagement of partners, contextual positioning and learning and negotiation of legitimacy and reason for being. Nevertheless, it proved hard to identify this kind of development through the narratives of the fieldwork, and with regard to entrepreneurial learning theory two challenges that clearly stand out is that many participants never leave the stage of personal and social emergence to enter into a new stage of entrepreneuring, and that actors of the field neglect the processes and potentiality of dialogue (contextual interaction and negotiation) in their attempts to navigate the programme and focus on content. They somehow let their fear of the unknown or strange get in the way of entering into an accelerating community of practice, hence learning to behave entrepreneurially and learning from entrepreneuring.

7.8. Masks are bad for entrepreneurial learning

The initial interaction between advisor and participant is like an interview, which, to borrow a term from Goffman, can be described as situations where actors show a '*preferred self*' as if they were on stage (Goffman 1959, 33). This performance is driven by concern for one's own image, an entrepreneuring or advisory identity, and in the Accelerator programme setting the participants present the story of their companies '*as if the imagined future is at hand*' in an attempt at attaining legitimacy (O'Connor 2004, 105). The advisors equally strive to appear as competent and rational authorities who represent the professional consultancy world and who offer solid services (Clark 1995). Both parties in this support situation are likely to wear masks at the beginning of the relationship, and a tension of not knowing exactly what to expect is present. In the meeting between entrepreneurial actors and advisors in of the Accelerator programme, it seems difficult to move beyond the self-contained front and behind the mask to establish a more productive relationship based on trust, sharing and open interaction. The narratives clash in relation to the notions of relevance and what it takes to offer advice, but they also clash in terms of who is the real expert, the understanding of expertise – and expectations.

Related to the presentation of the preferred self, it is a paradox that entrepreneuring actors present preferred images to the recipient, in this case the Selection Board of the Accelerator programme in order for them to be accepted and eventually fund the venture project. The goal of the applicant is to wear a mask that makes him or her look like a needy and worthy entrepreneur with potential. The needs of entrepreneuring actors is an important theme in all constructed narratives of my fieldwork, as it is a general held truth that immature entrepreneurs need specific resources and business understanding.

It is also a common understanding of advisors and policy makers that, the entrepreneuring actors do not necessarily know what they need – or what is best for them! This means that there are presumed shortcomings of new ventures in the field, and in order to be accepted into the programmes of the incubation industry, entrepreneuring actors need to match these presumptions. Rosen (1985) writes about what it takes to be accepted in a certain company (culture) (Rosen 1985, 46) and the language and narratives that are required to be accepted to be part of the internal community. I have indicated how difficult it can be to challenge the established narratives about entrepreneurs, growth and support in the incubation industry. This means that entrepreneuring actors who are able to perform the superhero-with-need-for-help language are more likely to be accepted into the community. The Investor Day event in the incubating programme of the fieldwork is similar to the 'Breakfast at Spiro's', and so is the Selection Camp (Rosen 1985, 33). If entrepreneuring actors speak this language being accepted into the programme rewards them and may even receive funding. The language is viewed as if there were no alternatives (Rosen 1985, 46).

In the context of traditional storytelling about entrepreneurs as special super-humans, we may refer to a much individualised language about entrepreneurial creation that affects the entrepreneur's narrative (Dachler 2010, 41). From a relational perspective, the entrepreneuring individual is never completely alone or the master of progress or setbacks, as actors is always part of larger relational and contextual processes. To construct or be part of entrepreneurial activities is a strong identity, not only for the individuals as makers of their own world, which often is associated with high risk and an unpredictable life, but also in the articulation by Society – constructing entrepreneurs as makers of our world.

7.9. Why incubators may still be a good investment

Based on the fieldwork, it is my impression that many of the entrepreneuring actors already have some kind of business or industry network, entrepreneurial experience from other business related activities and investors, and they have gained credibility and developed to a certain extent, but they struggle with applying the resources in the particular context. This was a surprise, as this does not match the presumed shortcomings that the incubating programme was designed to handle. This has made me believe that it is not enough to provide Access-To experts or to Add-On additional resources - without entering into a co-constructive process of exploring and implementing these resources and learning from such collective experiences. Otherwise, Add-On's and Access-To services are as useful as getting a new car without receiving the key.

In 1997, Johansson stated that entrepreneuring actors *need* support but do not *want* support (Johansson 1997, 12). Nevertheless, as pointed out in Chapter 6, although I have met a substantial amount of scepticism towards the advice from external actors, I have also heard stories indicating that the Entrepreneurial and Critical Narratives have been moderated in their approach to support. I see the growing industry of incubating activities as a sign that entrepreneuring actors do seek support, both as a strategic bootstrapping strategy and because it makes sense from a complementary resource perspective. The idea of participating in public and private programmes and competitions may have been promoted by a political wish for growth, but the support industry is indeed a place to look for resources for entrepreneuring actors. Many entrepreneuring actors know they are not jack-of-all-trades, and they experience the limitations of their existing venture on a daily basis. As outlined in Chapter 2, support initiatives have changed many times during the early years of incubation, and since the beginning of the 21st century, more and more private entrepreneurship programmes have gained a great deal of attention as catalysts for entrepreneurs. In spite of the hype surrounding these programmes, they are also having difficulty measuring an impact on the participants, besides a few success stories. According to this dissertation, such programmes may fail to work closely with the 'how' of entrepreneuring, what I refer to as relational activities of the incubating process. The incubation industry struggles under too many buzz-words promises and fluffy tool terminology, which is great for marketing and for gaining attention but does not necessarily make a difference for action and performance.

Business and technology need each other, and incubation activities can be seen as a sort of dating service – aiming at establishing long–term relationships. Ruef, Aldrich and Carter (2003) show that even though they '*anticipate that new formal organisations in general, rather than just those in high-tech environments, may benefit from having founders with a diverse set of work experiences and occupational backgrounds*', their study of entrepreneurial team composition show that homophily and network constraints based on strong ties have the most pronounced effect on group composition (Ruef et al.2003, 216). '*Even in a situation where we might reasonably expect stringent economic rationality to prevail – and thus lead to choices based on the functional diversification of achieved characteristics – we find that team composition is driven by similarity, not differences. Founders of organizations appear more concerned with trust and familiarity, at this early stage, than with functional competence, leading to 'competency discount' in founder recruitment. Just as in other areas of economic life, commercial exchanges involved in organizational founding are strongly influenced by socially embedded patterns of associations*' (Ruef et al. 2003, 217). When team composition is more likely to be based on similarity instead of complementarily, we might conclude that the clashes of the incubation meeting between entrepreneurs and advisors are expected. Nonetheless, this is no justification for actors being sceptical and demanding, as one argument for having business incubators may be to expose entrepreneurs to other competences, thoughts, ideas, than they will instinctively turn to. However, as we also know, the incubating practice of mutual collaboration is dependent on expectations of return of investment and mutual respect. Otherwise, the access, the provocation and the complementary resources offered will be rejected, as they come from unfamiliar sources and therefore are deemed not trustworthy. The general tendency for homophily also supports the argument about the role of the incubator as a challenging actor and a provoker that is to bring entrepreneurs out of their comfort zone, maintain their creative capacity and enable them to learn from action. The aim of fitting into the essential characteristics of the entrepreneuring community, in order to avoid misperceptions and miscommunication and to overcome barriers of distrust of the other, may inhibit new forms of thinking about entrepreneurial identity (Bouwen 2010, 23).

According to Shane and Stuart's (2002) study of how initial resource endowments affect organisational life chances, the success of new firms depends on the crucial first choices of resource pooling in the beginning of a venture's life time, which is a further argument for entrepreneurs to avoid the competency discount that homogenate teams might experience. As most entrepreneurs do not have entrepreneurial experience and qualified access to resources and knowledge (human and social capital) in the early stages of venturing, they might find a substitute in the form of competences and learning in the incubator environment. From this perspective, incubating activities have a role to play as a co-constructing partner of creative processes aimed at organising new ventures – and it is their co-constructive actions of initiating dialogue that are the raison d'être of intervention initiatives (Bouwen 2001, 365).

7.10. Concluding

Chapter 7 has demonstrated that entrepreneuring actors do not respect the advisors the way professional swimmers respect their swimming coaches (Chambliss 1988). The chapter elaborates further on the clash of Actor Narratives by demonstrating deep insights into the barriers to productive collaboration, by presenting two Action Narratives; Best-Practice Narrative and Blame-Game Narrative. When we investigate the Best-Practice narrative from a relational learning perspective, unproductive Blame Games become evident, as demonstrated in the present chapter. The matter of being vulnerable and feeling exposed, play an important role for the relational practices of collaborating and being open to learning in the incubating context. Nevertheless, one of the interesting insights from the empirical material is that the creation of an entrepreneurial identity is not, as Rae (2007) seems to suggest, all about confidence and self-belief (Rae 2005, 328); it can also be a narrative about having all the answers and belonging to one community (safe and well-known) and not to another (strange and uncertain), which, as a negative side-effect, can impair the person's ability to listen!

The Blame Game stories show that we need to question the hopeful or even naïve expectations of both advisor and participant side of the fieldwork, about young ventures being accelerated. We need to ask what kind of development and progress a venturing process may realistically produce from a meeting with an expert or a support programme. The severe resistance to entering into a shared community of support, of openly interacting and sharing the doubts and successes of the venture that this dissertation my research process has displayed, could make policy makers, researchers and entrepreneuring actors consider what kind of results can be expected from different kinds of support interventions.

From the above insights to the Blame-Game Narrative and the clash of Actor Narratives we now know that the field does criticise the existing initiatives, but their primary concern is on the attitude and actions of the other party of the incubating relationship, not on the content and consequences or their own role. That is why I argue that the interaction between the Best-Practice Narrative and the Blame-Game Narrative is not very productive, as in most cases new programmes and interactions are designed on the basis of the same assumptions about what works and on the same assumptions about how advisors and entrepreneuring actors would and should act. Again it is not a learning perspective – it is instrumental and managerial. In his HBR paper from 1991 about how to teach smart people, Argyris writes about the advisory situation where professionals receive advice from other professionals and describes it as a challenge for both parties to express their defensiveness and at the same time use it constructively in the collaboration for continuous development and learning (Argyris 1991, 109). If this defensiveness is not overcome in some way the incubation process risks becoming '*an unproductive parallel conversation*' (Argyris 1991, 102) and a waste of time.

Chapter 8: An alternative Action Narrative: The Future-Practice Narrative

8.1. Abstract

This chapter acts as bridge between chapter 7 and 9 – is a pause for the reader to stop and listen to an alternative language of entrepreneurial support – before we go further into explaining the clash of narratives and the vicious circle of Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives. From the rather comprehensive fieldwork material I have chosen two entrepreneuring actors, participants of the Accelerator programme, who in some ways have modified the dominant narratives. They are examples of participants, who did not accept the Advice Narrative of them being weak, as it too easy to blame the others. They therefore represent another type of Entrepreneurial Narrative – and a very interesting alternative to the Critical narrative. These two cases are used as inspiration for my supplementing narrative – the Future Practice Narrative, constructed from four stories; The Dialogue Story, the Relationship Management Story, the Expectation Management Story and the Co-construction Story – and acts as a contribution to handle barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubating context in a more proactive and open-minded way.

8.2. An alternative Narrative for increasing the learning capacity of the field

With regard to the narrative approach to enquiry, Somers states, '*Social change, from this perspective, is viewed not as the evolution or revolution of one social type to another, but by shifting relationships among the institutional arrangements and cultural practices that constitute one or more social settings*' (Somers 1994, 626). The intriguing implications of this quote is that it is possible to modify existing narratives, even if they have an old and stubborn structure and give meaning to dominant actors of a field, as they are still only relationships that may be shifted into other institutional arrangements. That is attractive for me as a researcher because it enables me to offer an alternative view on how collaboration with entrepreneurial actors is performed in the effort to set the scene for better learning experiences that make them stronger and wiser.

The challenge of the incubating field seems to be to get beyond the personal need for being right and best, which is part of both the Entrepreneurial and the Advice Narrative, and to be open to potential areas where complementary resources can work together. A starting point is for advisors to gain knowledge about who and what entrepreneuring actors trust and listen to and to make it more obvious what kind of value the managerial mindset can bring to entrepreneuring processes. On the other hand, in order not to waste their time, entrepreneuring actors should be careful in adopting a calculating orientation and distrust advisors and instead be more prepared to share, listen and collaborate and not only perceive the advisory process as a supplier delivering what is needed at the present hour. In that sense, we can say that all parties should expect 'more' from each other. Bouwen (2010) describes how a relational approach to studying the creation of organisations and grasping the social world of collaborating actors involves focussing on the ongoing practices among the participating actors. In a way, my interest in relational constructionism, presented by Hosking (2007), as valuable to this study came from the lack of organisational constructions (doing new stuff, talking with other actors, moving things, throwing ideas away, developing methods and changing ways of acting) in the empirical material, since much of it was about the troubled character of relationships as barriers to the interaction that they actually wanted to pursue. If we accept that '*it is in the doing together that the organisation is constituted*' (Bouwen 2010, 38), it becomes relevant to investigate the doing of the relationship. The implications of such a view to the dissertation has been the understanding that if there is no doing-together – in the sense of interactions between advisors and entrepreneurs – there is no entrepreneurial creation.

The next pages present two inspirational cases of the fieldwork that stand out in their attitude and way of approaching the Accelerator programme, They are highlighted in this chapter as they show how it is possible to act outside the existing narratives of the incubation industry, and they have played a significant role in my construction of the supplementary Future Practice Narrative later in this chapter. These cases are not the only two where I am able to say that the participants gained something valuable from the programme, and they both have elements where the programme did not meet expectations. However, they have in common not to enter a blame game and take on the responsibility of learning from the programme – and they manage the relationship with their advisor in a way that makes the relationship equal, hence valuable to both parties.

8.3. Inspiration for the Future practice Narrative I

The following demonstration presents a founder, who is entrepreneuring in the sense of creating the venture from continuous interactions and negotiations in the local environment of the venture. The founder interacts in a similar fashion with the incubating programme, taking in the managerial add-ons as they fit his venture and rejecting the ones that do not make sense to him. In addition, he manages the relationship with the advisor and programme in a very deliberate fashion and the advisor has to go along.

8.3.1. Empirical demonstration: Productive and well-managed collaboration

This demonstration is a rare example of a productive collaboration story from the fieldwork. It also serves as inspiration for alternative ways of approaching the incubating situation. As touched upon in Chapter 2, and based on the fieldwork, the incubation industry matures and becomes more established and it is increasingly common for entrepreneuring actors to apply for programmes and other support initiatives as part of seeking out opportunities for networks and resources. They are not necessarily applying as a last resort before closing down but view the support programmes as a way of expanding their opportunities, some from a more calculating perspective than others. The respondent in this demonstration applied simultaneously for this programme and two other initiatives, and the programme that serves as the object of this inquiry was the one that his venture was selected for. As many of the other participants, this founder did not have very high expectations about what he would "get from" the programme, and he was sceptical about the consultancy approach and concerned about how much time it would require; time that could have been spent on sales efforts! In that sense, he speaks the language of the Entrepreneurial and Critical Narrative, but he is also able to act outside it and does not subscribe to the Best-Practice Narrative of Add-On and Access-to, as he knows resources have been brought into play before they become valuable. I met with him three times for an interview.

At our first meeting the respondents tells me;

Interviewer: *What do you imagine you will get out of participating in the programme?*
Respondent: *Well, now I have discovered what I might imagine! I was accepted without having any prior expectations.*

Interviewer: *All right, so why did you apply, then?*

Respondent: *It was because I had heard that it was good – give it a try, so I did.*

Interviewer: *Good for what?*

Respondent: *I don't think I knew that. It was just one of those things, why not give it a try?*

Interviewer: *But weren't you pretty busy already?*

Respondent: *Yes, and that was my greatest scepticism the first day when I got this huge and lengthy programme book. It was really my working time that I was most worried about, and also the fact that the advisor was going to work half a day for us – that made me wildly nervous, because I know when someone is going to work for me, then I have to work for them in the beginning, so it takes time. (PCom02R7)*

Notice how the respondent refers to his experience with existing employees when he talks about getting new resources; support function or not, as the entrepreneuring actor he is the one who has to put the resources into play – he has to interact with the advisor and does not expect that the advisor knows how to assist the venture. One of the first things the respondent did was to invite the advisor that he had been allocated in to learn about the daily sales and strategy processes of the venture and to take part in the social gatherings after work, which illustrates the contours of a relational mindset. It is a way for him to establish and manage the relationship. At the Programme office I hear about this participant before my first interview with him, and how he engages his advisor in a new/ different way than the advisors are used to. When I meet the entrepreneuring participant I ask him about these situations;

Respondent: *Yes, he has been out to talk to a few customers that I picked for him.*

Interviewer: *For him to know what?*

Respondent: *For him to get a little insight into what we are doing. He has also been with me on customer visits, we drove around one day. I think he's all right, or my impression is that he has a fairly good understanding of whom we are working with (PCom02R7).*

The participant also invited the advisor to join a 4-day company seminar abroad – including party and sleepover. Again, I had heard about this invitation about joining a company event at the Accelerator office, as the advisors saw it as unusual and were sort of joking about it, but appreciated it as a positive gesture of the entrepreneur. The advisor did not join the party, since he thought it was too long to be away from home, but apparently he was motivated by this – to the programme - alternative way of collaborating! The invitation can also be said to be another form of team building, than just meeting in a office of white walls and post-its!

The interviews with the entrepreneur shows that he knows it takes time to get to a point where collaboration is possible – that he has to work to get other people to work for him. It is a very important experience – and we can hear that he has already begun learning entrepreneurially, as he creates his own space for negotiating his venture and learning. This is different from the many stories of passive reception and the expectation of Add-On resources that the empirical material contains. This respondent is well aware that it takes resources to receive resources and incorporate them into the venture, and his stock of experience tells him not to have too high expectations. He sets the scene for a professional dialogue and it is significant from this case that the respondent is in dialogue with the programme about his needs and does not view all input as relevant or timely. He also tells his advisor, as they have a dialogue about the advice-relationship, about his opinion of the theoretical content, but also about timing and prioritizing the programme contra the daily tasks of his venture. This is also different from many other respondents, who do not know what to expect and perhaps for that reason do not ask questions, sets the 'venturing' on hold and choose to go along more passively with the hope of being accelerated. Or even worse, they gossip negatively by the water cooler and become part of the Critical Narrative.

As the following quote shows, the participant and the advisor have a dialogue about their collaboration and how it is possible to combine incubating activities with running the venture. That is not easy, because there are two agendas based on two opposing narratives: The participant wants to run his venture and be part of the programme, and the advisor wants to deliver certain deliverables and have the participant be involved in certain activities, which does not necessarily fit into the calendar of the venture;

Respondent: *In the end, I just wanted to be done. At that point I had to get out and do something. I had pitched, I did the canvas – all that stuff, which is tremendously interesting, but it just doesn't produce any value if you don't do something about it. Often, there were sales to be handled and new employees to deal with. Shortly before the programme ended I just couldn't both be here and execute what we had agreed – and I could tell that this was frustrating for my advisor. I had to say, 'I can't come in today because I have a meeting with a customer.*
Interviewer: *Yes, that's what you told me last time we met, that you thought the programme was fine, but you kept wondering how much you could have sold during the same time.*
Respondent: *Yes, and one can't answer that, but I have to make some choices. There was also a time when we were supposed to meet with another kind of expert, and I said that I wanted to meet the person – but only after work, at 4 pm. This annoyed him because he wanted to go home to his family at this time. But I didn't care, because during working hours – I work! We also had to cancel an appointment with someone he had found somewhere, because I had to go out and do something else, and then he said, 'I won't cancel that meeting – you have to do that yourself!' So I cancelled it.*
Interviewer: *Did he express to you that he was dissatisfied with you, or did you just sense it?*
Respondent: *We talked about it, and I said to him, 'I can tell that you're unhappy about this, and he said. 'Yes, but I understand it too well, because of course you also have to make sales and deliver. That's how it is.'(PCom02R7)*

This interview excerpt show that it is possible with dialogue to manage the clash between a Policy and Advice Narrative focussing on programme deliverables opposite the Entrepreneurial Narrative favouring the daily work of the venture. The way the respondent here presents it, he and the advisor talk together, and reach some kind of agreement of disagreeing, but do not end up in a Blame Game story. It is also interesting that in order to make sense of spending time and energy on the programme, he says it has to outside normal work hours. The programme participation is not number one priority – the venture is number one. Keeping that focus is how he accelerates!

From the quote above we also listen to a way of acting in relation to the incubating activities that I have found to be rare. The respondent expresses that the theories and models are interesting, but he does not see them as the answer to anything before he has implemented or used them in praxis – which can be said to be the kind of hands-on attitude that we (politicians, researchers and laypeople) expect to hear from entrepreneurs. To some degree this conflicts with the instrumental and planned structure of the programme. It is interesting that the kind of Entrepreneurial Narrative that the respondent speaks within *is not* the Entrepreneurial Narrative of the incubation industry, as presented in Chapter 6 – which embodies the paradox of being strong but also weak and having challenges. The Entrepreneurial Narrative that this respondent relates to is a different kind of identity creation where the respondent is the active co-constructor of the venture together with the local, social and historical context. This means that *his* Entrepreneurial Narrative somehow acts outside the incubation industry, it contains many of the so-called clichés of what it is like to be an entrepreneur (Down and Warren 2008), but he is using the narrative in an energising way – rather than expressing expectations about receiving help. This observation shows that it is possible for the participants to speak a different of language than the *weak-but-potential* language of the incubating industry and by managing the programme benefit from it.

As outlined in Chapter 1, I was surprised *not* to hear more stories like this in the field – energising statements of how to work the venture and a can-do attitude – and instead hearing hopes about receiving answers and plans to resolve the unpleasant uncertainty or disappointed stories from the participants about public incompetence and a lack of qualified support. Again, I have been wondering what kind of narratives the field allows for and recognises, as the stories of weak but promising entrepreneurs seem to set the stage for the industry practice – and therefore also for the way actors enter into interactions. This participant is learning as Rae's (2007) framework describes it, and has already entered into the contextual learning phase of entrepreneuring and begun to negotiate and grow his venture in the environment, and unlike many of the other participants he surrounded himself with several external advisors with relevance for the particular venture, not only other cool entrepreneuring actors. It is not important to him to have a certain entrepreneurial identity and identify with super successful entrepreneurs such as Michael Dell, Este Lauder or Walt Disney. What is important for him is what it takes to create the present company that he has envisioned. And then he listens to the customers, and is open to listening – as he does not know everything beforehand and he does not need to pretend to;

Respondent: *What I do is I try to build a brand for my venture and myself, but I don't necessarily do it in the business environment, I also do it in all sorts of other environments.*
Interviewer: *Yes and why do you do that?*
Respondent: *(...) I try to make this venture as interesting to as many people as possible, both customers and non-customers.*
Interviewer: *Your industry knowledge and network in this business – how did that come about? You said you had worked as a volunteer and things like that. Did you have any previous contacts in the industry?*
Respondent: *Yes and no. I did not have any prior network, but I have a huge network now because I'm good at networking. So I have sold exclusively through my network. We had a turnover of EUR 150,000 in 2010 and slightly more in 2011 ONLY based on my network.*
Interviewer: *How about industry experience or knowledge of the industry?*
Respondent: *I do have some knowledge, but most of it I have gained by simply being with customers and listening.*
Interviewer: *And listening to what?*
Respondent: *What they talk about, and what they are doing. When you are out there and having meetings, you absorb a lot when they sit and talk and come up with good ideas. We run a very open development process.*
Interviewer: *Co-creation style!*
Respondent: *Exactly. We do that a lot, it's crazy. We have customers who come knocking on the door of the office with five-page Word documents with ideas for the business. It's crazy. So we are very lucky, and we're also lucky in the sense that when there have been mistakes, we have told our customers that we are sorry, but that we are working to correct it. And that works (PCom02R7)!*

The respondent defines what kind of knowledge and activities are relevant to his venture, and he actively manages uncertainty and various forms of relationship. Even more important, he has a particular learning focus that he talks about continuously during our conversations: Things are tough, but then you learn and move on, seem to be his motto. Unlike the Advice and the Entrepreneurial Narrative, which do not talk about uncertainty or a need for entrepreneurial learning and taking in complementary resources, this respondent handles the uncertainty of venturing in a proactive way by being in dialogue with and managing his context, including the Accelerator programme. His entrepreneurial narrative is about learning through entrepreneurship, and he does that from managing expectations, dialogue and entering into co-constructive relationships. Based on my conversations with him, I find that this founder seems humble and knows what he is capable of (personal emergence) and where he needs other people and influential partners (contextual learning)– in that sense he is not building castles in the air, and he describes how he invites collaboration and listens to people (negotiating enterprise). From the following extract it is demonstrated that he does not complain or enter into Blame Games – at least not to me!

Interviewer: *What have been the biggest challenges during the past year?*
Respondent: *Everything - it's been really difficult.*
Interviewer: *It has?*
Respondent: *Yes, I think so.*
Interviewer: *You make it sound as if it's a walk in the park.*
Respondent: *Well, I don't like to complain when things are difficult. You can't do more than you can; if you do your best, then you can do no more. I just try to do that and not get angry when we make lots of mistakes. That's just the way it is – just sunk cost. It happened and so on, so if we dismiss something, then we dismiss it.*

Interviewer: *But what has been challenging?*
Respondent: *What is difficult is that I haven't done anything like this before. I've never tried any of this before. I've never hired anyone, I've never fired anyone before, I've never made a business plan, I've never written an invoice before, I've never set up accounting systems, payroll and maternity funds. It's absolutely crazy.*
Interviewer: *However, you thrive in this position as CEO?*
Respondent: *Yes, I do actually. It goes up and down, of course, but I like the fact that I can do it!*
Interviewer: *Yes, it's not that you're thinking about doing something else?*

Respondent: *Well! I think about that once in a while.*
Interviewer: *I guess most of us do that sometimes.*
Respondent: *Yes, but not now, I would never change anything. It is for sure going to be a great company and it is going to grow, maybe not in terms of employees, but it's going to grow and I am learning all the time. I made a mistake with this salesperson – and I have learned something for next time, and we do have a very low staff turnover, so it's going well and we are a start-up company, that's not for everyone. We are also reasonably ambitious, and if you want to go home at 3 or 4 pm to be with your children and shut down the computer, it might not be the right place, and that's life. So we learn something all the time.*
Interviewer: *Good! (PCom02R7)*

From the above conversation we listen to a participant who acknowledges that doing things (the everyday stuff of entrepreneuring) is tough, but he does not complain or expect someone to come and remove the obstacles. They are to him learning experiences and he seems satisfied with himself that he "can do it", and build up valuable confidence and experiences from such learning episodes. What makes this respondent a rare voice in the empirical material is that he does not let his prejudices determine the outcome of future processes, which allows for the venture to gain from the process and engage in learning situations.

I asked the respondent about which areas of expertise he would expect the advisor to have, especially about the technical parts of his venture, and this made him a little confused, as he cannot imagine an advisor to have expertise in all areas of the start-up.

In that area my advisor is not able to contribute, for that he would have had to be a trained IT specialist. It has never been something we talked about. It's a typical advisor mistake to think they know something about everything and have a fix for everything. Those who have done it before, they know how difficult it is (PCom02R7).

Many participants have rather unrealistic expectations for their advisor; being an expert on everything, making the above quote a rare recognition in the field

Did this respondent learn anything, and were the entrepreneurial capacity of the venture expended? The venture was entrepreneuring already when it entered the programme, but they gained in resources and figured out what to expect and get from the advisor and in my last meeting with the founder, he estimated that the programme participation and capital had brought them *one and a half years forward*– more concretely in terms of hiring, attracting more customers and taking the first initiatives for taking the venture abroad. The following except is from the third and last interview, and describes well what programme interaction may lead to, based on mutual respect and management of the relationship;

Interviewer: *What is your overall perception of the Accelerator programme?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *I still look at it as an instructive and educational process, which I have been really glad to be part of, and which has been good for the business. It is hard to say how we would have been off without it, so it is difficult to say which kind of difference it has made, but I know that I have learnt a lot.*

Interviewer: *Yes, what did you learn?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *(…) Well, I have been upgraded within all the things I am doing.*

Interviewer: *Any examples?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Understanding of sales, what drives sales people, how to manage sales people, together with a better understanding of marketing. Especially the first part of the programme was good for me, this thing about putting into words what you do and how we sell it. This was really educational. I do not know if it all comes directly from the programme, but it's crazy how much has happened to our business since January. It is hard to tell precisely how it all ties together. But it has all been very positive.*

Interviewer: *So it has been a good process and lived up to your expectations?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *It went beyond the expectations. I did not have any expectations.*

Interviewer: *No that is true; it was a little like "Oh - I just try to apply for this", and then you got in. Maybe this is the good thing of not having these huge expectations. Which elements of the programme did you benefit the most from?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *The first part! We began to work more systematically with our customers, even though we thought we knew what our customers wanted. We were out talking to customers; we worked on all that value proposition stuff and things like that. This is what I remember as the foundation of it all.*

Interviewer: *Okay, then there is something you do different today?*

Entrepreneur respondent*: Yes, I work much more analytically and systematic, and our employees do that as well.*

Interviewer: *Okay. Any examples?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Yes. Now we have just made a Facebook campaign. But before we started we asked ourselves "What do we want to accomplish"? "We want 500 likes and 10 sign ups" and when we are done, we evaluate and look if it went good or bad, and what we could do different. Many head-over- feet- entrepreneurs would just do the Facebook add and never think about what to gain from it"*

Interviewer: *Thinking about what really was the purpose of it and evaluate it?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Yes, or if it actually produced any value. It is a very concrete example of something we probably would not have done as good and systematically half a year ago. (PCom02R7)*

This is a very positive evaluation of the programme, and can act as a concrete example of what we might expect participants to gain from the Accelerator programme – a more systematically approach to new initiatives. Such learning experience is likely to be crucial in their later endeavours or prioritizing resources and evaluating whether activities have been a success or not. We can say that their potential entrepreneurial capacity for decisions making are likely to have been increased – and I posit that such impact is *also* related to the open and learning mindset of the participating CEO of the venture and the acceptance of the advisor that the participant were managing his own participation.

This respondent is uncommon, in the sense that he is open to learning in the incubator context and is familiar with learning processes as something that requires energy and time. This was not something he learned from the programme, but the demonstration makes me wonder whether incubating programme activities can be designed and performed in a way that supports other actors with entrepreneurial ambitions to act like this and take responsibility for their own entrepreneurial learning process. It is difficult to define this way of acting as the definite ideal for incubating participants, but this demonstration suggests that it is possible to engage in an incubating process that is equal and with mutually responsive parties. In my conversations with the programme advisor of this venture, I got the sense that he appreciated being drawn into the company and that he thought it to be a good way of collaborating – even though a little more troublesome than some of his other participants – as there were some activities that the participant did not want to prioritize.

This participant of this case actively manages the relationship and is not scared or provoked by the Advice Narrative's managerial mind-set that the advisor represents. He works with the Advice Narrative, challenges it and negotiates how incubating processes can be performed. He manages the relationship with the incubating programme because;

- He is able to draw upon previous experience
- He has learning mindset and no illusions that there is a quick-fix to entrepreneuring
- He is aware that collaboration is uncertain, but necessary
- He manages his relationships deliberately and proactively through clear communication
- He has accepted a need for complementary resources
- He does not let his prejudices determine the outcome of future processes

The advisor on the other hand is also part of this productive process. In my evaluation because;

- He accepted that the participant took control of the process
- He accepted not to be the omniscient advisor and also that he was expected to learn about the venture an engage with it
- He changed his traditional praxis and made the programme work in a way that corresponded with the needs of the venture

With this demonstration in mind, I suggest it is actually possible to act in the incubation field with an alternative learning narrative and perform alternative roles and interactions than the broader picture of the dominant Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives.

8.4. Inspiration for the Future practice Narrative II

A recurring reply in the empirical material to my questions about what the participants have gained from the incubating activities is that they were *confirmed* in their original plans and ideas. They are happy and satisfied with the fact that what they already knew about their venture and their target market seems to be 'true' based on the work they have done together with the Accelerator programme. "*It has all ended in the same place*" – as many of them, says! Obviously, it is hard to talk about what would have happened if they had not participated, and as mentioned in Chapter 4, there are probably also some difficulties in recognising who and what produced the good ideas and giving credit to the process of the programme. The value of having one's ideas validated as legitimate should not be underestimated and may be the push needed to turn it into action. The validation of what is already known is good news from a managerial perspective – as it confirms that the existing strategies and performance is right. However, it does not necessarily falsify presumptions or provoke alternative ways of acting – and, thus, entrepreneurial learning. According to Rae (2004) entrepreneurs expand the entrepreneurial capacity of the venture, when new forms of contextual interaction are performed, and without interacting with context, the participant never gets to negotiate the existence of the venture. Sometimes it has been difficult to get participants to describe their interactions with context and the consequences of such interactions to me; it has been more likely to get an answer like this;

Interviewer: *You entered the programme with a business plan I assume? How did this business plan develop? What happened to it?*

Respondent*: Nothing happened to the business plan as a document, if this is what you mean?*

Interviewer: *But your ideas of what the business should do or?*

Respondent: *There have not been any big changes. We came in with a plan and came out with the same, maybe a little longer. (Com04R5)*

This type of answer has been very common in the fieldwork, and though the recognition of ‘others’ effect on one’s venture is difficult for many actors, it is still part of the programme agenda to change/ test the business plans of the participants.

8.4.1. Empirical demonstration: Support based on respect and empathy

The respondent of this empirical demonstration is a happy customer. In his assessment, the programme participation was valuable for him, and he is very grateful for the support he received from his advisor, despite not having gained entirely what he had hoped for. However, from my third meeting with the respondent the question that was provoked by the following excerpt, is whether being able to make a good pitch is what we should expect a from a five-month programme with a value of EUR 60,000. Maybe the respondent would not have had the mental strength to perform the actions to create the venture that he did during the process – and still does – if it had not been for psychological support of the advisor. We do not know!

Interviewer: *Last time you said that the programme had very much confirmed your plan and your strategy. Have there been experiences and input where you realised that, all right – I shouldn’t have done that, or this was maybe not such a good idea, or at this point I was not quite on top of things?*

Respondent: *No, not really*

Interviewer: *Not really?*

Respondent: *No.*

Interviewer: *OK, then I have to ask you, were you challenged enough?*

Respondent: *Yes, but I ... because it’s a challenge in itself to know if your strategy holds and then to continue to expand it, because this is an ongoing effort. Yes, there have been plenty of challenges. For example the elevator pitch – I think that’s a good tool, where you have to present your firm and its products in a very short amount of time. That is probably one of the best things we got from the programme, because now I can present the firm and our products in 30 seconds without people beginning to yawn or look at the clock.*

Interviewer: *All right, then I also have a question here, which is, which of the elements of the programme did you benefit from the most. Would that be it?*

Respondent: *That was being be able to make this pitch talk and the elevator pitch, and then I think we had great use for a strategy for the American market.*

Interviewer: *Okay, and did you do that with your advisor?*

Respondent: *Yes, and also with the Americans, the MBAs who were associated with the programme. That was fun, like a joint benefit.*

Interviewer: *Yes, and they were good?*

Respondent: *Yes, I actually think so.*

Interviewer: *Yes, in what way?*

Respondent: *They give you this tool, which we can now take out of the drawer when the time comes and say that now we are going for the American market. Here’s a plan for how to do it. What we have is a solution for market penetration.*

Interviewer: *All right, and have you applied this plan in any way?*

Respondent: *No! Or, yes, we have in a way, because we have contacted some advisors about which certifications our equipment would need to go on the American market.*

Interviewer: *Okay, based on that discussion?*

Respondent: *Yes, and this confirmed what we already knew before the programme: that we actually don't need any special certifications for the American market.*

Interviewer: *That sounds good. You also mentioned that you went to a Connect Danmark Springboard?*

Respondent: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Was it useful for you?*

Respondent: *No.*

Interviewer: *No? All right, why?*

Respondent: *The idea is actually fine, but it's a bit too commercial, all this...*

Interviewer: *You mean Connect?*

Respondent: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Yes, commercial how? Isn't that what it's all about?*

Respondent: *When you've just finished your presentation, then a hoard of people come running up to you, and each one of them is wiser and smarter than the other, and they want to help you make your presentation much tastier and better, etc. That was a weird thing. I could also feel that because the springboard consist of two segments, you have the people who are called in to advise you, the feedback panel, and then there are these ten people, and those who are invited as an audience. It is especially among the audience that you find most of these people who want to sell you something that you absolutely don't need. But also among the panel members, there were a few where I would say, they're not here for me, and they're here for themselves.*

Interviewer: *Okay, so it was actually an annoying experience?*

Respondent: *It was a waste of time.*

Later in the interview…

Interviewer: *Just briefly on the different camps, what is your impression of them? I refer to the ones where there were teachers who were brought in?*

Respondent: *I think that some of them were really interesting, and others I didn't really think gave me anything.*

Interviewer: *Okay, but were there anywhere you thought, okay, I could do this differently, or?*

Respondent: *Yes (…) but I haven't done so yet.*

Interviewer: *Well, then you did get something. Where would you be today without the programme?*

Respondent: *(…) Yes that is a bloody good question!*

Interviewer: *Yes...*

Respondent: *I don't know if I would have been somewhere else with the development of the firm. It's hard to answer. Because the participation in the programme did not move our strategy in any important way. So in many ways you could say that there aren't any big changes.*

Interviewer: *No, but it is my impression that it was good and nice for you to receive support in this process?*

Respondent: *That is true.*

Interviewer: *Yes, and that is important too.*

Respondent: *Yes, it is, sure. Also because you are together with equals, and you can have some exchanges with them about some of the challenges you face as a newly started firm (PCom07R7).*

Based on this dialogue, it is difficult to conclude that the programme activities have impacted the entrepreneurial learning or development process significantly, besides providing confirmation and peer support. Despite the programme not contributing to his strategy and being disappointing in other areas, the entrepreneuring actor was happy about his participation in terms of the weekly one-on-one personal support he received from his advisor, and it is difficult to say what and where the venture would have been without this support. There are aspects of the form and content that he is unsatisfied with, and some of his hopes of what he might have gained from the programme in terms of networks or complementary skills were not satisfied.

I had several conversations with the advisor of this particular venture during the 5-month of participation. The advisor was honest in his doubts about what to do in his interactions with the venture, as the participant was clearly more competent in the industrial field than the advisor and perfectly aware of which strategies he wanted to pursue. Nonetheless, the advisor knew that the participant appreciated their meetings every second week, their conversations, and that the possibility of sharing doubt and thoughts was highly valued. The advisor argued to himself that such a process could also have an incubating effect, which the respondent clearly acknowledges. This case shows us that the incubation process and relationship may be just as important and relevant to the participant as the content of the Accelerator programme, and that it is not only industry-specific knowledge and entrepreneurship experience that work to support participants. This quote shows how the role as conversation partner and active listener has meant a huge difference to the participant;

Interviewer*: Looking at the programme, do you have the feeling that you have learned something?*

Entrepreneur respondent: *Yes – I have learned sometimes to wait and breathe, and be careful not to have too much on my plate at the same time. When we are changing things it is important not to stick to the old strategy, but accept if there is a need to change it and then adapt it if it is necessary. Typically this happens because something happens internally or externally, which implies that we have to change it – as with our marketing strategies when something unexpected happened, and we had to change things. This is how it is, and we do that with many of our tasks. My advisor has been really good at drawing attention to when we have too many things at the same time – then he has said – Focus! (PCom07R7).*

What is really interesting in this case is that the advisor has managed to maintain his legitimacy as a valuable advisor, despite three reasons that often makes participants reluctant;

1. His competencies in the particular field are limited, compared to the participant
2. He is not able to open doors to other industries, as the participant had hoped for
3. He has no personal entrepreneuring experience

This means that the advisor was capable of managing the relationship in a way that overcame the *traditional value signifiers* of the Entrepreneurial (and the Critical) Narrative. From my position part of the way of managing the relationship with the participant was through being honest about what kind of support it is possible to offer and respect for the participants work and needs. After the programme had ended the entrepreneur kept calling the advisor once a twice a month, for a talk, and the advisor accepted that. The entrepreneur explains to me, six months after the programme has ended, that he likes to keep his advisor up-dated on the progress of the venture – but it is my impression that these talks also serve as a safe room for testing assumptions and getting support. Again, this sort of proactive interaction with and use of the advisor is rarely seen in the field. The most common answer I have met when I have asked about the present contact to the Accelerator programme six months after graduation is that there is none.

This case shows that the participant and the advisor respect each other and have decided to trust and make the best of the incubating process that their mutual and contextual competences allow. In terms of a 'tangible add-on service', this participant could also have been one of the one of the complaining respondents. Hence, it is my interpretation of this case that the relationship with the advisor is more important to the participants than the specific outcome, and the evaluation of the programme becomes based on the relationship with the advisor. When this case serves as inspiration to Future-Practice Narrative is it because the entrepreneur;

- He trusts the advisor and is open to learning if it makes sense to his venture
- He manages the relationship and perform it in the way that makes sense to the venturing process, and not necessarily the traditional programme design
- He sets the agenda for meetings, shares challenges and ask for help
- He accepts that he is the expert – and that his need for support is mentorship

The advisor on the other hand is also performing an alternative Advice Narrative, in the sense that;

- He accepts that he is not the expert – and take on another role than he is use to
- He listens and senses the present needs of the entrepreneur (empathy)
- He is clear and honest about his capabilities, knowledge and experience
- He acts as an authority and his critical questions are therefore accepted

The question we might ask as outsiders, based on the above demonstration, is whether the 'programme owners' can be satisfied that the participant seemingly has only 'applied' a very small part of programme content – besides the secrets of pitching, which does not provide much value if the participant does not do something with it. Can the programme manager be satisfied that participants are confirmed in what they already know? Can the programme manager be satisfied that the programme team is not able to think across industries in terms of application? At least not from an entrepreneurial learning perspective with an emphasis on increased entrepreneurial capacity, as the additional support that increases confidence might be good for interacting and performing entrepreneurial activities which the participants can learn from – but it does not in itself teach them how to apply and activate complementary resources.

Based on the two previous sections on well-managed and respectful interactions between advisors and participants, I shortly present my suggestions for a Future Practice Narrative in the field of incubation – as an alternative to avoid the vicious circle of Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives.

8.5. A Future Practice Narrative – for entrepreneurial learning

Should the Advice Narrative be provoking? Yes, I believe so, because provocation can open the door to learning and the imagination of ventures as something else and inspire other ways of entrepreneuring (Hjorth 2011, 49). Should the Policy Narrative be bold? Yes, I believe so, because at the policy level there is room for having visions about what entrepreneurship may be – and, in addition, about whom the entrepreneuring actors may also be. For policy makers to be bold and set new standards for the selection of entrepreneurs and new expectations for where to find entrepreneurial activity, I suggest that they remember Steyaert and Katz's definition of what entrepreneurship may be:

> '*Communities that define entrepreneurship in terms of its greatest wealth creators will only find entrepreneurship occurring in those few places where profit is great. They will only be able to explain the skills and spaces needed for entrepreneurial success in terms of a few examples afforded by those super-successful individuals, and are likely to have at best enclaves or island of successful entrepreneurship. On the other hand, communities defining entrepreneurship whenever they see efforts to improve processes, meet needs and profit in small ways will find themselves awash in entrepreneurial activity*' (Steyaert and Katz 2004, 191).

The perspective put forward here is that entrepreneuring is for everybody – if we engage in mutually, co-constructive relationships for creating new organisations. The entrepreneuring actors in the empirical material seldom feel provoked or corrected, and the programme management would like to keep them in the programme to fulfil the goal of having a certain number of graduates, like universities that are receive funding based on the number of students who graduate. Such structural circumstances lead to attempts at minimising risk, which in some cases favours picking the applicants that the 'selectors' identify with – or just anyone to fill the quota, because there are too few quality candidates to choose from. It somehow seems to be taken for granted that the facilitators are capable (that they master the appropriate pedagogical techniques to create learning situations), and that the participants are open and willing to embrace external knowledge and intervention. If we view it as the responsibility of the incubator side to facilitate the entrepreneurial learning of immature ventures, I have found that there are few didactics for advisors to facilitate such learning in the field. Hjorth and Johannisson (2006) conclude that openness combined with the rejection of a one-way instrumental and managerial approach to entrepreneurship support facilitates learning, which makes sense in light of the previous chapters.

In the following I present four complementary stories, which I have constructed from the fieldwork – particularly drawing upon the two inspirational cases just presented and the relational constructionist lenses. Combined they construct a Future-Practice Narrative which suggest an alternative for acting out entrepreneurial support and cope with some of the relational challenges of everyday incubating activities. As these stories do only present themselves to a minor degree in the fieldwork they still have to be co-created in the field of incubation – and the following descriptions should be seen as preliminary sketches of what may become the actual performance of entrepreneurial support. The sketches need to be developed further, based on both empirical investigations and relevant theoretical foundations.

8.5.1. A Dialogue story

According to Hosking (2011) social sciences must work heavily the concept of dialogue, and relational constructionism is grounded in a dialogical view on the individual (Hosking 2011, 61). However, as it has been referred to literatures of management and organisation have been scarce on relational and dialogical considerations (Dachler and Hosking 1995), which might explain why I think dialogue in the relational sense is missing in the field. Both Goffman (1961) and Coleman (1990) point out that there is something particular to the meeting (and thus also to the interaction and collaboration) between strangers compared to the meeting between friends. In the case of incubating activities it has been shown by the two previous cases that respectful dialogue can be a key to productive collaboration and what Goffman referred to as the ‘traffic rules’ of social interaction. Senge (1990) made an important distinction between dialogue and discussion, which could be useful to incubating practices. Dialogue is a tool for a variety of ways to communicate and establish a platform for other stories of collaboration in the field instead of scaring each other off, whereas discussion is more about finding the one right answer and winning the discussion (Senge 1990). The fieldwork material has shown that there is a difference between discussion and dialogue, which relates to the actions of convincing versus the actions of active listening, and also that the classic expert approach to advice. It is my analysis that the act of convincing the other party of the benefits of a particular strategy – seems less appropriate when the situation involves unknown processes, and nobody really can claim the expert hat!

A Dialogue story in the incubating field could be based on mutually responsive, dialogically structured relations that somehow manage the biases, ambitions and political goals of the field in order to create a shared interpretative template for collaboration. In an ideal world, '*dialogue is the enactment of an open authentic and two-sided interaction: the intention is to acknowledge and to empathise with the speaker or listener on the level of the content, and on the level of the relationship, so that a shared understanding is growing and that the relationship is developed at the same time*' (Bouwen 2001, 365). A starting point for a productive Dialogue story in the field would be to ask how to communicate and also to establish who has the responsibility for making a dialogue happen (Hosking 2011). Furthermore, it is also important to establish how to listen to each other – and to establish ground rules for listening respectfully. We might also look to Senge (1990) for inspiration on that one.

To say that dialogue should be an important part of the incubation process is simple, but the fieldwork has shown that it is anything but that – and that it takes time, trust and an alternative mindset to reach a stage of open dialogue. Following Hosking (2011) dialogue should be considered "*a special kind of conversation"*. And she continues; "*Dialogue as a special kind of conversation goes in slow, open and curious ways of relating characterized by: (a) a very special sort of listening, questioning, and being present; (b) willingness to suspend one's assumptions and certainties; and (c) reflexive attention to the ongoing process and one's own part in it*" (Hosking 2011, 61). Note how this description of work as slow, can almost be restricted by the individualistic and managerial language of *accelerating the entrepreneur*! Among the expected outcomes of a Dialogue story are involvement and motivation for participants and advisors, transparency of processes, stability and engagement of the relationship, closer collaboration, better understanding of the benefits of complementary resources and relational capacity building. As such, dialogue could act as a valid Best-Practice *method* for clearing out expectations and managing them.

8.5.2. A Relationship Management story

I find that a Relationship Management story is needed to create a relationship between actors of the incubation industry that is not purely based on a transactional perspective. This study has shown that uncertainty (of the potential of the ventures, of the value of the programme and what to expect) and personal biases have a huge impact on how the actors interact in a context of entrepreneurial support. Without a proper story of Relationship Management as a method for approaching interacting, the parties are not listening to each other and are not open to new opinions or suggestions; consequently, they base their decisions on assumptions and prejudices about the other – which the Blame-Game Narrative has shown to be bad for entrepreneurial development and to create distrust and resistance. To feel safe, the participants need to feel that they can trust the programme and its advisors – and that the 'secrets' of their venture are safe. To really share their personal network and use themselves, advisors have to feel that participants are in it wholeheartedly. A Relationship Management story in the incubation field might create commitment, trust and respect as the foundation for engagement in the incubating community, which largely has been missing in this dissertation. Again, this is about mutual responsibility – and about investing in the relationship in order to gain from it. Hill et al. (2010) have found that '*people will only take the risks necessary to share their talents with others when they feel psychologically safe, and safety comes from knowing that they are part of a community of like-minded value'* (Hill et al.2010, 627). This means that the ability to use the context and seize the opportunities comes with relational skills – the organising acts of the entrepreneur and related actors, which we can also refer to as contextual learning.

A Relationship Management story can enable incubating processes to provoke and interrupt the existing entrepreneurial process '*as a frame-breaking event when the cognitive restructuring occurs at the same time as the relational restructuring*' (Bouwen 2001, 362). It seems that entrepreneurial learning from experiences related to incubating activities is highly dependent on established relationships – both old ones but especially also new ones. That is why I argue that entrepreneurial learning in the incubating context is about interacting in a '*learning*' partnership, where the parties learn from and with each other and co-create the power to turn a dream into reality. As a recommendation for leaders of innovative teams, in this case incubation managers and policy makers, Hill et al. (2010) quote Peter Block on the importance of how the actors interact – in relation to the outcome of collaborative processes: '*The way we bring people together matters more than our usual concerns about the content of what we present to people. How we structure the gathering is as worthy of attention as grasping the nature of a problem or focusing on the solutions that we seek … Transformation hinges on changing the structure of how we engage with each other*' (Hill et al. 2010, 631). As the transformation of the existing skills for entrepreneuring is part of the ambition of incubating activities, a Relationship Management story is highly relevant for achieving the desired impact.

8.5.3. An Expectation Management Story

With stories about Dialogue and Relationship Management, actors of incubating activities may be able to talk honestly about what to expect from the interaction and also define the respective responsibilities associated with the processes of support. Based on the clashes of Actor Narratives demonstrated in Chapter 6 the incubating field clearly needs an Expectation Management story that may guide expectations, in order to prevent disappointment and establish common ground for the co-construction of the venture. It has been shown that many participants of the incubating programme do not know what to expect as the outcome of their participation, but also that their expectations are often unrealistic – and that such unrealistic expectations create a great deal of frustration, distrust and distancing to the programme. This means that advisors cannot assume to know what the participants expect, and that the actions stemming from an Expectation Management story should set the scene for establishing realistic, attainable goals for the incubating process and the relationship between advisor and participant. And they cannot expect entrepreneuring actors to be as proactive in their management of the Accelerator process, as the two inspirational cases. Furthermore, through dialogue and relationship management, such a story could enable actors to agree upon what is needed to attain the desired goals. Expectations can be expressed in words that describe what is expected to occur, but the empirical material also shows that in many cases, the participants' expectations are only hinted at or reflected in the lack of participation, which is why dialogue is the best method for clarifying and understanding expectations. Before incubating managers and advisors have justified the benefits and relevance of their activities to the participants, and the participants have taken responsibility for the process, the participants are less likely to participate actively and learn from the process.

It is important to stress that an Expectation Management story should not be about setting goals on behalf of the participant; instead, it should involve activities where the participant defines goals in collaboration with the advisor and the incubator team. Participants need to realise that participation in an incubation program for learning the robes of entrepreneuring (Watson 2013a) is about collaboration – not gift-giving – and that productive collaboration depends on relationship management and the management of expectations, which is also the responsibility of the participants. If the goal of incubating interactions is entrepreneurial development, then mutually clarified expectations, influence and trust are prerequisites of the relationship between advisors and participants (Hill et al. 2010, 629).

8.5.4. A Co-Construction story

'C*ollaboration is one of the best kept secrets in creativity*' (John Briggs, quoted in Bennis and Biederman 1997) and when we forget that accelerating a venture is a truly creative process that has never been done before – with that product/ service in that context and time – we might also forget the importance of co-constructing with complementary competences. I find that there is a need for a Co-Construction story to develop methods for interaction that produce and promote the much desired entrepreneurial ventures. The basic premise of social interaction is the construction of shared knowledge (Rae 2004), and entrepreneurial learning in the incubating context can therefore be characterised as a process of co-constructing shared knowledge where the actors converge on a shared meaning and agree what to do (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012). The dialogical potential of incubating activities is released from communicating and relating – and therefore not only about identifying and solving a specific problem but about collaborating and being creative.

The co-construction of the venture by the advisor and the participant can be interpreted as an alternative 'teaching method' for entrepreneuring actors who do not consider themselves students.

If we are interested in facilitating entrepreneurial learning, I find that there has to be some kind of provocation somewhere in the process that can bring out the creative. As Hjorth (2011) suggests, entrepreneurial learning is creative-relational in its nature, and if not actors are likely to say what others want to hear, know or can remain disinterested. The challenge is that a respectful dialogue (relationship) is the condition for the provocation to work for that reason there is a need for looking into the pedagogic of such learning (Hjorth 2011). Empirically based, I am able to say that there has to have been established some kind of trust and legitimacy for actors to accept and listen to foreign intervention, which this study has shown is rather in shortage in to the present set-up of incubating activities.

The successful co-construction of new ventures is not achieved merely by mastering the relational aspects of the interaction, as the dissertation points out. Nevertheless, I claim that a relational constructionist alternative to the instrumental management approach of adding on knowledge is more likely to make a qualitative difference to the incubating relationships, its learning opportunities and entrepreneurial creations, than the existing approach. The ultimate challenge for actors entering into collaboration is, as Bouwen puts it, '*to be able to engage with others in such a way that the relational practice that is created opens up opportunities to enact and to allocate a space to all differences that emerge in the encounter, not just as impediments but as new sources of creativity and innovation*" (Bouwen 2010, 38). This quote sums up the potentiality of a Co-Construction story in the incubator context.

8.6. Sum-up on Future Practice Narrative

The Future Practice Narrative is, so to speak, a recommendation for themes and topics to consider when formulating, talking about and conceptualising incubating activities – trying to capture that the relational interaction is always historical, contextual and social. It sums up suggestions for how to interact with the Blame-Game Narrative (which cannot be fully avoided, as there is always a need for blaming somebody when things did not turn out as expected) and to perform with and outside incubating activities. In that sense, the incubator makes an excellent training ground. The Future Practice Narrative is constructed on the basis of my dialogue with the field, which caused me to conclude that the relevance of networks and knowledge is relational, that entrepreneurial needs cannot be defined beforehand, and that the rationalities of the incubation industry are sometimes contradictory to entrepreneurial learning. However, it is important to stress that the stories are presently not dominant themes of the Incubation industry. Incubating managers or advisors do not know the entrepreneuring actors, their expectations or their needs in advance, and in order to support and educate the participants, I suggest that they approach the 'implementation' of ideas and knowledge as an equal process.

The active management of relationship and expectations seems to be crucial for incubating activities, along with accepting business creation as an unknown creative process. Thus, the Future Practice Narrative proposes that incubating activities should focus more on learning processes than Add-On service deliverables. At best, entrepreneuring ventures have a learning focus when they leave the incubating process, which can be interpreted as an increase of their entrepreneurial capacity.

An important challenge of the Future-Practice Narrative is to *sell* incubating activities to entrepreneurs and advisors, as both have been brought up with the traditions of the Best-Practice Narrative. A programme like the Accelerator programme attracts it customers by promising Add-On and Access-To deliverables and services, because that is what entrepreneurs want - and in many ways what advisors would wish they could deliver! Entrepreneuring actors are probably not attracted by promises of Dialogue and Co-construction – and that their expectations will be carefully adjusted to reality is not the value proposition that make them take time out of a busy project. For the same reason I advocate the Future-Practice Narrative as supplement to the Best-Practice Narrative as a professional method for relational interactions – setting the scene for entrepreneurial learning.

8.7. Concluding

With this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how alternative dynamics of the advisor-participant relationship are possible and that the self-reinforcing forces of existing narratives can be challenged (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009). This will imply that policy makers, incubation researchers and incubator management question their assumptions about how to *deliver* support entrepreneuring actors and what it is we think they need. By articulating the existing narratives of the field, as this analysis has done, designers of incubating initiative could seek to construct supplementing narratives that directly works to soften the clash of narratives, and thereby give rise to alternative relational constructions, as we have listened to from the two inspirational cases. The Future-Practice Narrative is therefore also to be considered as an analytical outcome of an incubation practice study meeting a relational learning perspective; hence it illustrated how the empirical material and theoretical framework are actively part of constructing the analysis – and my contribution.

With these suggestions for alternative thinking and practice performance for incubating activities, I will return to my investigations of the barriers to entrepreneurial learning. Chapter 9 seeks go even further into the field material to understand some of the taken for granted assumptions – constructed as a Silent Relationship Narrative - in the field about entrepreneurial support with the purpose of increasing the entrepreneurial capacity of its participants.

Chapter 9: A Silent Relationship Narrative, and suggestions for a relational learning approach to incubating activities

9.1. Abstract

By now I have analysed barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator – and presented an interplay of Actor Narratives which clashes in terms of expectations, assumptions and attitudes towards support, and a vicious circle of the Action Narratives; Best-Practice Narrative and Blame-Game Narrative due to lack of identifiable impact – which in all give insights on how I have interpreted the substantial barriers to learning from the fieldwork. This chapter goes even further into the narrative analysis, and drawing upon on a relational constructionist reading of the fieldwork, I claim that spaces for contextual exchange, collaboration and entrepreneurial learning did not receive the attention that entrepreneurial learning processes require. To some extent it appears from my analysis that they are taken for granted – and when actors of the field do not address them properly they come to act as a *Silent-Relationship Narrative*. The Silent-Relationship narrative is constructed from three silent stories of *relational construction, relevance* and *uncertainty* – which are stories that the field does not talk about – and they shall be interpreted as my constructions and interpretations of why the field enters into the unproductive Blame-Game Narrative. As the dissertation discusses what a focus on entrepreneurial learning could do for the impact on incubating activities on the praxis of immature entrepreneurs, this chapter also contains discussions about how an entrepreneurial learning mindset for incubator managers and advisors could be inspired, together with a brief presentation of existing entrepreneurial learning methods at universities and the dominating approach to entrepreneurial teaching; action learning.

9.2. Construction of a Silent-Relationship Narrative

Relational constructionism is concerned with 'the how' of relating (McNamee and Hosking 2012), which is relevant for a study of the impact of entrepreneurial support. The perspective implies that relational construction is fundamental for collaboration, training, learning and creativity – and as we have seen, differences in assumptions of actors generate different forms of practice. According to McNamee and Hosking (2012), all human beings bring their own unique orientation to the context – and relate to the context with this (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 18). This has been well demonstrated be the way the four Actor Narratives makes sense within their own interpretive templates of entrepreneurial support, but clashes when meeting others. The relational constructionist thought style has enabled me to see how relational constructions are performed – as something that is constructed in relational processes in a specific community characterised by certain local values, norms, historical factors and interests (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 98). With regard to entrepreneurial learning and impact of incubating activities in general, relational constructionism as a thought style has made me move beyond the "taken for granted" assumptions about support, entrepreneurial needs, advisors and entrepreneurs, in order to also listen to the things that the field is not talking about.

The fieldwork and write-up of the substantial empirical material expose that start-ups are never simple, clear-cut or standardised neither in their challenges nor in their need for support. Although there may be similarities from case to case, there are differences in terms of context, technology and time, and this is at least one reason why the standardized methods of Best-Practice Narrative meet resistance. Start-ups are ambiguous actors in an ambiguous world with unclear, conflicting and multiple goals, and in addition, these systems interact with each other, which essentially makes for a messy situation (Steyaert 1995, Hjorth 2003). When a situation is highly complex or ambiguous, people tend to engage in sense-making by hanging on to existing narratives and taking things for granted; Weick (1995) describes this as a process where people or organisations seek to explain and justify the world from their existing frame of reference and from the previous chapters we have learned how actors in the field organise their narratives when they tell their stories from incubating activities (their life).

With the construction of the Best-Practice Narrative, the dissertation speculates that the performance of everyday actions in collaborating with entrepreneurs, such as communicating, listening, evaluating, challenging, creating, utilising, exploring, questioning, distributing, designing, negotiating, pushing and thinking, is taken for granted in a form of instrumental thinking, as if it does not matter how these actions of support are performed, or whether the input/ advice/ knowledge is implemented. I find that entrepreneurial learning, in the sense of increased capacity to act entrepreneurially, is taken for granted as an automatic outcome of incubating processes based on the Best-Practice Narrative and supported by the Blame-Game Narrative, which does not challenge the methods. The way learning is talked about – if talked about – is not related to specific methods of support processes and interactions which may lead to increase of entrepreneurial capacity, but learning understood as something that can be activated from having a toolbox of models. From my perspective, I do not believe that any actor in the field would disagree that some kind of learning from entrepreneurial processes is the purpose of incubating activities, but these actors have not have the necessary language to facilitate such learning to occur. The reason for this is partly because central prerequisites for entrepreneurial learning are silent in the field – meaning that learning as social and situated

(Wenger 1998) and entrepreneurial learning as dynamic and contextual (Rae 2007) is not talked about in a way that has been possible for me to hear as a fieldworker.

In this highly political field of incubating activities, many of the challenging aspects of entrepreneurial support is only talked or written about to a very small extent. According to Rae *"five themes are helpful in designing interventions to optimise the effectiveness of owner-manager engagement in entrepreneurial learning, these being that the learning should be relational, relevant, authentic, useful and productively shared*" (Rae 2009, 292). My study of and interaction with an Accelerator programme supports this statement and I fully agree. But, I have also witnessed how constructs as *relevant*, *authentic* and *useful* are subjective to the individual and in that sense relational construction of the incubating community. It is my experience that the language of the Actor Narratives and Action Narratives in the field only to a limited extent acknowledge the uncertainty of the incubating process, which becomes a barrier to entrepreneurial learning as it prohibits a special focus on relationship and relevance and thus the emergence of a language for how entrepreneurial learning is to be accomplished.

9.3. A Silent Relationship Narrative

The descriptions of Actor Narratives in chapter 6 demonstrated that there are large differences between the actors' perspectives on how to communicate, how to collaborate and how to prioritise business and technology, both before and after programme participation. During the fieldwork, it was a surprise that they were as strong and conflicting as they were, and like Damgaard et al. (2004), I experienced that when the different narratives of the field take important processes for granted, it leaves room for misunderstandings, conflicts and agreements stemming from differences in values and beliefs (Damgaard et al. 2004, 170). From the empirical material and the incubation literature, it is not entirely clear how incubating actors expect relations to be established and interactions to happen – and I claim they are taken for granted as the automatic outcome of meetings or presentations.

Several barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context have been outlined in the form of clashing narratives and lack of appropriate methods for enhancing entrepreneurial learning. In the following section I seek to give some explanations to why barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context exist from a relational constructionist perspective, presented as the Silent-Relationship Narrative. It is important to stress that since the Silent-Relationship Narrative is silent, my role as analysts changes slightly. This narrative is not empirical in the same sense as the other, explicit material, which means their *origin* they are a mix of empirical and theoretical material. There is a silence because I expected to hear something. Otherwise it would not have been a productive silence, a silence that did something – and it is based on my expectations (research question, theoretical preparation and empirical expectations) that I hear the silence (the paradox).

This silent Narrative is constructed from stories about relational constructions, relevance and uncertainty that I have found not to be fully grasped and talked about in the incubator context. I have chosen three stories that I find to be particularly influential in their absence[58] with regard to entrepreneurial learning. Particularly, it seems to be influential of the field that a story about Relational Construction, a story about Uncertainty and a story about Relevance is not addressed more carefully and actively to create an open, motivated and honest learning environment. Such stories from incubation practice can be interpreted as a collective *Silent-Relationship Narrative concerning relational construction* in the field of incubating activities, blind spots of entrepreneurial support initiatives that come to play an unintended, massive role as barrier to entrepreneurial learning. Hence when we know them, it is my belief that it is also possible to un-silence them by acting out the Future-Practice Narrative presented in chapter 8.

9.3.1. A silent story about Relational constructions

From a relational constructionist perspective, a productive, relational organizing is emotional and dependent on will to collaborate, positive expectations, and establishment of trust through dialogue (Salipante and King 2010). Even if there may be contractual terms concerning confidentiality or equity between participating actors and incubators, the relational constructions matter because it is still difficult to design contracts for collaboration and sharing that attend to all future contingencies that might impact the terms of relationship between entrepreneuring actors and their partners (Shane and Stuart 2002, 156). We saw that demonstrated from the inspirational case of chapter 7, in which the participant had decided to trust beforehand, but this is not always the case. In some cases, incubating relationships may be different from other partnerships in entrepreneuring, as they may have no prior contact or interaction experience. Shane and Stuart (2002) write that one of the most solid findings in the literature of intercorporate and interpersonal relationships is that actors with established trading histories are more likely to trust one another, as discussed in chapter 7. They argue that '*Past partners are of known character, and the counterparties in an ongoing relationship have an incentive to behave with good faith to preserve the health of the relationship for future exchanges*' (Shane and Stuart 2002, 157). The incubator relationship, in theory, begins with no interdependence and in most cases no

[58] Other stories could have been selected here, as for example a silent story of conflict, about the substantial amount of resistance that participants express which is not really talked about, or a silent story about the competences of the advisor, about what makes an advisor qualified for the incubating job which is only touched upon sporadically in the field. Nevertheless, I have chosen three stories with huge potential for being un-silenced from a relational constructionist approach to incubating activities and by speaking the language of the alternative Future Practice Narrative.

prior history, so trust and empathy has to come from good intentions of support, openness to foreign intervention and promises of acceleration. According to Coleman (1990), it makes a difference if the parties are unknown to each other, since in that case, the incentives for commitment or obligation in the relationship are limited. As we have seen in the previous chapters there is a lack of respect and empathy in the field. When a proper story – and therefore also methods - of the importance of positive relational constructions is missing in the field, there is a lack of language for talking about that one actor's good intentions are not necessarily repaid by the other and that the decision to collaborate can simply be based on an assessment of current benefits and have no long term perspective. The empirical material put forward that the relationship – or what we could refer to as relational constructions or the lack of them - between entrepreneuring actors and the incubating programme, which in most cases is personified by the advisor, have a heavy influence on the programme performance and the learning experiences of the participants. In some cases it is fair to say there is only little relational construction in the narrow meeting of advisor and participant - the two parties who are to interact in some way and only little effort, typically a phone call or a few meetings has been put into establishing the relationship. Consequently eventual presumptions and hesitations about each other or the programme may not be overcome before the parties "goes to work" and begin problem solving. I find that the field is in need for methods for relational constructions and the story about the necessary relational construction between the programme and participant is not talked about to a proper degree – and it is not entirely clear who has the responsibility for such constructions to happen.

The many interviews with participants of the Accelerator programme suggests that when programme participants passively 'receive' knowledge from advisors and industry experts (as an Add-On); there is a risk that the knowledge becomes *valueless* input that never become relational constructions. Even through the respondents express that they think the input is 'good,' 'nice' or 'cool,' it is very hard as an outsider to get a sense whether it was translated into real actions and whether it changed their capacity for (inter) acting entrepreneurially. What I am able to determine is that entrepreneurial actors are introduced to models, theories, stories and advice, but over time most of them do not appear to change their capacity for entrepreneuring and their ongoing entrepreneurial process. Bouwen offers some explanation to this paradox, arguing that social learning is context bounded "*and has to go on within the community of practice to have a lasting effect*" (Bouwen 2001, 365). The business plan that was developed through the programme remains in the desk drawer – waiting for the project to be ready for it, which indicates that it was more of an isolated workshop exercise than an entrepreneurial action learning process. Such accounts suggest that the programme activities were a one-way delivery of knowledge, where knowledge is presented as an object that the subject can apply whenever it is needed as a tool.

According to Hosking (2007), the assumption of subject-object relations is problematic, as it presumes stability and makes personal change difficult, because it is perceived as moving from one stable state to another: '*The subject constructs resistance to change as the irrational response of the other – one that requires they mobilise more "power-over" the other. This means that patterns of relating are likely to reproduce more of the same i.e., more facts, more rational arguments and more persuasion*' (Hosking 2007, 16). If we believe in the relational mechanisms described in this quote about resistance and 'more of the same,' we can understand why the empirical material to a large degree reveals a lack of collaboration, actions, learning and development – because "*all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the on-going process of relationship*' (Gergen 2009, xv) and as long as the (importance of) Relational Construction story is silent, there is a risk that the entrepreneurial capacity of participants is not going to change. The relational constructions of incubating activities go beyond the relationship between two individuals; it also involves the organising processes of entrepreneurs, which can be associated with relating to (also interpreted as networking, selling, negotiating) relevant and powerful resources to construct the venture (Latour 1996, Hosking 2011). This is one of the most central elements of entrepreneurial learning as business venturing is relationally and communally constructed (Fletcher 2006), and the incubator actually has the opportunity of training the relational capabilities involved in establishing trust, negotiating and interacting, using the programme as a laboratory of entrepreneuring processes to be explored and reflected upon. Hence, it is problematic that a story about relational constructions is silent.

9.3.2. A Silent story about Relevance

In the context of incubating activities with the aim of entrepreneurial support, relevance is in this dissertation interpreted as; variously constructed from different perspectives in the community (Hosking and Pluut 2010) – meaning what is attributed relevance and how relevance is attributed value by actors is guided by the narratives of the field. Schein (1987) argues that in general it is a challenge for advisors to establish legitimacy in the relationship with clients, and he writes that many experts have experienced that simply having expertise is no guarantee for being able to influence others (Schein 1987, 9).

A key element in the dilemma of helping others is the recipient's valuation of what constitutes *relevant* expertise, and who possesses it. Do the process tools that the process advisor holds provide legitimacy? Does a track record of having sold two companies in another industry attribute authority? Does the ability to listen make the advisor trustworthy? Does having capital or industry-specific knowledge ensure that the entrepreneuring actors accept the advisor as relevant? Does having sold a 1 billion venture allow for wasting other people's time? These questions are seldom posed in the fieldwork, hence making the important

Relevance story silent. To understand how come it is possible to not talk about relevance in a more critical way, we may think of the way actors of the field agree about The Best-Practice Narrative – they all agree that entrepreneurs should be supported, that they need business knowledge – hence theory about business models must be relevant. It is overlooked, as Hill et al. (2010) explained to us, that the gathering of people and resources (the how) is as important as the content (the what) we wish to bring forward to them (Hill et al. 2010). And for the same reason, as demonstrated in chapter 7, entrepreneurs are not receiving the Add-On, Access-To and Pave-The-Way services without critique. But in their critique they focus on the wrong model, or the wrong expert – more than remembering that entrepreneurial creation is a creative process, and that the development of the venture is sometimes more about what you do with your resources to make them relevant – than the resources itself.

The processual perspective of relational constructionism makes us see that the Best-Practice Narrative has too little focus on the methods (relational interactions) to make the Add-On and Access-To services *become* relevant to entrepreneurs.

From the scarce but existing literature about the advisor-participant relationship in an incubating context, we know that the advisor role is very important for the potential output of incubation processes, even though this theme does not have a high priority in the existing incubation literature. Researchers have shown that the intensity of the incubation process matters (Rice 2002, 164), that it may be difficult for advisors to establish legitimacy, and that participants and advisors may have conflicting ideas about how to prioritise and what is important (McAdam and Marlow 2011, 463). Entrepreneurial actors are concerned about the relevance of the advisor's competence, but they have a hard time expressing in words what credentials, knowledge or attributes they do find relevant, and they tend to fall back on the cliché of relevance as being equal to entrepreneurial experience – and care less about how the advisor/ knowledge/ experience are to become relevant! Many respondents are sceptical about getting some sort of standardised package from advisors who do not have industry-specific knowledge and who do not really understand the depth, beauty and complexity of the entrepreneur's project. McAdam and Marlow (2011) have also found that there is a low recognition of the advisor's work in the advice situation and afterwards in the evaluation of the service, and my study confirms these findings as well.

The relevance and applicability of input, meetings, theory and other incubating activities are central to all Actor Narratives, and there is a common reference to targeting *the real needs* of entrepreneuring actors. From the analysis of the previous chapters, the fieldwork heavily suggest that the participants' assessment of relevance is closely related to the relationship between the entrepreneuring participants and the advisor and hence to the legitimacy of the advisors and the incubating programme. Knowledge and advice are thus not perceived as relevant and needed simply because they are knowledge and advice; they are perceived as relevant if the person or organisation delivering it is perceived as trustworthy and worth listening to. This is one of my important conclusions, which is supported by Aldrich and Foil's (1994) argument about '*Evidence of trustworthiness within one context does not automatically serve as evidence of trustworthiness within a broader context*' (Aldrich and Fiol 1994, 663). The consequence is that entrepreneuring actors or advisors are not necessarily found to be fabulous (relevant) outside their home turf, if they are unable to communicate with new actors in a trust-inspiring and meaningful way.

Based on my fieldwork interactions, it would be fair to say that knowledge, information and learning opportunities are resources obtained as a *by-product* of participation in some kind of organising relationship, but the relationship seems to come first as we saw it from the second inspirational case of chapter 8. Without the relationship, only small transactions of resources and creative development take place – demonstrated by the Blame-Game Narrative. That is why I argue that it may be more productive to talk about a collaborative/co-creating relationship, which entails mutual participation and responsibility (the Future-Practice Narrative), instead of talking about an advisory relationship based on one-way communication (The Best-Practice Narrative). This relates to the argument of the need to address the practical and psychological circumstances of *how to interact* in the presentation of advice and knowledge. In their incubator study McAdam and Marlow (2011) found that even though the incubator advisor's support is perceived as useful by the participants, '*their legitimacy is always somewhat limited as they neither control funds nor do they have the entrepreneurial credibility*' (McAdam and Marlow 2011, 461). This is similar to my field study and demonstrates a difference between incubating activities and investors: The incubating advisors need to demonstrate their value to the venture and to draw their legitimacy from something other than potential funding that has credibility in the entrepreneurial community (Pittaway and Thorpe 2012, 855).

The Critical Narrative seems to claim that the *relevance* of a person's advice is proportional with the person's amount of entrepreneurial experience. The Silent story of relevance – as useful and valuable support – is that emotions and biases of intuition rather than functional competences and rational calculations of ROI largely determine relevance. When the field does not have a proper conversation of what relevance is – in terms of usefulness and applicability of incubating services – barriers to entrepreneurial learning can be further strengthened by the Blame-Game Narrative, and stories of lack of professionalism and a miss-fit between programme and participant.

The empirical material tells stories of *experts* who were not experts in the eyes of the participants, of meetings that were set up and which were perceived as a waste of time, and industry-specific input that was not specific enough or not from the right industry. It is hard to predict the need beforehand by providing standard Best-Practice tools, and the advisor's expert label may lead to overly high expectations. By un-silencing the Relevance story, there is a possibility for actors in the field to embrace the relationship, make relevance obvious and create a will and space to learn from incubating activities.

9.3.3. A Silent story about Uncertainty

It is widely described in the start-up literature that start-ups suffer from a liability of newness (Stinchcombe 1965), and that uncertainty (Knight 1921) is particularly 'high' among young ventures trying to commercialise new technologies (Shane and Stuart 2002, 156). It is less acknowledged that these characteristics of low resources, low bargaining power, high uncertainty etc. also apply to incubating activities. The uncertainty of entrepreneurial start-up processes does not vanish into thin air with the acceptance into an incubating programme – or with a well-planned policy strategy for promoting entrepreneurship and trying to eliminate uncertainty. This attitude towards the unknown future creates a field where uncertainty is not talked about properly; even though the fieldwork tells us that there is no need to present incubating activities as the answer to uncertainty, as they are not; however, they might qualify the entrepreneurial ability to handle (work with) uncertainty.

Meaning-making is incredibly important to all actors of incubating activities to justify time and resources spent, but the traditional sources of meaning – as profit, workplaces or identifiable impact - are not really being produced in the context. As indicated in previous chapters, research and evaluation methods have yet to document that incubating activities make a difference in terms of providing economic value for society (Blackburn and Schaper 2012). Proof of sales or revenue, the traditional sources of legitimacy for companies and projects, are yet to materialise, which gives the emphasis on doing something (saving society) and the storytelling about the company-to-be an even greater role to play (O'Connor 2004). That is why the hopes of the Actor Narratives about a new reality waiting just around the corner becomes so important, and why meaning is expressed so strongly – from a learning perspective oppressing uncertainty – and opportunities for learning (Cope 2010).

It is my understanding that the incubation industry works with a high degree of uncertainty and therefore, as Hicks (2010) described in chapter 3, relies on business suits and professionalism instead of articulating and working with the uncertainty. The problem is that the Actor Narratives are notoriously bad at embracing and working with uncertainty and thus also act as the gatekeepers to what is seen as a potential. The reluctance to acknowledge uncertainty creates a strong need for meaning-making in the field, selecting the 'right' strategy and 'proven' methods and only selecting the 'elite' companies and thereby causes the incubating actors to cling to their stories about growth and entrepreneurial superheroes, because it provides meaning to their work life. The problem here is that the language of the Best-Practice Narrative implies a need for selecting, planning and executing as all factors are known to the venturing process – but as with both venturing in general and entrepreneurial support, the most important aspect of method is not to make a plan, but to respond to whatever emerges from the plan (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 14), hence dealing with uncertainty in a more constructive way.

The participant-advisor relationship operates in a setting of urgency and a high degree of uncertainty, which is part of the creative process of entrepreneuring. Many aspects of the venture can be questioned, and that makes the process messy in a way that makes it hard to be the expert on all issues, as the advisor is expected to be. In Chapter 5 I asked whether it is appropriate to work with the consultancy model of advice, as it sets unreal expectations about what incubating activities are, and how the participants should act. Furthermore, it is often difficult for the participants to articulate exactly what they need or seek assistance with (Steyaert 2004, 11), but in their attitude of trying to convince the world of their need to exist, they spell out either capital or customers as the need that is going to make or break them. In practice, their needs of learning to behave entrepreneurially are much more sophisticated, as it may involve the need to know *how to* invest capital or *how to* interact with customers – and a lot of others contextual *how-to's*!

Entrepreneuring actors would much rather listen to 'war stories' than receiving advice from someone 'who-does-not-know-what-it's-like' or even worse – a sales person! This feeds into a discussion about *how uncertainty is handled,* and whether uncertainty is acknowledged in a world of superheroes. Based on my empirical material I find that uncertainty is something that is talked about when it has been resolved. Part of what makes the 'war stories' so appealing is exactly that the trouble and struggle have been overcome, and in the end was a success – despite all odds. Present uncertainty is talked about as potential competition or structural barriers out there somewhere, both of which are areas to be handled with creativity and complementary resources. However, in praxis, many entrepreneuring actors respond to uncertainty by relying on the resources they already trust and are familiar with. Ruef, Aldrich and Carter (2003) refer to this as the reason why entrepreneuring actors have a *competency discount*. The inclination to avoid including outsiders and unfamiliar processes and knowledge into the venture '*tends to decrease functional diversity and may, in the long run, inhibit the success of new formal organizations'* (Ruef et al. 2003, 218). This means that the entrepreneurs stay on the personal level of venture development in their handling of uncertainty but do not manage to enter into the contextual learning and relational co-construction of negotiated relationships (Rae 2004). Entrepreneuring actors who act in this way have not yet acknowledged the need for complementarity – or understood how to work with it. I have found uncertainty as a silent story is widely present in the field of incubating activities, even though entrepreneurial learning in most cases is unplanned, unintentional and accidental, and something that happens along the way, which is therefore difficult to measure and evaluate (Cope and Watts 2000).

It is not entirely clear from the empirical material, even though I have been investigating the matter quite thoroughly, what criteria are used to hire the '*selectors*' and '*advisors*' in the first place, but words such as '*professional*' and '*experienced*' are common terms, although there are no clear systematics on what kind of professional experience will be appropriate for selecting and supporting entrepreneurs. The selection of projects, companies and expertise resembles the 'arm's length principle, similar to the division of resources in the incubating industry which to some extent is passed on to incubator managers with the message of '*here is some money – go pick the best companies based on your professional skills, and grow them.*' But what is best, and what is professional in this context is all very uncertain, and how do we know that the selection of candidates and division of resources are not based on personal preferences, old boys' networks, gut feelings and raw power[59] - because that is the way we handle uncertainty when it is silent. In my opinion it is a challenge in an industry where uncertainty and ambiguity are such strong factors that the most common selection approach is driven by homophily, while the starting point of new creations and growth in many cases seems to be complementarity. The argument of establishing support for entrepreneurship and growth is well put, and nobody is arguing against professionalism and professional knowledge, but in practice we need to be able to value whether the efforts make a positive contribution to society. If we cannot evaluate the long-term effects we need to discuss how we might provide value to entrepreneurial processes and avoid silencing uncertainty - because we cannot handle the questions of measurement, evaluation and impact. The problem with the Best-Practice Narrative is that admitting to not knowing where to go is a bad thing. Acknowledging uncertainty can let actors say that not knowing where to go – is a good thing (Chia and Holt 2008).

[59] As a note, I can mention that the decision-makers in my fieldwork, the people who select and work with entrepreneuring actors, are predominantly ethnically Danish, male, well educated and from the dominating social classes and the people they select share the same characteristics. In my fieldwork I have interacted with one non-Danish entrepreneur and with three female entrepreneurs and two female advisors, all five of whom share the majority characteristics of being white, well-educated and from the dominating social classes. This means that women, non-Western individuals, people of colour, people with little or no education and people from subordinate classes are not or only to a very small degree represented in the empirical material. Does this indicate that if the applicants share the same demographic and cultural characteristics and speak the same language as the selectors, they are more likely to be selected?

9.4. Sum up on a Silent Relationship Narrative

With this inquiry I have questioned some of the assumptions behind incubating initiatives about what the needs of entrepreneurs are and, not least, how to address them from an entrepreneurial support perspective. *'Relational constructionism emphasizes that what is validated or discredited (or given power, so to speak) is local to the ongoing practices that (re)construct a particular form of life'* (Hosking 2011, 54) – and this study shows that the methods and assumptions of the Best-Practice Narrative have been given more attention than pedagogical methods for entering into dialogue and relational constructions.

Similar to a study by Bruneel et al. (2012), the previous chapters show that the transition process of incubation, coupled with the incubating philosophy of providing infrastructure and progressing into providing consulting and network, is a very difficult step that involves much more than establishing an extended service portfolio (Bruneel et al. 2012, 119). The silencing (intentional or un-intentional) of stories in the process of designing and performing support initiatives for entrepreneurs have certain consequences, as it clearly involves the risk of Actor Narratives clashing – and becoming unproductive. Such clashes come from biases of intuition and distrust that I have demonstrated is present in the field – which may occur simply because the actors have not yet chosen to trust – but also from mismanaged expectations and misunderstandings, and it produces negative tensions. As pointed to in chapter 7 about the consequences of the Best-Practice Narrative I posit that such tensions are produced from a – rather simplistic – understanding of what support of knowledge, network and capital are, how such resources can be added on and how they can make a difference.

Actors in the field have difficulties in finding new roads for productive co-constructions based on entrepreneurial learning processes, as the existing Best-Practice and Blame-Game Narratives are so strong in the sense of dismissing alternative roads to pursue, which makes it hard to engage in alternative relational practices (Bouwen 2010, 22). With regard to entrepreneurial learning and impact, the Silent Relationship Narrative perform in the field as the absence of relational constructions and produce particular local, social and historical understandings of the prerequisites for learning, because they are not handled or discussed in their complexity and importance but taken for granted as part of the entrepreneuring/incubating process.

It is the scepticism and distrust in the Actor Narratives that somehow leads to clashes and makes the relationship one of masks and blame games instead of open collaboration and creativity. This is not to say that the narratives will inevitably clash, as it is my impression that most of the actors want to move the entrepreneurial process forward; however, the local, social and historical constructions of entrepreneurial support and entrepreneurial needs – together with a tendency to ignore the importance of didactics and emotions – cause the narratives to clash. The clashes do happen and produce a lack of production so to speak, as the Silent-relationship Narrative hamper creative interaction, the construction of ventures and entrepreneurial learning. The mutual awareness among different professions could be a positive force driven by curiosity, listening, challenging and provoking, but the empirical material tells us that many of the relationships never get to the level of respect and trust that would make it possible to enter into these kinds of interactions with an open mind. The praxis and methods of the incubating community are crucial to the meaning making of its actors, in order for them to understand and engage in the learning that actually happens (Wenger 1998). Silencing a Relationship Narrative therefore has huge influence on how competences and resources of the actors come together in various forms of experiences to learn from.

9.5. Insisting on dialogue and entrepreneurial learning

Learning does not just happen. I argue that the Policy and Advice Narrative underlying most incubation initiatives are too simple in their understanding of how to support and make someone stronger and independent from incubating services. They neglect the intermediate methods for personal development, learning and knowledge creation (Cope and Watts 2000, 108) and as this dissertation points to – lack a pedagogical process perspective on entrepreneurial support. A business canvas might cover a service perspective, customer surveys, pitch training and strategies, and these elements are indisputably important. However, the experience and learning part, the development of organisational practices and the development of individual capabilities come from motivation and learning experiences (Wenger et al. 2002, 44). I argue that the purpose of incubating activities is not only to achieve a business goal; it is also to develop human capital (skills, knowledge and identity) and social capital (social and technical networks). This is why the outcome of incubation depends on the way in which the relationship between participant and advisor/ incubating activity is constructed. The type of relationship that is established between participant and advisor/ incubating activity influences the communication and actions of the incubation process, and thus the emotional, intellectual, creative, constructive enabling and constraining impact on the participant (Bouwen 2001).

I find it problematic that the uncertainty of incubating activities is silent to a degree where important questions are ignored, as it becomes a substantial barrier to entrepreneurial learning as an outcome of relevant co-constructions. Hence, it leads to a strong need for meaning-making (Møller 2012, 55), and in my opinion it makes the language of the field too caricatured, too worried that the little child in the back of the crowd will cry out *'but he doesn't have anything on,'*[60] as a reaction to the fact that incubating activities are based on

[60] H.C. Andersen: the Emperor's new Clothes

assumptions and political goals. What if we gave up trying to be so clever about what works to produce creative processes that will become economically successful? With the existing Actor Narratives, the incubation field seek quick-fix solutions (that will lead to growth) and strive to avoid uncertainty, and in this rushed process actors might overlook solutions and potentials. They are too busy for the rational processes to be acted out – for the sake of getting the actors through the system (fast). '*Even in Theory, fundamental contradictions exist in the "planning" of entrepreneurship and innovation, suggests that it is misguided to aspire toward elegance, symmetry and efficiency in this context. A better approach is to begin located within the complex and rapidly changing world in which technology entrepreneurs actually operate*' (Auerswald 2007, 32). The entrepreneuring actors of the fieldwork seek knowledge and experts to legitimise and qualify their actions, but in many cases they apply for legitimacy from a world whose authority or expertise they essentially reject. The ability to interact and ally with various actors is a crucial part of organising start-up process. The actual outcome of incubation activities in terms of revenue and growth is often a long-term endeavour, difficult to measure or track for a specific venture. It is therefore important that business incubating activities are designed and performed with an ambition of achieving entrepreneurial learning, as a potential for changing actions (Cope and Watts 2000, 105). A goal like that could be stated explicitly, and not simply occur as a fortunate coincidence. Bouwen and Hosking (2000) advocate that in the research community '*there is a great need to create new conversations, new ways of relating that support new, multiple, and local possibilities for thinking and acting. The quality of co-ordinations opens and closes possibilities; construct exclusion or inclusion, enables reflexivity, or limits learning*' (Bouwen and Hosking 2000, 273). Such new conversations and dialogue between actors can also be said to be needed in the field of this dissertation. The relational perspective has made it possible to show how the relational constructions that do exist in the incubation field to some extent inhibits learning, because clashes of identities makes actors defensive and less open to listening to foreign advice and promises of new technology. The question is how it is possible to speak an alternative language of entrepreneurial support that does not turn entrepreneuring actors into demanding superheroes and know-it-all advisors, but which encourages relational practices and the emergence of the uniquely new (Shotter 2010, 261). I have given my suggestions for such alternative Future-Practice Narrative in previous chapter, which are concerned with increasing the learning capacity of the incubation field

With this proposal of a more dialogue based approach to incubation with entrepreneurial learning as its goal, I will now return to entrepreneurial learning theory and discuss how we may talk about and construct incubating activities with an entrepreneurial learning ambition. In the following I look into a more cross-disciplinary approach to inform both entrepreneurship policy, which primarily works with an economic and managerial mindset, and entrepreneurship training and education, which draws on a variety of sociological, educational and psychological theories. These disciplines might benefit from talking to each other. The analysis of the dissertation stresses learning experiences as crucial for the ability of entrepreneuring actors to manage their venture successfully on their own after the programme. It is the claim of the dissertation that skills and resources for acting entrepreneurially is not to a satisfying degree acquired from Add-On or Access-To initiatives; even though these initiatives may work in making resources available, they do not tell the recipient much about how to play them. From a relational constructionist view, I advocate that incubating processes with the purpose of entrepreneurial learning should resemble co-construction by different but equal parties, and that the establishment of the relationship and co-constructing of the venture is a mutual responsibility.

9.6. Towards relational action learning for entrepreneurs

Fayolle and Gailly (2008) suggest that it is crucial to ask the following questions before designing and performing activities aimed at entrepreneurial learning: *'why (objectives at the learning and socio-economic levels, what (contents), how (methods and pedagogies), for whom (targets, audiences) and for which results (evaluations).'* On the basis of the present study, I suggest that policy makers, researchers, incubation managers, entrepreneuring actors and related actors of the incubation industry should ask all of these questions in their design of support activities – and not just one or two. Hjorth and Johannisson (2006) supplement with their theory on learning to learn entrepreneurially (mix of skills and mindset) and incubating theory could use a supplement of how to educate advisors and incubation managers for entrepreneurial learning.

As it was presented in chapter 5 – and according to Rae (2005) entrepreneurial learning had until then not been well understood in either the academic study of entrepreneurship or the practical development of new entrepreneurs (Rae 2005, 323). For the last 10 years entrepreneurship scholars have worked on closing this gap, but entrepreneurial learning still is a rather undeveloped theme in the incubation literature. However, if we turn to other related but more sociologically and psychologically oriented fields of academia such as training[61] for SME managers and entrepreneurship education at business schools, entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurial networking, it is possible to find researchers who have explored how immature ventures learn and are created from interactions with their surroundings and an external supply of resources and experiences. In these sections I therefore draw upon theories from entrepreneurial learning, entrepreneurial

[61] It should be noted that from a relational constructionist perspective it is problematic to speak about teaching and training in the context of incubating activities, at least for growth-oriented tech-entrepreneurs, as this dissertation suggests that co-constructing the venturing process is more appropriate in relation to the actual incubating processes I hope to promote than to teaching or facilitating entrepreneurial learning.

education, entrepreneurial training, action-learning approaches and adult learning literature in order to give my suggestions of how we might perceive relational entrepreneurial learning to be, and what sets it apart from other types of learning in other contexts.

Drawing upon Wenger and the theory on communities of praxis, Rae (2004) posits that possibilities of engagement and enactment of the resources are crucial for entrepreneurial learning (Rae 2004). However, the present study have shown that it is not always the case that participants have the capacity or the skills of entrepreneuring before entering into a programme or activity – in fact, these skills are sometimes exactly what they are hoping to acquire. If the participants are already entrepreneuring – in the sense of behaving in entrepreneurial ways, they can gain from increased resources and learn through entrepreneuring – if they are not, the fieldwork of this dissertation tells us that they will not learn it from programme interactions. This makes it problematic to provide Add-On resources that the entrepreneuring actors do not know how to activate, and – even more problematically – have not learned from acquiring themselves in the first place. What is hinted here, is that I see a risk that the Best-Practice Narrative takes away the learning opportunity of early venturing processes, the satisfaction of overcoming challenges and that the venturing actors might end up lacking the experiences of early failure, trying things out and small successes.

9.6.1. Supplementing entrepreneurship policy and incubation theory and practice

To fulfil the growth ambition of the incubation policy and work more openly with the complex barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context, this dissertation suggests that incubation initiatives include a relational focus such as interacting with entrepreneurial actors in a space of imagination and creativity with the purpose of entrepreneurial learning. This means the enhancement of the participants' human and social capital in the form of collaborative and networking skills in addition to an understanding of business theory (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, 266). The understanding of how to facilitate entrepreneurial learning can be part of the considerations about the design of business incubating activities, and as a result, programmes and activities would have to become increasingly oriented towards the uncertainty of the entrepreneurial process, continuous relationship-building and interactions with the surrounding environment.

A main challenge is to consider the introduction of entrepreneurship in its wide diversity - and from a pedagogical point of view. One of the most popular approaches for entrepreneurship programmes and education is *action learning*, since it is commonly accepted that entrepreneurship is not a regular study subject such as economics or marketing (Fayolle and Gailly 2008, Smith 2009). Action learning theory has a strong focus on authenticity, which in many ways is attractive to incubation designers, as it seems to be a prerequisite of entrepreneurial learning. However, as I will discuss in more detail later, action learning is still based on the epistemological logic of traditional management education monologues, planning and problems in an artificial setting, which not necessarily allows for the entrepreneurial creation that incubating activities also seek to support.

In the field of learning theory, many of the most cited scholars operate with different levels of learning, typically two levels, to capture the depth of learning and also to highlight that learning in different forms have different effects on the learning actor and its surroundings. The most common distinctions are single- and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978), lower- and higher-order learning (Fiol and Lyles, 1985), adaptive and generative learning (Gibb 1997), transformative learning (Cope 2003) and simple and expansive learning (Engeström 2007). I find it important not to judge one form of learning as more important or better than any other and instead view them as reciprocal processes. It is debatable which kind of learning is most likely to produce an entrepreneurial capacity change from relational interactions, as it depends heavily on the initial needs and the learner's capacity and motivation and the capability and context of the facilitator. It is important to acknowledge that there is a difference between the kind of learning (impact) we can expect from very different relational practices, ranging from Add-On services to dialoguing and reflecting on ongoing co-constructions (Bouwen 2010, 28). If incubator management wants the participants to learn the robes of entrepreneuring, as the above definition presented in chapter 5 implies, this dissertation has demonstrated that entering into for example reflective double-loop learning requires a different programme or service than the methods of a managerial Best-Practice Narrative offers.

9.6.2. Theorising on entrepreneurship support with the purpose of learning

From his far-reaching work on SMEs, policy and growth, Gibb (1997, 2000, 2002, and 2009) diagnosed some of the challenges involved in entrepreneurship promotion and training, and it is clear from his work that an increased focus on interactions, learning, relations and the organisational context is relevant. '*The highly personal and therefore emotionally charged world of SME development presents considerable challenges to educators and trainers in general (…) They are not well prepared for this in the ways they organise knowledge and they are considerable constrained in their approaches by the culture of their own organizations'* (Gibb 2009, 215). It is one element of incubating activities to consider whether the participants are ready for training and foreign intervention, but another crucial element is considering whether the facilitators, educators and trainers are capable and properly prepared for interacting with and making a lasting impact on the participants. I have only to a small extent met considerations on these aspects in the field.

Already in 1997, Gibb discussed this issue, and he writes that the key challenge of teaching and counselling immature ventures is '*to understand the real nature of the learning context, the culture of the business, and to* *adopt pedagogies accordingly (…) this need requires the "teaching" of small businesses in an enterprising and entrepreneurial way embodying networking, local and self-development knowledge into pedagogical tactics*' (Gibb 1997, 20). We may interpret this as making incubating activities more entrepreneurial and less managerial; it is also interesting to note that he mentions pedagogic – another issue seldom addressed in incubating literature presented in chapter 3. It is taken for granted that the facilitators are capable of mastering the appropriate pedagogic techniques to create learning situations, and that participants are open to and willing to embrace external knowledge and intervention. It is a key contribution of the present dissertation to have localised empirically that this is not necessarily so. Gibb does not go in depth with praxis details of relations and interactions to help us understand the mechanisms better, as Cope (2003, 2005a) does in his work on entrepreneurial learning. However, his diagnosis of valuable business incubating activities as interdisciplinary, local and relational (Gibb 2000, 29) supports my argument that looking at incubation activities through the lens of relational constructionism is productive.

9.6.3. Action learning for entrepreneurial learning

The potential impact of action learning as a practice model has become increasingly adopted to universities and support programmes '*as a popular alternative to management development programs and centralised structural/process redesign as a principal method for promoting "cultural' change*"' (Blantern 2010, 65). According to Blantern (2010) action as a learning opportunity is particularly well represented in the literature on entrepreneurial learning and is continually tested and evaluated around the world, based on the model of the learning cycle (Kolb 1984) and the theory of action learning (Revan 1982). Kolb offered an overarching model for experiential learning that presents learning as the interplay of education, work and personal development. Action learning is therefore often explained in terms of learning as a cycle: having an experience, reviewing the experience, concluding from the experience and planning what to do next (Kolb 1984, Mumford 1995). This process is deeply embedded in most everyday actions of entrepreneurs such as innovating, testing, selling, negotiating, pitching, building, planning, executing, reflecting etc. Action learning is a dialogue-based method for learning and teaching and partly based on Kolb's cycle of learning and the action learning method developed by Revan (1982).

It is a challenging educational method grounded in the philosophy of action, which emphasises a shift from a classroom-based model of teaching and learning to a constructionist one, where the participants actively construct their own learning by deciding what is relevant for them (Coghlan et al. 2012, 1). The rationale is that when participants are responsible for their own process they will have a stronger motivation for designing events and processes that facilitate deep learning. The method involves action-oriented conversation in groups of 6-8 people; it is voluntary, spurred by urgent problems and depends on feedback, asking frequent questions and the dynamics of learning from each other in a peer-based learning context (Coghlan et al. 2012, 1). In many cases, the participants do not know each other beforehand but are brought together because they work in the same or similar industries or face similar challenges. They meet off the job, meaning not in the setting of the challenge, and there are guidelines for how and when to speak, listen and offer feedback (Blantern 2010, 66). The method actively engages the participants to apply theory, knowledge and concepts for specific experiences and reflection. This means that the participants work with their own experiences and actions to improve their performance, as Revan's hypothesises that individuals learn best from working with actual problems with instant feedback (personal relevance). Furthermore, it is a central part of action learning that individuals learn with and from each other, which should secure a safe learning environment (Leitch et al. 2009, 247).

Theoretically, action learning is positioned within behaviourist and social constructionist theories of education (Gibb 2009, 218). Behavioural learning is primarily incremental and springs from experience; cognitive learning refers to the cognitive processes that improve the creation of knowledge, while action learning focuses on the moment-to-moment practice that may transform and bring forward the venture (Voudouris et al. 2009, 241). Action learning sets certain pedagogical but also empathic demands for the facilitator to understand the possibilities and constraint upon learning by doing (Gibb 1997), as it requires an understanding of the cultural and motivational structures influencing actions in the venture as well as existing resources to draw on when learning. As Gibb nicely phrases it, *'We begin where we are, and learn as we act*' (Gibb 1997). Theoretically, action learning stands in contrast to programmed learning and the dominant institutional norms in the education and training environment (Gibb 2009, 219), focussing instead on the demonstration of knowledge and skills through concrete actions, which lead to improved social and financial performance. Responsibility is moved from the 'teacher' to the participant, and both the context and the content of the learning are supposed to be informal and open to new directions. Blantern (2010) write that action learning has still to be accepted as more than an experiment by both practice and academia. Rae (2009) posits that business schools and institutions of higher learning are hampered by bureaucratic control measures – as how many students graduated - which privileges programmed learning (Rae 2009, 292). Based on the empirical material, I find it fair to say that a publicly funded Accelerator programme face similar challenges in escaping the programmed learning concept and not predefine the needs of entrepreneurial actors and thus the deliverables of incubating activities. With this in mind, it makes sense to experiment with action learning methods for both entrepreneurship education and incubating activities as well.

The Accelerator programme of the fieldwork is presented as having an *action learning approach*, and it was founded on having a hands-on mindset! But here too, it is difficult to find evidence that the action learning method is performed successfully in practice – as touched upon in chapter 7. Since 2011, the programme managers have been working closely with Entrepreneurship Professor Sara Sarasvathy and have tried to incorporate her theories on Effectuation and co-creation (Sarasvathy 2008) into the programme, by using her as presenter and facilitator. Despite the appealing theory, the presentation of Effectuation to the programme participants was, as most of the other camps in the programme, primarily performed in a formal educational style where Sara Sarasvathy lectured, and the participants were to listen and answer questions from the professor. Engaging with scholars as Professor Sarasvathy suggests that the programme managers are aware that traditional teaching of business plans theory is not entirely suitable to a design of incubating practices, which are to accelerate start-ups. Nevertheless as touched upon previously, some of the participants expressed that they did not feel that the form and content of camps of theories was properly translated to their entrepreneurial challenges – hence the remark of making the content relevant through relational interaction. This suggests how difficult it is for incubating activates to escape traditional management thinking about how to transfer knowledge. It is not enough to talk about action learning and co-creation; one also has to consider the prerequisites to entering into actual relational co-constructive processes (Steyaert and Looy 2010). I do not know how much or whether the effectuation theory has been used as remedy in the advice situations between advisor and participant, but I have not listened to statements or stories that has indicated this.

Action learning is used as an alternative to traditional teaching methods all over the world, especially in entrepreneurship education and programmes (Rae 2009, 291). This dissertation confirms that action learning may be a suitable framework for allowing theoretical contributions and insights to be balanced with the chance to draw on practical experience and application (Leitch et al. 2009, 247). However, the fieldwork also gives insights into why the method may be challenging to apply when intervening into entrepreneuring processes of creation. The prerequisite of a problem that needs to be solved, as implied in the action learning method, may be a way of expressing that something is needed, and this 'something' implies exploration, as it also implied in the entrepreneurial process. However, the framing of one particular problem to focus on seems to be problematic to in the incubating process, as it is leads to a one-dimensional focus on a single aspect of the venture. This produces an artificial understanding that 'freezes' the rest of the venture process, which is not possible in real life, as relationships and development in other areas of the venture need to be managed as well. Another problematic point is that the tasks and needs of the entrepreneurial actors are not necessarily articulated as problems, and that the supposed needs and problems may be unknown when the venture enters into the incubating process – as for example learning to learn entrepreneurially!

The fieldwork material shows that the needs of entrepreneurial ventures are often shaped by the capacity and resources of the context, and that the surroundings serve as inspiration for imagining how the venture may look and for the ongoing development of the product/entrepreneur/ network or venture and resources available in general. Action learning methods seem to imply that the participants can find the answers/resources within themselves with the appropriate kind of facilitation. Again, it is my experience from the fieldwork that in many situations it is not possible to find/acquire/attract the necessary new/complementary resources with the currently available resources; instead, these venturing actors have a real need for external intervention, new/other network, new/other technology or different kinds of resources, which makes the incubator relevant. As I will discuss later, entrepreneurship programmes are faced with the challenge of capturing the concentration and motivation of students and entrepreneuring actors, which requires a balanced mix of authenticity and authority. Klofsten and Jones-Evans (2013) describe a case study of the successful Linköping incubator in Sweden, which applies an approach that largely resembles the action learning method, and one explanation from the authors is the membership feel that the incubator has been able to create (Klofsten and Jones-Evans 2013).

Blantern (2010) is critical of the artificial context that characterises traditional action learning, where the participants are required to solve a problem that is contextually related somewhere else and thus instead becomes a problem for the individual learner. Regardless how open to outside input a group of action learners are in the sessions, they still subsequently have to re-enter the context from which they came. Argyris and Schön (1978) were very concerned about why it is so difficult for individuals to take the knowledge they had gained in the setting of the training/learning session home to their organisation and to implement it. From a relational point of view, it seems that when challenges or problems are relational constructions, and when individuals learn something in a completely different context, characterised by other constraints and reasons for face saving, it may well be difficult to transfer the learning from one context to another (Bouwen 2001, Blantern 2010, 66). For the same reason, Blantern advocates a stronger focus on how social actors can interact in more satisfying ways to navigate their social territory in order to develop, create and change their organisations, and he proposes a set of principles for relational action learning (Blantern 2010, 67).

The action learning model has adapted easily to the entrepreneurship education context but does not specify what learning will result from each stage or how the individual stages affect the others (Fisher et al. 2008, 315). Another critical comment from Blantern is that '*One might ask "where is the action in action learning?" when a learning set meets off the job away from those contextual issues such as "power-relations," "what can* *be said openly and what is kept private," "face saving and maintenance," and "pragmatic risk" (what might happen to me?). These notions are powerful shapers of what can be learned*' (Blantern 2010, 66).

From a relational action learning perspective presented by Blantern, the focus of attention is neither on the individual nor on the organisation in any monolithic sense but rather on the micro-sociological processes in any given and recurring context. Relational action learning draws on many of the same ideas as Revan's action learning, in the way the facilitator stirs the process and applies pedagogical tools and provocative questions, but Blantern emphasises that '*in relational action learning we will want to work, for "real", in order to encounter and make sense of those relational practices that shape the outcomes. We want to work with face savings routines, with power difference, with marginalisation in talk, with subject positions, with difference, with ideology and with unexpressed expectations*' (Blantern 2010, 69). Again, easier said than done to find this "real", but the ambition is relevant and goes along with the Future-Practice Narrative. An important implication of a relational action learning approach is to move away from problem-solving thinking and instead ask, what happens to the process when there is no defined goal, and the collaboration, dialogue and interaction become the goal of incubating activities? Then there might be space for alternative narratives of support.

9.6.4. What incubators may learn from university-based interactions with entrepreneuring students

In 2003, Cope and Pittaway experimented with action learning entrepreneurship courses for business students to overcome the paradox within entrepreneurship education of establishing a framework for learning as a model while and accepting that such a model can never resemble real-life entrepreneuring. Most business schools all over the world offer entrepreneurial courses, often practice-oriented, and even though these courses have many forms it is always difficult to simulate the social and relational aspects of entrepreneurial processes. It has been recognised '*that it is not possible to convey the challenges and complexities surrounding new venture creation using only conventional pedagogic techniques such as lectures and seminars*' (Pittaway and Cope 2007, 229). According to Pittaway and Cope, courses may be successful in stimulating certain elements of entrepreneurial learning, such as the social context and communal work, through participative mechanisms such as the *self-selection of teams and projects*, *learning advisors* and *a venture panel offering opportunities for reflection and learning*. Emotional commitment and exposure may be created, and students may take substantial ownership of the project. However, other elements of entrepreneuring such as financial exposure and crises, which Cope considers prerequisites to entrepreneurial learning, cannot be stimulated in a significant way.

With regard to incubating activities, it is interesting that the elements of learning that a university programme is able to create are somewhat opposite to the reality of incubating activities. Incubating activities do not have to create financial exposure or crises, as these elements of the process are available in abundance. However, incubating activities do struggle with creating an attractive and trusting learning environment. The processes of handling but also creating emotional exposure through provocation and working closely together on handling uncertainty and ambiguity do not seem to be the focus of incubating managers, according to the incubation literature. Incubating activities do not need to artificially mirror challenges of the entrepreneurial process, but they might benefit from some of the pedagogical thoughts on how to stimulate learning, such as addressing the relational elements of the learning environment and actively incorporating uncertainty rather than speaking a language, as it did not exist.

The study of Pittaway and Cope '*raises implications for agencies engaged in entrepreneurial education outside the university environment. It shows that understanding how entrepreneurs learn is an important precondition for the development of programmes that facilitate learning*' (Pittaway and Cope 2007, 230). This resonates with some of the suggestions made with regard to improving pedagogical approaches in entrepreneurial education and support in general (Leitch et al. 2012, 738). One of Kolb's points about learning was that individuals tend to focus strongly on one or two stages of the cycle but need to be able to manage them all. According to Mumford (1995), the most effective learning processes occur when 'the learner' completes the complete learning cycle in relation to the present situations, problems and opportunities: What is the context, what are the needs, what information and experience are available, what conclusions can be drawn, and what can be done on the basis of these conclusions? It is the sequence of questions and actions that is described as the learning cycle, and in order to learn to act in new ways, the full circle must be activated.

9.7. Reflections for an entrepreneurial learning perspective

In the field of entrepreneurial learning Politis (2008) argues that '*there is a need to reconsider the static view on entrepreneurial learning, which presumes a direct link between a particular experience and the knowledge gained from this experience. Hence, even if experience is conceived as an important source of entrepreneurial learning, it is necessary to acknowledge the experimental process where experience is transformed into entrepreneurial knowledge*' (Politis 2008, 63). From a relational point of view, this quote demonstrates recognition of the processual – here referred to as experimental – and relational elements of learning that politicians, incubation managers and researchers have limited understanding of.

Both Rae and Cope were interested in the reflective capacity of the individual entrepreneur, what the entrepreneurial process should look like and all the things that entrepreneurial actors ought to do, which to a certain extent becomes a prescriptive to-do list but is not very instructive in relation to the *how-to* questions of entrepreneuring. Both Cope and Rae present prescriptions for entrepreneuring actors to reflect more and enter into double-loop learning, which to some extent conflicts with the common notion of entrepreneurs as doers rather than thinkers. In addition, they implicitly regard entrepreneuring as a highly articulated and planned process (Rae 2006, Cope 2005b). As with the theory on action learning and Cope's emphasis on the reflective entrepreneur, Gibb's emphasis on the empathic and super-competent advisor and Rae's specific prescriptions for the perfect process, there is a risk that they become too normative in their conclusions about how entrepreneurial learning happens or how entrepreneurial learning can be facilitated. However, besides pointing to a need for pedagogical considerations, they deal less with the actual pedagogies of how to create relationships, as they do not really get behind the notion that entrepreneurial learning is a social construct.

The social constructionist perspective and phenomenological investigations of entrepreneurial life worlds that both Rae (2006) and Cope (2005b) subscribe to, tells us that entrepreneuring is inherently a social phenomenon derived from individual sense-making and enactment (Fletcher 2006, 427). However, the phenomenological approach does not get us into the relational processes of becoming, but focuses instead on the pre-existing social and individual structures. In the context of incubating activities – which are basically about entrepreneurial becoming – and despite the acknowledging of an existing stock of experience and contextual learning tasks, I find that it makes sense to perceive the construction of both individual actors and entrepreneurial worlds as emerging from relational processes (McNamee and Hosking 2012, xv). Rae's description of the necessary entrepreneuring skills presented in chapter 5, informs us what the process should be like, but it does not tell us how we can go about designing processes of incubating activities that somehow enable entrepreneurial actors to live up to this description. If we want a deeper understanding of how to make relational realities from relational processes and find out how actors may interact and learn to create something, the relational stance suggests looking at the relationality and coordination between actors and their context: '*With a focus on relationality, relational constructionist ideas move us beyond determinist understandings of social behaviour/ practice. They also move us from over-privileging agency and its singular role in social construction processes. This is because their theoretical starting point is the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than the individual and private space of particular individuals*' (Fletcher 2006, 436). Actors with entrepreneurial aspirations are especially dependent on relational influences, as there are as-yet no structures, routines or expectations that construct the venture. Relational processes are crucial for producing and reproducing successful organising, and by engaging in practices; entrepreneuring actors can create and recreate their own community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002). The knowledge and understanding created in the community becomes the guide to action.

In their article about entrepreneurial learning, Cope and Watts (2000) emphasise a need for mentoring support programmes designed to help entrepreneurs interpret critical incidents as learning experiences. They argue that such focussed support needs to be contextual and individualised, and state, '*To create such facilitative, dynamic assistance would require a detailed knowledge of both entrepreneur and their business, and therefore, highlights the importance of long-term mentoring programmes within small businesses*' (Cope and Watts 2000:117). Again, very nice descriptions of what to do, but the challenge here, which the authors do not address, is also *how* to acquire this detailed knowledge about the venture and the actors. The empirical material is heavy on accounts indicating that getting close to the needs and dreams of an entrepreneurial project, in order to support it, is essentially difficult and a sensitive and emotional matter. The Best-Practice Narrative take for granted that the advisor, simply by virtue of acquiring the label of advisor, already *holds* a relevant network of resources to draw on, has the necessary skills to be a mentor and is attributed with the right amount of respect and legitimacy by the entrepreneur to establish a productive collaboration. Furthermore, and even more important, it is taken for granted that the entrepreneurs are willing to share their needs, dreams and anxieties with the mentor – that they trust the advice situation and that they have the willingness and desire to learn. It is expected by the policy makers and advisors that when something is free, people will be motivated and grateful. According to my experiences in the field, that is not necessarily the case. Incubation policies do not question whether entrepreneurs actually want to learn, since it does not deal with the interests of the entrepreneur – it assumes to know them. The consequence is that the question of how entrepreneuring actors learn, how they become motivated, and how they come to trust their advisors, are not viewed as important elements in the design and performance of incubating activities. It is not considered that entrepreneuring actors might have another agenda for the incubating process or other evaluative frameworks for deeming the activities relevant or irrelevant, than the incubation management and politicians. This is what makes dialogue between actors so important when want to direct the tensions, the passion and the energy of the field into a more productive direction than what I have listened to from the Blame-Game Narrative. For this particular field of dreams, emotions and political ambitions I find dialogue particularly appropriate, because '*Dialogue provides a container for slowing down speedy "internal" and "external" conversations, grooved patterns, unquestioned assumptions, and conventional tendencies to fragment or to break things up that are not really separate. It provides space for the display of fragmentations (we might say entifications), for friction between different values and assumptions, for listening, for reflexive practices, and for attention to the "how" of* *relational processes*' (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 70). The field of the incubation industry would benefit from more dialogue to set the scene for more productive interaction and fewer barriers to entrepreneurial learning.

Cope argues that failure forces entrepreneurs to critically examine the underlying assumptions that have guided their strategic actions (Cope 2010, 617). This dissertation supports that reflection and learning stem from critical incidents, failure and crisis, but that they also require openness and readiness towards reflection, learning and behaviour changes from the entrepreneur. From a relational perspective, the emphasis on failure is a need for authenticity – or what is known in the field of incubation as '*having skin in the game*': having something at stake, whether as an investor, an advisor or an entrepreneur! With this, I suggest that if entrepreneurial actors are open to knowledge, methods, feedback and experiences, it does not have to be a matter of failure or not whether they learn and adopt, but they do have to feel some kind of urgency. My empirical material suggests that entrepreneurs learn from both good and bad experiences, and also that what is regarded as a good or bad experience differs and varies with time and place – which is part of the learning process.

Understanding learning from a relational constructionist perspective is useful to the dissertation's search for a creative and productive language for incubating activities. This implies that the entrepreneurial learning process of incubating activities is the dialogue between a programme and an entrepreneuring venture/project, which is aimed at enabling new possibilities for making the venture, creating the market and developing the product. Entrepreneurial learning is not to be perceived as a product to be kept on the shelf for whenever it is needed to form a business plan or strategy. Business plans and strategies are outcomes of learning processes, and their quality depends on the quality of the venture's relationships and interactions (Bouwen and Hosking 2000, 267). Hosking speaks of *'the quality of conversations,'* which is an interesting concept, as it goes beyond the feedback and analysis perspectives of Argyris and Senge, which Hosking argues may end up creating too much resistance and too strong a focus on problems, in line with Blantern's (2010) criticism of action learning programmes. Indicators of quality include the possibility for polyphony or multiple voices and the possibility of such voices to be heard, to be reflectively examined in an including rather than an excluding process. Quality means the possibility for reciprocity, reflectivity and mutual acknowledgement. This implies a shift from what is learned and where learning is situated towards a focus on the quality of the process (Bouwen and Hosking 2000, 270). What is offered is an alternative for incubating practices to focus on relational learning in a social context of venturing (Bouwen 2001, 365).

The relational constructionist perspective complements and extends the traditional economic, institutional, personal and behavioural perspectives on business incubating initiatives by taking into account that venture creation is a dynamic, relational and contextual phenomenon that is continuously in the making – essentially, a mess! For the same reason, it is not possible to develop one model for support or one model for the selection of ventures to support (Bygrave 1991). If we agree that one desired outcome of a programme could be entrepreneurial learning to make entrepreneuring actors able to handle the uncertainty and manage relations after the programme, we need to design the programme in ways that are suited for increasing the likelihood of leading to a capacity change. This means that our focus should be on the process, not on what we believe the entrepreneurs need or would like to get. '*Relational constructionism does not imply that the practice of evaluation is wrong or bad. Rather, it invites us to pay attention to the relational practices we engage in when we enter this language game*' (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 81). The evaluative question about incubating initiatives should not only be about what works to create successful companies but also about how we provide value to the entrepreneurial process. I would like to promote another approach to evaluation, which goes beyond evaluation as an end-point or a product evaluation in dualities of good/bad, successful/unsuccessful and exciting/boring, and which instead allows for learning and value that broaden the potential for (inter)actions as successful outcomes of incubating activities. When actors such as governmental or private and non-profit companies/organisations choose to spend resources on incubating immature companies, they need to make certain conscious choices about how to manage the relationship between the involved actors and manage the expectations for the collaboration, the selection, the relevance of goals and the form of business incubation. If society wants to offer a helping hand and influence entrepreneurs with incubating activities, methods and actions it should not expect productive processes and progress to happen automatically. With this we may look into what entrepreneurial learning – as an output of relational constructions within and around the incubating context may be.

9.8. Concluding

In this final analytical chapter I have explained, from a relational learning perspective, some of the reasons why barriers to entrepreneurial learning are present in the field of incubating activities. I have presented three silent stories about relational construction, relevance of incubation offerings and uncertainty of both the entrepreneuring and incubating process, in the field about that I find to be particular important when explaining the lack of entrepreneurial learning and relational constructions. It is difficult to judge whether these stories are silenc*ed* on purpose or silent because they are taken for granted or not thought of. Nevertheless, I conclude that they are not part of the economic and managerial perspective on entrepreneurial support and in their silent form they become barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context. This is demonstrated in the dissertation as the Best-Practice Narrative, and has consequences for what kind of outcome we might expect from incubating activities. I find that some of the actors of the field have not yet decided to trust one another, and as the prerequisites of trust depend on the actor's participation in some form of social relationship (Coleman 1990), it is clear that the form of interaction and participation makes a difference for a relationship that should not be silent.

Reflecting on the kind of clashes of values and means constructing the narratives of the fieldwork highlighted in Chapters 6 and 7, I find that without proper dialogue, relationship and expectation management, the collaborative relationship between actors in the incubation industry is vulnerable – suggested in chapter 8. As I have experienced during the fieldwork, there is a risk that the relationship might end up being two actors facing each other dressed in superhero costumes and taking turns to deliver their monologues – and huge barriers to learning arise. When one party speaks, then the other puts on headphones to avoid being disturbed while preparing for his or her next monologue. The problem is that they can only enter each other's life and the mutual conversation if they open up to each other (Steyaert 2004, 10). As such I have demonstrated that relational approach to entrepreneurial learning is relevant to incubating activities; as such this stance does not perceive the entrepreneur as a student (as they themselves typically also do not) but as a partner in co-constructive processes. This perspective makes us see the learning situation that entrepreneurial actors interact within and learn from – or not, because '*awareness of "'relationality" adds an important dimension to the reflexivity of the parties and gives a perspective on how ongoing relationships are enacted in co-ordinations and conversations*' (Bouwen and Hosking 2000, 273).

A relational learning perspective view offers insights into the mundane character of the process, the changing nature of the venture/project/technology, and how and what the entrepreneur learns from the process. It also tells us something about what the entrepreneurs learn from practice, as opposed to the normative writings of what they *should* learn. As an example, three areas of strong concern for technology-based start-ups participating in the incubating programme are processes related to *recruitment, management of staff* and *contracting with investors.* These themes are very seldom touched upon as basic needs in the incubation literature and policy documents, which are much more concerned with business tools. Thus, programme managers might benefit from thinking less about what the participants should learn from a generic perspective and instead seek out the potentiality of the venture, identify the existing stock of experience and define the most pressing learning task at the moment.

The critique of action learning theory from Blantern (2010) together with the empirical material demonstrate how management and managerialism prevail in all organisational forms, also when the design of action learning programmes that are supposed to offer something different. Thus, when educational or support organisations plan or organise a learning programme, there is a risk it is developed as "*paradoxical systems for controlled creativity*" (Hjorth 2005, 387) in business contexts. As ventures are always 'in the making', the entrepreneurial learning mode is more experiential, problem-based hands-on and adjusted as one moves along, indicating that the managerial standard approach to learning will be insufficient to meet the needs of immature entrepreneuring actors, as it does not bring out the entrepreneurial about entrepreneuring (Hjorth 2005). An action learning approach that does not take the entrepreneurial about entrepreneurial learning into account, risks not being able to be action oriented

Chapter 10: Conclusion and contribution

10.1. Insisting on an entrepreneurial learning perspective

The conclusion provides the accomplishments of the research process and the dissertation. The introduction stated the urgency and importance of entrepreneurial support activities as a remedy for growth, and the longing for more knowledge about how to *make* more successful entrepreneurs. The dissertation sat out to investigate the barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context – essentially to provide answers to why this ambition of supporting entrepreneurial growth is so difficult to realize.

Support for Entrepreneurial growth is the key-defining feature of the field, and as such it shapes and constrains the stories that are told in the field – or can be told (Bruner 2004, 703). The central story of the fieldwork is the well established understanding that incubating activities should '*provide some degree of supporting infrastructure to compensate for perceived failures or imperfections in the market mechanism*' (Bøllingetoft and Ulhøi 2005, 269). However, as Auerswald argues, which is supported by this dissertation, when our focus is on technology-based start-ups with a growth potential, incubating initiatives are often not targeting the imperfections and failures that make the difference. The main barrier of these start-ups are that, '*multiple barriers of information, valuation, trust and culture render particularly severe the contracting challenges for entrepreneurs seeking to realize the economic value of a science-based invention*' (Auerswald 2007, 24), and it is in the context of this process that the entrepreneuring actors meet the incubation industry. I have identified a gap in incubation theory and practice – a lack of relational focus of what it means to support a particular venture, in its local and social context. This is why this dissertation has been investigating how the relationship between entrepreneuring actors and incubator actors affect the incubating activities, and in what ways it is possible for incubating actors to collaborate with entrepreneurs to help them learn from practice. If the goal of incubating activities is to grow ventures and jobs, the goal is purely economic, and it seems that pursuing such a goal is not conducive to achieving it – instead, we need to look at the prerequisite (inter) actions of economic growth. This is why paying attention to the details of narratives of the field has been valuable (Smith and Anderson 2004, 126) as narratives direct the actions of an organisational field (Czarniawska 2004).

Based on the initial fieldwork it was clear to me that in order to investigate the barriers to facilitate and understand entrepreneurial learning, there was a need to challenge some of the exiting assumptions and myths in the field of incubation and entrepreneurship (Rehn et al. 2013). I needed to turn to theories and methodologies that were able to capture the processual and relational elements of entrepreneurial learning. The comprehensive fieldwork has made it possible to make a longitudinal study of incubating practices, and for that reason the research question is answered using a relational constructionist approach (Hosking 2007). From a relational constructionist perspective, entrepreneurs, advisors, venture capitalists, incubator managers and others are understood as co-constructors of creative processes of venturing and in an ideal description they collaborate when they '*relate in ways that support inter-dependent, different but equal relations*' (Hosking 2007, 30).

As a consequence, the premise of the dissertation has been that entrepreneurial learning is a prerequisite for entrepreneurial growth. The analysis shows that the existing narratives of the field are not as productive to facilitate, nor understand entrepreneurial learning as we might hope for, and chapter 3 and 4 outline the possibility that the architects of the Accelerator programme do not approach their task from a learning-perspective. This means that throughout the dissertation runs an insisting voice about the necessary connection between incubating activities and entrepreneurial learning as a capacity change for acting entrepreneurially – and what happens when the field does not work explicitly with a learning mindset. The intention is to open up a discussion of the implications of entrepreneurial learning as a process and outcome of incubating activities.

10.2. A unique multi-voice study

The industrial PhD study has resulted in an in-depth multi-voiced analysis, providing insights and understanding of the values, assumptions and actions that drive the actors of my field – an Accelerator programme and its context. The narratives of my fieldwork, presented in the analytical chapters do not necessarily confirm the field as more 'true,' simply because several perspectives have been outlined, but they do 'thicken' (Geertz 2000) our understanding of the ideas and beliefs that constitute the Accelerator context. The four Actor Narratives (representing the voices of advisors, entrepreneurs, policy actors and the critical actors) and the Best Practice Narrative (demonstrated through the stories of Add-On, Access-To and Pave-the-Way) all aim for entrepreneurial growth (prosperity, jobs, progress). Their language and actions of how support leads to growth, seals the narratives as a community with meaning, and an industry with a shared understanding and language - the necessity of entrepreneurship and support for entrepreneurs.

The dissertation has illustrated that assumptions and language at policy level and the level of incubator managers have considerable influence on policy priorities and the design, performance and management of incubating activities. As most other fields, this field also has its established assumptions – which come to act as truths, interpretative templates beyond discussion hard to question - because they also stabilize the field (Czarniawska 2008, 49). An example we can think of is the challenge for the start-ups to secure funding, as it is a well-known 'truth' in the field that most start-ups need funding – at least when they reach the growth phase. As a consequence, entrepreneuring actors engaging in the incubation industry dedicate much of their time and effort, including participation in support programmes and competitions, to secure funding - instead of doing other things, such as selling and finding new customers. The few times I have sought to question this need for funding (and the enormous amount of resources spent on trying to get it) in conversations with actors in the field, I have been met by arguments about fierce competition and small windows of opportunity – and the comment that '*there is no time to <u>not</u> get funding.'* Similarly, it is also 'well known' in the field of advisors and venture capitalists that technology-based entrepreneurs are introvert and technology-focused and do not know what is best for them or which challenges they need to be prepared for. Therefore, support functions need to help them understand – by either carrot or stick! From an outsider perspective, it seems important that researchers, but also advisors and entrepreneurs in this field, are critical of these kinds of ready-made statements, as they may not be universal facts.

It is my analysis that the Best-Practice Narrative can be related to Gibb's (2000) criticism of entrepreneurship research; as based on static and underdeveloped ideas and concepts of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activity that remain present in the field without being empirically tested, and which have a heavy influence on policy priorities (Gibb 2000, 13). Blackburn and Schaper (2012) support this point with the following statement:

> '*There is a gap between research evidence and policy interventions – the key criticism is that SME and entrepreneurship policies keep re-inventing the wheel – meaning that there is a poor accumulation of knowledge and sharing of experience between research and policy making* ' (Blackburn and Schaper 2012, 2).

The fieldwork impressions of this dissertation support this assertion. Chapter 7 demonstrates how a Best-Practice Narrative reflects an entitative and possessive view of the individual actor as a container of resources and skills, which from an outside view, in a study of incubating activities, leads to a misunderstanding of how knowledge is constructed and how networking is performed as well as a number of un-reflected taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships. Dachler and Hosking (1995) argue that, '*relations are given little explanatory power*' in the traditional literatures of management and organisation. This conclusion can also be said to be the case of my fieldwork, where it is shown in Chapter 7 that a Blame-Game Narrative is applied by many actors, instead of exploring the lack of relational constructions and learning environment. According to Gergen (2009), respect and trust is a by-product of participation in social interactions, making the active interaction of participants and advisors crucial. Incubating actors should know that interrelated mechanisms is not to be taken for granted (Gergen 2009, 15), even though the setting is a free-of-charge incubation programme. This illuminates why the matter of supporting and receiving support is delicate, and as a first step, the supply and demand sides have to agree on a form of communication, before they can agree on goals or content. The dissertation is fully in line with Gibb, stating that;' *There will need to be empathy with small entrepreneurial ways of doing, organising, communicating, thinking, feeling and learning*' (Gibb 2009).

Since learning is difficult to capture as a general phenomenon, it is relevant to be specific about the prerequisites of learning (relational constructions) when we discuss the concept within an entrepreneurial frame, as presented in chapter 5. The literature on incubation generally does not write much about learning, but instead about performance measures in an unspecified manor of growth and participants' reactions and growth is more narrowly interpreted as creating workplaces and gaining access to capital and knowledge. Such performance language is good for selling the incubation idea, but I have not found it appropriate for entrepreneurial learning. The multi-voiced analysis shows that the field lack narrative resources for speaking about entrepreneurial venturing as a creative, unpredictable process that cannot be controlled, but which may be steered towards targets by means of experience, local knowledge, market insights, strong networking activities, participation, mutual responsibility between actors and relational competences. However, Rae's framework presented in chapter 5, shows us that entrepreneuring is not only about acquiring basic knowledge of business or industry but also about positioning one-self as an attractive partner in a chosen industry – playing the game of the particular context, as knowledge only becomes valuable when it is activated, and not just from being offered or added-on (Warren et al. 2009, 493). For the same reason, the dissertation suggests that what entrepreneurial actors need to learn from the incubating processes is to organise and negotiate their relationships wisely, test local combinations, reflect on them and seek out new ones (Rae 2006, 2007) - but also that this does not happen without articulating it as a entrepreneurial learning need.

10.3. The story of the Accelerator programme is not a fairy tale

For each Actor Narrative presented in chapter 6, the creation of new companies and their success forms the central axis, and stand in opposition to what actors constructs as the non-entrepreneurial world: public bureaucracies, working 9 to 5, preserving the status quo and old-school management. The non-entrepreneurial world is rejected as dull, boring, and predictable and a value set that society must eventually abandon if it is to survive. Nevertheless, despite the shared stories of being on an important mission, and creating the people (Superheroes) who are going to pay for us when we get old and the shared sense-making that keep this field together, the overall story about creating new ventures from an Accelerator programme is not a fairy tale, as much as it is a drama of passion, unfulfilled ambitions and hopes of making the hockey stick real. As Hjorth (2007) suggests, there is a drama of entrepreneurship that is neglected as a consequence of the traditional focus on the economic aspects of entrepreneurship (Hjorth 2007, 722), and I conclude the same can be said of the activities of the Accelerator programme.

The analysis demonstrates that despite good intentions and a clearly expressed need for supporting entrepreneuring ventures, there are many differences between the actors of incubating activities, which this dissertation interprets as part of barriers to entrepreneurial learning. It is demonstrated that these differences relate to the identity of the main actors in the field – demonstrated as Actor Narratives, which amongst many factors are constructed from a) beliefs, b) values, c) 'ways of doing', d) sets of assumptions about the way the advice is valued and produced or *should* be valued and produced, e) theoretical and educational background, f) the language in which assumptions and beliefs are expressed, g) attitudes and h) overall narratives of advisors, entrepreneurs, policy makers and investors. The clashes of Actor Narratives in the field are rooted in these complex psychologically and socially constructed factors, which clash, but somehow go together with a shared understanding of and way of legitimising incubating initiatives. The dissertation has shown that it is a paradox, and the field does not have a proper language for explaining this clash – nor the lack of definable outcome of incubating activities. They cannot explain it!

When a narrative is silent, it is not part of the active standardised language of the field, but it still acts and influences the performances of the field. The learning perspective brings attention to some of the silent stories in the field. It is demonstrated through the Silent Relationship Narrative in Chapter 9 that the Best Practice Narrative, which directs the actions, methods, content and performance of the Accelerator programme, does not adequately address the issues of uncertainty, relevance and relationships because it does not to a sufficient degree address the relational 'how' of support. As an example it is thought provoking that the Accelerator programme to a large degree fails on delivering *hands-on, applicable support* in the eyes of some of the participants – even though this was the starting point of the programme – as we heard it from the Programme manager in Chapter 2. It is interesting how hard it is to escape *traditional educational methods for knowledge transfer* of the Best-Practice Narrative, and it becomes a paradox that some entrepreneuring participants of an Accelerator programme perceive the methods of the programme as being non-relevant to entrepreneurs!

In order to understand the silent narratives of the fieldwork, I found it necessary to go beyond the existing Action Narratives about support and growth, as these only allow for certain voices in the field and exclude others. I find that the Silent-Relationship Narrative and the silent stories of relational construction, uncertainty and relevance is part of the answer to the lack of impact that the incubation industry has had so far. When I approach the incubating relationship as one that is associated with interactions, creation and entrepreneurial learning (a relationship that is supposed to stimulate entrepreneurship), this is what I expect to 'hear' and thus the basis for silence of alternative aspects. When the stories of the field indicate low-level capacity change and a low-level of relational constructions, I find a silence to be 'present.'

As we have seen it from the analysis, narratives can be productive in shaping structure, language and relations of an entire industry of support. The analysis also shows that the self-confirming agreements about purpose and goal constructs self-legitimizing ideas about what is right and needed and can silence other narratives. It is important to state that this silencing, intentional or not, should not be interpreted as a result of 'evil' actors who are trying to disguise the lack of impact, but rather as an outcome of the self-referential nature of narrative constructions (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009). Geiger and Antonacopoulou (2009) write,

> "*Despite the existence of critical voices (from inside as well as outside) that the organization is aware of, the self-referential nature of the narrative constructions creates a self-reinforcing feedback mechanism that implicit confirms dominant assumptions*" (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 431).

This is a precise description of how I have interpreted narratives interacting during my research process. It is therefore my understanding that the silencing of certain stories in the field is therefore not necessarily intentional, but a result of the available explanations and narratives in field.

10.4. Five barriers to entrepreneurial learning in an incubator context

My way of acting as a researcher in the field has been performative and enacts certain stories about incubating practices in the field –and my search for entrepreneurial learning has been more provocative than expected. I am not claiming that my interactive, performative research methods allow me to find the truth or tell any kind of story I want to– it has been a way of telling other, less known stories about incubating practices (Steyaert 2011, 81), which have led to alternative explanations and understandings in the field. Thus, the ethnographer's presence in the field of the *local storytellers* takes account of what the respondents say and how they say it but is also sensitive to the narratively contingent conditions of designing certain stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 21). Based on my *staged conversations* (Czarniawska 2004, 122) in the field I highlight an alternative view on the everydayness of organising in incubating contexts, which give rise to alternative answers to the barriers of entrepreneurial learning. As such the analytical story of the barriers to entrepreneurial learning is also the contribution of the dissertation. Based on the analysis I point to five central barriers to entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context that I find it possible to work with in praxis in order to overcome them, at least to some degree.

- **No.1 barrier to entrepreneurial learning: a Clash of Actor Narratives**

The Actor Narratives represent different perspectives, attitudes and assumptions of the four main actors in the field. The narratives are bound together by an agreement about the importance of support for entrepreneurial growth, but clashes on "how" to reach this goal. This "how" concerns language of support, roles of the relationship, responsibility, methods for knowledge sharing, what is considered professional – and end up conflicting. To my judgement I have been part of a field with actors that define themselves through strong identity narratives, and that advisor, investors and participants are still not convinced of the potential value of collaborating. The construction of the clashing narratives makes us aware, that actors in the field do not necessarily respect each other from the beginning of their interactions, and in many cases this respect is never established. This means that we in some cases have listened to stories about a waste of time and resources, as this clash comes to take away the potential space for collaboration between complementary resources, establishment of new networks and entrepreneurial creation. As a result, an interdependent, different, but equal relationship is only seldom being constructed.

Scepticism towards the unknown is well known among humans and systems, but it was a surprise during the fieldwork that the prejudices and critical attitudes were that dominating. As the clash is presented in chapter 6, it comes to stand as a central barrier to entrepreneurial learning experiences and openly sharing the challenges of the venture and the limitations of an Accelerator programme - not least because it is not spoken about, but kept in the corridors and hidden behind facemasks, as too much is at stake. The participants want to "get as much as possible" from the programme and hopes to be promoted into prosperous networks and investor environments – and the advisors want the participants see them as authorities with attractive resources to offer, together with the programme target of a specific number of graduates. The clash is critical as working with and attracting complementary competencies is a significant learning area for most entrepreneurs, recall Rae (2006) and Cope (2005), but also Auerwald's (2007) argument about the market gap of technology based entrepreneurs is exactly related to contracting and working with strangers. For the same reason, illustrating this clash is an important contribution to both practice and academia within business incubation.

Finding: We cannot take it for granted that entrepreneurs, advisors or investors appreciates and are open to complementary resources (knowledge, methods). Preparation for collaboration, exchange and mutual learning is a difficult task and should be taken seriously, in order to avoid clashes of narratives and waste of resources.

- **No. 2 barrier to entrepreneurial learning: The Best-Practice Narrative does not do the trick - alone**

The incubation literature presented in chapter 3, tends to take an instrumental view of the "what" (services and tools) that the incubator needs to deliver. Many considerations are made about what young ventures need, what they should receive and expectations about how this help (paving the way) will accelerate entrepreneurs. The instrumental literature and policy reports are typically not very precise in specifying the "how" of processes of providing support – and the fieldwork investigations also indicate that the 'implementation' part of services attracts low attention. The constructions of instrumental, pre-described programmes and initiatives comes from the assumptions of the Best-Practice Narrative – implying a constellation of the advisors and incubating managers as the delivering part – adding on knowledge, resources and opening doors, and entrepreneuring actors as the receiving and passive part – getting access to the services and knowledge the advisor thinks they need. The analysis highlights several challenges of this narrative, and how the Add-On of tools and models is questionable as facilitator for entrepreneurial learning and how Pave-the-Way and Access-To stories may take away important learning lessons. Based on the Future-Practice Narrative cases, it has been highlighted that sometimes, it is the challenge, the dysfunction, the frustration or the provocations that initiates creative processes, brings forth hypotheses or makes us try out new combinations of elements

When advisors work with a toolbox of models, they are likely to find problems that are suitable for the toolbox, which might give a false belief that the process is on the right track. As many elements of a start-up are questionable and problematic, it may not make sense to isolate one problem without seeing the bigger picture. Hence, deciding on one problem may be a way of silencing the overall uncertainty of the project and incubating activities. Most people who act within complex systems or processes seems to love methods, tools, benchmarks and evaluations, because it makes us feel on safe ground and that we are doing something meaningful – as delivering an analysis, or a business plan, or a phone number to a very important person. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that the deliverable is nevertheless not a satisfying goal – until it is implemented, and a plan cannot be the end! The dissertation highlights the problem that the Best-Practice Narrative does not contain a proper language for implementation of knowledge, models and tools – which is closely related to the learning process of entrepreneuring. How knowledge is produced and activated – made relevant to the particular venture - is not properly developed and the incubating relationship does not become a community of practice for entrepreneurial learning. Based on my field studies I conclude that the Best-Practice Narrative is not evaluated properly, as it ends up being illusional in its promises about growth and acceleration – which create very disappointed customers.

Finding: The exiting methods and language for delivering service and access to entrepreneurs are insufficient for stimulating entrepreneurial learning processes. Most actors in the fieldwork agree on the legitimacy of the Best-Practice Narrative and the practices they produce. Their appropriateness is not questioned and only few actors have the fantasy and courage to act outside this narrative.

- **No. 3 Barrier to entrepreneurial learning: Blame Gaming instead of asking how questions**

The Blame Game Narrative consists of a variety of ways of pointing fingers at the 'other'. In my interpretation these stories are produced when the field is confronted with direct questions of impact, learning and implementation of knowledge. Instead of discussing the anxiety and assumptions about incubating activities, a Blame Game is entered. The Blame Game Narrative therefore demonstrates the reaction to unfulfilled hopes of entrepreneurs, advisors and investors – expressing frustration and maybe also unrealistic expectations.

It is my evaluation that many participants do not enter the programme with a learning mindset, and that it can be challenging to make them listen or engage wholeheartedly in exercises. Listening to the interviews it has been easier to identify a calculating orientation – about what kind services the participants expects to get. In practice, a calculating orientation (Gergen 2009) to interaction in the incubator setting has a very functional outlook: Exploit the resources on the shelves, and never look back. It is not relational and does not have a learning focus. A learning orientation sets other demands for both advisors and participants, and is much more complicated. In this study I find that the mixed expectations of both getting/ providing tools and capital (Add-on) – but also about *being* accelerated and learning the robes of entrepreneuring is disturbing to the incubating process as these are two highly different deliverables – and requires different 'learning' methods for delivery and application.

Within the artificial context (in terms of relations) of business incubation, the Accelerator programme has a hard time convincing their participants of the necessity and relevance of camps and theoretical frameworks. Some advisors and investors working with entrepreneurial ventures claim that entrepreneuring actors are lazy, self-sufficient and un-ambitious, lacking desire and motivation. As we have listened to, we cannot only blame the entrepreneuring actors alone for the failed attempts of support. According to Blackburn and Schaper (2012), the literature on policy intervention often overlooks the world-views of entrepreneuring actors (Blackburn and Schaper 2012, 2). This study shows that what may be interpreted as lazy or unwilling to listen – might be expressions of scepticism and biases towards consultancy and public initiatives, which are not managed. By constructing the Actor narratives, this study gives an in-depth understanding of the forces driving the actors of the incubator context and that an alternative language for interacting, sharing and listening is needed.

Finding: When confronted with questions about impact and learning, the field answers by blaming the other side. The Blame Game Narrative is the result of the un-managed expectations and relations. Actors may find Blame-Game stories harmless, but the analysis shows they act as barriers to openness and respect.

- **No.4 Barrier to entrepreneurial learning: Relationship and learning is taken for granted**

Relationship is needed when actors are to collaborate and create in an unpredictable and uncertain setting. The analysis presents clashes of narratives in the fieldwork, which suggests that the incubating relationship matters to the individual perception of relevance, hence the reception of a service offered or knowledge presented are difficult to separate from the sender. When relationships are taken for granted and important elements of learning processes not talked about, there is a risk that ventures are not organised and developed when relational interactions are not made.

It is my conclusion that the lack of relational constructions in the field inhibits entrepreneurial learning. I conclude that relationship in many ways is taken for granted in the Accelerator context and that the field does not have a language for the relational and psychological aspects of incubation – they expect management and consultancy language to do the trick. This is interpreted as a Silent Relationship Narrative. An advisor matched with a participant is not necessarily a relationship in itself that constitutes trust; it is the commitment to reciprocity – which is not necessarily present. Maritz and Brown (2013) show that when incubating initiatives are placed outside universities, the elements of pedagogic and motivation are silent and the focus is on economic goals such as growth and job creation (Maritz and Brown 2013, 237), and this dissertation supports this finding by claiming that motivation of the entrepreneur and pedagogic skills of the advisor seems to be taken for granted. A substantial part of the interview material shows that participants of the Accelerator programme express a low degree of commitment to/responsibility for the incubating process. Initially many are reluctant about the programme, do not know what to expect and have not yet decided to trust – maybe because trust is related to risk and exposure (Ruef et al. 2003).

If there is no membership, no team-spirit, no community of practice, there is distrust and reluctance towards the offerings. Central concepts in the incubating process therefore include motivation and the establishment of legitimacy, equality and respect in the local context of the support (Fayolle and Gailly 2008). When that is in place, we may talk about what entrepreneurs need and which models to apply.

Finding: The motivation of the entrepreneur or the advisor to relate, listen, participate or learn through incubating activities cannot be taken for granted – but has to be relationally constructed

- **No. 5 Barrier to entrepreneurial learning: Defining the learning task**

I have not been able to pin out five things that all entrepreneuring actors need. The needs of entrepreneuring actors of the fieldwork seem to be much more relational and contextual in nature, indicating that needs depend on the social context, stock of experience, resources, the actors' history and the mutual relationship. The analysis shows that the needs of the participants are hard to pre-define, despite considerable screening and selection processes - as the available narrative resources of the incubation industry seem to imply that they can. However from chapter 8 of the analysis, a Future-Practice Narrative suggests that needs as relationally constructed in the context if the relationship is accepted. The need is to be able to act entrepreneurially about the particular venture.

Relating to/networking with other actors and learning how to relate to/connect with new and different actors is part of organising any venture and therefore a crucial learning outcome. It is the organising of relationships, sometimes also referred to as the management of context and the negotiation of enterprise, which incubating participants seek to master (Gartner 1988, Rae 2004, Cope 2005a). Hence, entrepreneuring is not only about gathering resources but also about demonstrating the better use of resources that already exist, regardless of who owns them. When we regard incubating activities as learning opportunities, the ultimate challenge for actors entering into collaboration is '*to be able to engage with others in such a way that the relational practice that is created opens up opportunities to* *enact and to allocate space to all differences that emerge in the encounter, not just as impediments but as new sources of creativity and innovation*' (Bouwen 2010, 38). This is as important for participation in an accelerator programme – as acting entrepreneurial about any venture.

From a relational constructionist perspective, incubating activities could be regarded as part of the entrepreneurial learning process, offering the venture additional resources in the form of dialogue and collaboration to be used and acted upon by the entrepreneurs. I have not found it to be effective in terms of entrepreneurial development of the venture, to regard the Accelerator programme as a quick fix or a magic potion that brings about financial success. Entrepreneuring actors could perceive their learning task as being able to interact with advisors, investors and other resources affiliated with the incubator – as it is just the next activity in an endless series of interactions that entrepreneuring actors need to perform, and the incubator is not a bad place to practice and learn. I point to a need for a relational perspective – including psychological and pedagogical considerations to create a learning community.

Finding: When a new venture is being created, no matter the experiences and resources, there is always a local, historical and social learning task, with regard to behaving and learning through entrepreneuring.

Outlining the five barriers to learning provides us with a starting point for future research on how it could be possible to see incubating contexts - as a space and laboratory for entrepreneurial learning. In his research, Cope repeatedly points out that it is not enough to define what entrepreneurs need to learn – meaning *the what* of incubation activities. The development of a dynamic learning perspective also needs to take account of *the how*, meaning '*the specific processes of learning that stimulate the learning content'* (Cope 2005a, 380). Being fully in touch with practice is both a challenge to researchers with a constructionist orientation and to programme designers with the best intentions of being action-oriented and in touch with the needs of the participants. The entrepreneurial learning field has matured and we now have considerable knowledge on what entrepreneurial learning is – as presented in chapter 5. But there is still a need for further investigation on how to facilitate entrepreneurial learning in the incubator context experiences as a collaborative, mutual responsible process and handle the substantial amount of barriers to entrepreneurial learning as this dissertation has highlighted.

The relational constructionist perspective complements and extends the traditional economic, institutional, personal and behavioural perspectives on business incubating initiatives by taking into account that venture creation is a dynamic, relational and contextual phenomenon that is continuously in the making – essentially, a mess! For the same reason, it is not possible to develop one model for support or one model for the selection of ventures to support. Success becomes a moving target if we do not locate its initial position, and that makes it impossible to judge whether something was a failure or a success. We may set the goal to be more jobs, stronger businesses and a stronger entrepreneurial culture in the local economy, but we cannot measure incubating activities directly on absolute measures. Work could be done to develop appropriate performance measures on the value of incubating activities, and attention could be focused on the process, as it is common in other activities, with the purpose of improving the capabilities of the actors. However, by understanding entrepreneurial processes as relational interactions (and thus hopefully the creation of a company), the dissertation claims that the most important goal of business incubating activities should be '*learning about the nature and management of relationships*' (Cope 2005a, 380). This means that the short-term goal of incubating activities should be a processual outcome, a way of organising that is helpful for the specific venture in the specific context. When incubating activities have produced a suitable number of incubated companies to make statistical analyses possible, and enough time has passed in order to expect realistic figures concerning sales and earnings, workplaces and growth rates, such measures should obviously also be included as long-term goals of incubating activities. '*Relational constructionism does not imply that the practice of evaluation is wrong or bad. Rather, it invites us to pay attention to the relational practices we engage in when we enter this language game*' (McNamee and Hosking 2012, 81). The evaluative question about incubating initiatives should not only be about what works to create successful companies but also about how we provide value to the entrepreneurial process. I would like to promote another approach to evaluation, which goes beyond evaluation as an end-point or a product evaluation in dualities of good/bad, successful/unsuccessful and exciting/boring, and which instead allows for learning and value that broaden the potential for (inter)actions as successful outcomes of incubating activities. When actors such as governmental or private and non-profit companies/organisations choose to spend resources on incubating immature companies, they need to make certain conscious choices about how to manage the relationship between the involved actors and manage the expectations for the collaboration, the selection, the relevance of goals and the form of business incubation. If society wants to offer a helping hand and influence entrepreneurs with incubating activities, methods and actions it should not expect productive processes and progress to happen automatically.

I find that policy initiatives such as business incubation need to have an explicitly stated goal, and if traditional economic measures such as growth and revenue are not suitable for evaluation, other measures or other goals should be defined. It is obvious that incubating activities can strive to be successful by entering into a virtuous cycle, in the sense that good programmes will attract good companies, which in turn will attract strong investors and subsequently lead to successful exits, which repeats the cycle of attracting better ventures and investors. However, instead of searching primarily for the best entrepreneuring actors who would probably make it anyway, incubating activities can also strive to offer an entrepreneurial learning environment to actors who are not quite able to perform entrepreneurial activities yet, but who are willing to collaborate and learn. Such activities can leave it to Tech-Stars and Y-Combinator to pick the winners.

10.5. Still looking for entrepreneurial learning

The common critique of incubating activities and support for entrepreneurial projects is articulated as lack of results – in terms of concrete tangible outcomes. I say that the critique should focus more on the lack of capacity to create a learning environment! With this dissertation I have interpreted the search for growth as a societal need for *entrepreneurial learning and increased entrepreneurial capacity*, and as such the main goal of incubating activities is to facilitate and stimulate these – which means that the goal is both economic (jobs and growth), but also pedagogical and relational (Maritz and Brown 2013, 239). As a result, this study has ended up being a close analysis of some of the intertwined, challenging and complex processes of *making* the makers of the world that usually are not discussed in incubation literature.

A relational view contributes to the existing field of incubation by pointing to some of the mechanisms, dynamics and actions that leads to entrepreneurial change or impact, which are deeply influenced by the relationships among actors, and this makes relational mechanisms important to consider in incubation practice and theory. Relational practice thinking complements the dominant content thinking of incubating, the 'what' focus in institutional, economic and organisational thinking, with a 'how' perspective on incubating and insights into 'who' is and is not part of the process (Bouwen 2001, 361). One of the main arguments in the dissertation is that a topic as entrepreneurial learning, the relationship between actors and the valuation of activities are only to a limited extent spoken about and come to act in the field as silent (Hosking and Hjorth 2004).

I argue that business incubation as a relational, creative and collaborative process is silenced when support initiatives is narrated and performed as solutions and quick-fixes (Best Practice) – and become a one-way delivery of Add-On services from teachers and advisors. The argument is not that support should only be understood in other ways and that the existing narratives and ways of doing should be disregarded. My intention with chapter 8, was to show that supplementary narratives of practicing of support is possible – and with the Future-Practice Narrative to open up new possibilities and ways to interact and co-construct with entrepreneuring actors (Hjorth 2007, 718). The Future-Practice Narrative illustrates that there is no-fits-all method for interacting with entrepreneurs, but that it can be productive to allow for mutual responsibility of the incubating relationship, as needs are relative and contextual.

From a relational perspective, the entrepreneuring individual is never completely alone or the master of progress or setbacks, as actors is always part of larger relational and contextual processes. This contradicts with traditional stories about entrepreneurs, typically presenting them as special super-humans, which often have an individualised language about entrepreneurial creation that affects entrepreneuring actor's personal narrative (Dachler 2010, 41). The remarkable point is that it is not only the entrepreneurship literature, policy makers and autobiographies of very successful entrepreneurs that prefer the stories of superheroes, it is very much also reproduced by the entrepreneurial community at all levels. Entrepreneurs and actors in the secondary market of entrepreneurship (the Incubation industry) love to tell the story about the intelligent and gap-spotting underdog, misunderstood-by-the-system person with special skills who defeated the lazy and content established structures. Maybe such Best-Practice stories are motivating for some individuals, but to many others that do not identify with superheroes and speak the language of misunderstood geniuses, these stories might prevent the broader population in trying out entrepreneurial adventures. I find that it is important to hear other stories of entrepreneurship that account for the complexity of entrepreneuring, and add more colours to the picture of who is an entrepreneur (Ahl 2007, 2).

According to Gibb little progress has been made in meeting the learning needs of new ventures over the last decades (Gibb 2009, 210). Although Gibb has a sharp eye for the needs, motivations, assumptions and myths of the field, he still places the main responsibility for the incubating process on the supply side as the facilitator of learning. Gibb identifies a supply and demand side of incubating activities and the many inconsistencies among them that hamper productive collaboration, but he does not present it as a mutual responsibility to minimise the gaps between the two sides. I find that empathy (Gibb 1997, Gibb 2009) with the feelings of the other and continuous critical reflection on the entrepreneurial process (Cope 2010, Higgins et al. 2013) together with constructive engagement in the context (Rae 2006) need to be present on both sides of the collaborative relationship, and I present learning options and needs as relationally constructed. Gibb, Cope, Rae and Higgins all have a tendency to make normative statements about what the advisor or entrepreneur needs to do, such as being highly reflective or facilitating in a certain way, but they are not very specific about how these personal improvements to action are facilitated by the interactions between them. In addition, I question the appropriateness of making one party solely responsible in terms of possessing great facilitative skills, an amazing network or an excellent creative mind, like some sort of oracle, while casting the other party as the passive recipient and then to expect any development to spring from their meeting. In general the dissertation questions whether traditional consultancy as presented in chapter 3 is adequate for an entrepreneurial learning perspective. In the traditional advisor perspective, the participant needs to be convinced about the truth of the Advice Narrative – and the advisor should use certain personal 'tricks' or methods to gain respect and legitimacy for it (Smith 2008, 42). Reading Schein (1987), the advisor perspective, seems to imply that is the participant who needs to see the light, not the advisor (Schein 1987, 92). However, the question is whether the Advice Narrative, encapsulating a consultancy approach, and the methods used to perform it are suitable for cultivating entrepreneurial start-ups and making them strong and interdependent?

Incubating initiatives has to be clear on what kind of support unit they want to be – a service provider or a learning laboratory. This means that designers of incubators should ask themselves what they want the incubator to be – and at the same time also ask whether this is what they are capable of delivering with their current resources and methods. The dissertation examines what happens when we go from perceiving the incubator as service setting to viewing incubating activities as potential learning processes, and in that sense the dissertation bridges the fields of entrepreneurial education and training and business incubation, seeking to make a contribution to business incubation theory from a relational learning perspective. This shift in outcome perspective from service to learning has implications for the perception of the subject, as the entrepreneuring actor goes from being a consumer to being a co-constructive participant, which in turn has implications for the possible expectations of incubating activities. From a relational point of view, learning is expected to happen on both sides of the relationship, both as an increased capacity to act and also as a mutual openness to the destination of the project. To rethink incubating activities as learning contexts rather than activities that 'fix' problems is perhaps more radical than one might think! How would it influence the narratives of the incubating industry if the *offering* was not a service but instead qualified provocation, learning opportunities and the expectations of mutual responsibility?

Appendix

Appendix A): Post-Programme interview guide Round 3 – May 2010

Work document: Explorative investigation of the experienced benefits of former participants

The qualitative method is to reveal praxis through a series of subjective descriptions, which implies that the individuality of the respondent is included in the qualitative analysis. This Interview investigation is targeted to uncover Programme- participants' understanding of their reality, i.e. a description of respondents' creation of meaning with the purpose of interpretation of actions. A semi-structured interview guide provides possibilities to pursue what in the given situation proves to be the object of interest for the following questions.

The purpose of the study is to know more about what the entrepreneurs have experienced from the Programme participation; if they are better to do more systematically reflections, has a better understanding of market mechanisms, and an understanding of network – i.e. exploitation of their social capital in the chosen industry (Warren et al. 2009, 485). It is interesting what competence they have in networking, and how much of their network goes beyond the technical environment in relation to how to assess how Programme has contributed to the construction of their strategic potential.

In relation to the PhD thesis these interviews are supposed to contribute to the specification of the research question and theme in the study of, to what extent is it possible to learn network, transfer networks, or at least get an understanding of the importance of networks' (as relations and resources) importance for commercial success. It will be the preconception of the thesis that a proactive approach to develop an external network, which can be strengthened/developed through the incubation programme is an essential element in they strive for a central industrial position, influence, and not least independence. In both cases the incubation programme functions as a nursery for the strong participants.

It is the hypothesis of the research project that it is central for entrepreneurs that they are aware of the strength of the external network, not just the appropriation of basic business know-how, but to develop their own position as an emerging new firm in their chosen industry. It is hard to assess if network capabilities could be attributed to apprenticeship, role models, or collaboration tasks with other entrepreneurs in the same situation, but it does not appear as if the entrepreneurs learn it in a formal way. On the other side, if the network abilities are decisive for the eventual success of enterprises, as much literature indicate it is important that entrepreneurs understand this as early as possible in the process (Warren et. 2009, 490). Because of this it is essential to study what is the influence of Programme on the entrepreneurs' understanding of network and try to strengthen the parts of the programme, which could contribute to this understanding.

Inductive: Want a sample that ranges across a wide variance on dimensions of interest in exploring topic

Selection parameters:

It is planned to have 5-6 interviews out of the 8 enterprises that one of the programme advisors has recommended from round 3. The two selection criteria are to talk with enterprises that have had different advisors affiliated, and represent different industries.

Programme focuses on four elements that each contribute to the development of the enterprise. It means that the participants can expect to have appropriated knowledge and competence through these elements, and therefore have to be asked how this knowledge is used in praxis.

1: Camps with focus on getting methods and tools to form a comprehensive frame of reference

2: Individual coaching and adding resources by affiliating an advisor from the secretariat

3: Building network with knowledge persons, who regularly can give input on market, product etc.

4: Test in market through dialogue with customers, partners etc.

Conversation with Programme manager

For the understanding of what can be expected that former programme participants have learned, I had a short dialogue with the Programme manager. The main points from the conversation are:

- Participants have not learned anything, but are being supervised to focus on their product. They get an understanding of what it takes to get successful!
- They are not demanded to understand tools or use them, the programme does that for them. They should have become smarter in marketing and better to make business reflections.
- They are probably better suited to become successful and the good enterprises run with the business plan, but many are lost, because they do not have the competence for implementing it.
- The introduction to industry experts is the most important part of the programme, and it is the programme manager's impression that many of the firms are good at keeping these contacts.
- There has not been any systematically execution-support after the 5 months and the preparation of the business plan. The enterprises are supervised on how to use their resources (The abilities and network of the entrepreneur) efficiently enough; the programme manager does not think that the Programme has the mandate for this.

The researchers own questions of recognition before interviews:

Does Programme equip the participants with capabilities to make good decisions?

How does the entrepreneur work with the concept/ phenomenon of network (the necessity/ use of network)?

Is the entrepreneur capable of creating strong alliances for/attract the necessary resources for his (her) enterprise and product?

Is the entrepreneur capable of recognising and understand what s(he) does not know, and where s(he) needs help?

Post Participation Interview guide Round 3 – May 2010

Introduction

A little about yourself: Where are you born, age, and education?

How did your enterprise start and who were involved in the idea and execution of the start-up?

The enterprise after the Programme

What happened to the business plan you developed with the Programme?

Were there conceptions of markets and customers that were confirmed or rejected?

What customers do you have today, and why do you think they have become customers with you?

What is decisive for your enterprise to keep it growing/ get further success and how will you address this need?

What would you say is the most important eye-opener, which made a difference to your venture?

Which of the elements of the programme did you get most out of, and how did they play together?

What type of contact did you have with the Programme since the programme stopped?

Network

In which partnerships/ types of collaboration is your enterprise involved?

Do you work with some of the relations, which were created through the Programme?

When do you consider a person/a technology as part of your network?

Would you try to describe the network/relations to other actors for your enterprise/technology?

What needs/interests does you enterprise have today (need for network/resources) – and how are you trying to create the right connections?

How are you creating contacts for your enterprise/technology (2-3 examples)?

Decision competence: Flexibility and readiness for change

How much are you working with plans for the future/do you think it is important to work with plans and strategy?

How do you perceive the market for you enterprise just now?

Try to describe the way you take decisions (on technology, market, employees)?

In what way do you think the Programme has affected your way of making decisions (examples)?

How has your enterprise changed over time (Critical incidents)?

When has it been tough and how did you solve the problems?

Contribution to the Danish entrepreneurship structure (The personal learning)

What would say were the most basic elements to start a new enterprise?

If you should start a new enterprise today, how would you tackle it?

How to you think your approach today would be different from before your participation in the programme?

What type of job could you imagine to have if you were not an entrepreneur / which position in a larger firm could you imagine to have if you did not have your own firm?

What abilities and ideas do you think; you would have contributed to another organization/enterprise after your participation?

What could make you start a new firm?

Market and customers

How are you working with / is in contact with your primary market today – and how do you expand your market?

How do you identify whom you like to sell to?

How do you use market analyses?

How do you differentiate yourself from your competitors in your approach to the customer/ what do you bring?

Identity

How do you see the relationship between you, your enterprise, your technology (the division of labour and roles, are you the innovator)?

What do you hope will come out of your work with the enterprise in a 2-3 year perspective?

Appendix B) Key person interviews – autumn 2010

These interviews are about the post-reflections of advisors and programme designers – of their visions and on what has happened in the process during the creation of the programme. It is important to clear out the learning perspective – how much participants they supposed to be able to do themselves, and what do they need help for. This also taps into the network questions, and whether they are able to use the competences and network of others. Respondent 1: Advisor – 3 years of experience, which I would like to, talk to before he leaves. Respondent 2: Former Programme manager, also about to leave the programme. The interviews are used as key person interviews about their experience s working with techno-entrepreneurs.

Questions:

- I am curious to know why the programme has come to be as it is. What were the anticipations behind it?
- What has been your motivation to work for Programme?
- Could you describe the profile of the entrepreneur, who should participate in the Programme?
- Is this the type who is actually participating? Why (not)?
- During the years you have worked with entrepreneurs, has there been any so-called critical incidents that has changed you attitude to the work with entrepreneurs? When? How? Timeline?
- Your frustrations – why? Does Programme take firms/ventures too early into the programme? Is the material good enough? Is the programme good enough?
- How did it make a difference?
- What have been your expectations to the entrepreneurs? Did anything surprise you?
- When you started there were probably ideas and visions, what specific episodes made you doubt?
- What kind of entrepreneurs does the programme take in?
- How do you perceive the type of entrepreneurs- characteristics?
- What are the success-criteria for a programme like Programme according to your opinion?
- What works to accomplish these criteria?
- You know I am very interested in what the entrepreneurs learn, and whether they are able to network, and to use others' network, understand their environments and affect these environments; how do you perceive this – and this type of language?
- How do you best describe the potential growth entrepreneur? Is there some you have found it more difficult to work with/make change than others?
- How is the potential Programme advisor best described? What should s(he)be able to do?
- Do you advisors have sufficient sector/industry knowledge? Do you have access to the nerds?
- Did you revise your views on how a business development programme should look like?
- Do you any kind of doubt in relation to the programme?

Appendix C): Selection Board interview guide: ”The Programme selection criteria”

The purpose of the interview guide is among other things to get a feeling for what criteria are formally and informally behind the selection of Programme enterprises. It is the pre-assumption that the individual members of the Selection Board will have some general reflections and criteria they use/ return to, but also some personal preferences based on experience. It is interesting in relation to assess the potential of the selected enterprises, and the understanding of what type of firms/personalities who are selected, and what type is rejected. In here is also an expectation that the personality of the entrepreneur is assessed. It is the pre-assumption that respondents in the selection of firms may use gut-feeling and more subjective criteria and preferences for the entrepreneur, but they respond more normatively (try to create rational criteria) on my questions. It is my challenge to make them be more precise in their description of their criteria as possible, and possible also give examples.It is the pre-assumption that respondents will be difficult to interview in relation to concrete and precise answers, and therefore have to be pressed to come with examples in order not to give very superficial responses. It is the prejudice that they will not be good at talking about their own mistakes and deficits, but will underline how good they are, and emphasise their successes. When it comes to the question on whether a firm is a success, it is the opinion of one advisor that they will answer that it is the management who has done this, and not that the technology lived up to the expectations - because it falls back on their judgement.

Interview Questions

Intro: Background of the Respondent

- Tell me shortly what you do in you daily work and how your affiliation to Programme was established?

Theme: Potential for growth

- **How do you assess the potential of the firm/project? Could you give a few examples of how you assess the potential value - how a firm will become a good firm!**
- What type of potential do you mean can be created, and what has to be there from the start? Give examples.
- Why is it that some firms do not have a potential for growth – is it the technology or personality? How much of this is talent?
- What is the potential for growth in firms in Denmark – Has this changed according to your experience with Danish entrepreneurs?
- What did you learn in order to spot potential firms?
- **How good are you to spot potential/talent - and why?**
- Assessment of potential within and outside your knowledge domain

Theme: Selection Criteria for Programme enterprises

- Could you shortly describe which criteria you use to say YES to a firms participation in Programme – what engages you and what is important? Give examples
- What is the different on the entrepreneur who participate in Programme and the entrepreneur who is a clear Venture case?
- **Is there a difference in how you assess a programme case and a venture case? – (Which criteria are the same/different?)**
- When you choose to say yes to an enterprise it must be because you think there is something they should learn and there are gaps in their resources and competences that you think could be learned?
- What kind of gaps the programme can close – what strength and what weaknesses can be accepted?
- What should they learn to become a good venture case? – And how?
- **The 8 criteria you should use to select enterprises for Programme I guess is a venture fund's dream! – Which weaknesses are you willing to accept - where can the enterprises be less perfect?**
- The criteria are expressions for how strong the entrepreneurs are – which gaps are the most important for Programme to fill out?
- What is a realistic investment case for you? What are the elements that convince you?
- What is a persuasive management team?
- **Do you think that the selection process of the programme gives you information on/ impression of the enterprise to select the best?**

Theme: What should the Programme be and do

- **How do you see the Programme's task of developing entrepreneurs – should they learn something, should they learn to use others competences or should they have access to other resources?**
- **Should the Programme solve problems for the enterprise or should they learn to solve problems themselves?**
- To what extent do you see the programme as a learning programme - as a process where the entrepreneurs recognise certain issues?
- Should the entrepreneur be able to do it all by him (her) self - or should s(he) learn to use others' competences?
- What is the gap at the enterprises that the Programme can fill?
- Is the advisors' delivery for the entrepreneur advice or services – i.e. should the advisor give advice so the entrepreneur him/(her)self reaches the recognition of the problems or should they help solve certain tasks?
- Should the Programme relieve the entrepreneur in certain areas?
- Do you think the entrepreneur has the capacity to both make the technology and the business?
- **Have you worked with entrepreneurs who have been through the programme – What is your impression of how the programme affected the entrepreneur?**

Theme: Challenges in the work with entrepreneurs

- **How do you do when you get the role as mentor for an enterprise?**
- Why is it so difficult to help entrepreneurs – what are the challenges?
- What challenges do you experience/ has experienced in your work with entrepreneurs?

Appendix D): Pre-Programme interview guide Round 5 – December 2010

The Pre-Programme expectations and needs

The purpose of the guide is to reveal the entrepreneurs' **expectations** for their participation in the programme, their assessment of their own competences, needs, opportunities, challenges, potential etc. It is interesting if they can define their own gaps. I will ask how they think they **learn best** (learning style), and how they hope the programme is constructed in order to get the most out of it, a question they probably cannot answer precisely. On the question of competences they the more technical oriented probably will emphasise their technical qualifications (according to Mette Mønsted). The assessment of their needs is about what they think they miss or should get access to – and if they can formulate how they could cover theses holes in their resources. On top of this the purpose is to get a sense of where they are in the development process of the firm, and be able to compare this with where they are and how they have developed after finishing the Programme.

It is important to get a feeling for what kind of resources the enterprise brings along to the programme, what they want, what they think they have and where they think they need some competence. The goal is to know what the enterprise brings in terms of resources throughout the programme process – and determine the contribution from Programme.

Note: At the 'Selection Camp Day' November 1st. 2010 there were several of the entrepreneurs who answered pretty vaguely on what they hoped to get from the programme and why they should participate. As observer I had the impression that many of them were motivated by the money that some of them could qualify for after the programme. I will be interesting to see what they answer when they are accepted for participation.

Interview guide Pre-participation Round 5 December 2010/ January 2011

Intro: Education, former employment, projects shortly.

What is your product – what do you sell?

- Who is your customer – why?
- Where is your market – why?
- What is your proof of concept/ proof of market?

Expectations to Programme

- Why did you apply to join Programme –where did the idea come from, what did you hear?
- What are your expectations to Programme?

- What do you expect to get out of your participation in the programme – in what ways may the programme contribute to your venture?
- (If funding –the other possibility is that you become better in getting customers, and then you are up and running without the demands from investors. I assume that the purpose of your project is to create an enterprise?)

Assessment of own and the enterprise's competences

- Do you feel good about making decisions? (Ask about experience)?
- How do you typically legitimise your decisions?
- What are your/the enterprise's strongest competences? (pose both questions depending on what the respondent answer) Team capacity?
- What is the largest challenge just now – internally and externally (competitors, needs, resources, technology), access?
- How do you assess your own competences to make your technology ready for the market?
- Does bringing your technology to the market/ help customers or creating an enterprise motivate you?
- In what areas do you think you need help/knowledge?
- In what areas do your enterprise need input and sparring?
- What would you say is the challenge in helping you/ what catches you?
- If someone should teach you something – how could that be done?
- What can provoke you/make you angry?
- If we should help you/support your project – how should we tackle it:)?
- Do you have other projects just now – or did you have some that have been put aside?

Theme: Where is the project just now?

- Whom and what is you enterprise dependent on now?
- What resources/ contacts/relations would you has wanted your enterprise to have?
- From where did the idea for the enterprise/ project come from – and when did you know that you wanted to make an enterprise?
- How would you describe the relations/network of your enterprise – who are associated with the project just now, and how did they get to be affiliated?
- Who do you collaborate with now, and who would you like to collaborate with?
- What experience do you bring with you into the programme, and how do you imagine this can be exploited – give examples?

Expectations to the future

- Where do you see your enterprise in 12 months?
- What are your expectations to your enterprise – hopes/dreams?
- How do you see your own potential in relation to creating a business – where could you improve?
- Where have you improved in getting customers and capital?

Appendix E): Post-Programme interview guide Round 5 – December 2011

Notes: Explorative study of meaning creation among the Programme participants

The interviews were carried out 6 months after the official programme was terminated. Several of the participants had received capital from the Programme and because of this they still have a Programme advisor affiliated about 1 day per week. The participants were interviewed in Dec/Jan 2010/2011, just after they were accepted for the programme and had been in contact with an advisor, but before the official programme was started. The Pre-Programme interview round had focus on expectations and existing competences, and was carried out with an interview guide. The Post-Programme interviews were carried out from a perspective of the general recognition, but are individually customized from the first interview with the respondent. In this way there is a follow-up on the situation the participants were in before their participation, and the business-plan they had from the beginning. The purpose of the study is to reveal the behaviour of the participants, and not just if they had new knowledge and abilities, but if the learning is leading to concrete patterns of action.

What does it mean that they have met me before? More or less trust?

Recognition questions: What did you get out of it? What made a difference to you?

1. *Decision competence*: Can differences/changes/change in the language about their firm, product, business plan, market or strategy be identified? Are there any signs that they are more focused, self-conscious or realistic (what is that?)? *What works?* What elements of the programme worked, and what parts did not?
2. *Resource understanding*: Have they changed their view of their own abilities/competences? Do they have a clear picture of what they can do and in what fields of the firm management they need help?
3. *Network understanding*: Is the respondent capable of creating strong alliances to attract resources for his business?
4. *Real development*: What has happened in the business the last year, and what could be attributed to the Programme? How has the business model changed? Why?
5. *Actions*: Did learning and experience from Programme and the events of the last year result in actions? How is the learning reflected in their actions?
6. *Critical incidents*: What happened that made action necessary? Which decisive choices were made in the development of the business plan? What affected the process – learning, market, input, and competitors…

Post Participation Interview guide December 2011/ January 2012

Introduction:

How is it going? (Spontaneous reflections on the present situation of the business)

How is the contact to Programme today?

The Business after the Programme:

What happened to the business plan developed with the Programme? How have you worked with it?

How did it go with the investor pitch you developed with the Programme?

Did you have expectations on markets and customers that were confirmed or rejected through the programme?

What is the clearest eye-opener from the Programme?

What elements of the programme did you get most out of? How did they play together? (Camps, advisor, industry experts, customer contacts etc.)

Many of you said to me that the programme had to be very concrete in relation to your situation, was it concrete/practical enough?

What part of the programme could you not use for anything?

How would you describe the business that you work with today?

12 months ago you said you would have obtained … Did you follow the plan? Why (not)?

Decision competence:

How do you feel you are fit to run a business?

If you should start your business today, would you do something different than you did one year ago?

What challenges did you experience in the last year? How did you handle them?

How do you perceive the market for your business right now?

What is the plan/strategy for the business right now? How do you follow up on the plan?

Could you mention a situation or event that really made a difference for you?

In what way do you think Programme affected you way of making decisions?

What has been the hardest by participating in Programme?

Network:

You had those and …. relations last year, are these relations still working?

What relations are established during the last year – to partners, customers, industry, capital? How conscious are these established to get competence?

What needs do your business have today in terms of network and resources? How do you try to create connections to these?

What relations are being established to your business via the Programme?

Were you satisfied with the network of the programme? Did it live up to your expectations?

Actions:

How are you in contact with your primary market today?

How do you identify whom you would like to sell to?

How did the collaboration with your programme advisor work out?

How are you using market analyses?

How do you distinguish yourself from the competitors in your approach to the customer?

What is decisive for the success of your business in the future?

What crises have you been through in the last year? What did you do to handle them? What did Programme do?

The Programme

What worked in the Programme?

In what way did the Programme not live up to your expectations?

Are there fields where you thought the advisor was not good enough? What could s(he) have done better?

Could the Programme have done more for you? Or could you have done more for the Programme?

How big a part of the development for the business in the last year do you think could be attributed to your participation in the Programme?

Rounding up

Where is you business in 12 months?

Generally, what works for you in relation to getting input for your business?

The advisors are very interested in what you think of the programme and not least if there is anything they could have done better. Can I reveal some of your answers to the advisor?

Can I contact you again in 12 months for a follow up interviews?

Appendix F): Interview guides Round 7 – winter 2012 – summer 2012

The participants of Round 7 are to be interviewed three times – before (60 min.), during (30 min.) and shortly after (30 min.) programme participation. All participants of round 7 are to be interviewed. Three interview guides have been developed;

First Interview guide Round 7: Entrepreneurial logics and processes – Getting to know them

The start of the venture

Tell me the story of you and this idea/business!

Tell me about how the idea/venture/business started. How did it all start?
Time, people and background? What has happened until now? Timeline, events etc.? What was your(s) point of departure? Why?

Actions

What was the first you did in this project/venture?
Ask for details: actions on the idea/product, contacts/network/people, resources etc. Who did you talk to in the early stages of the idea/venture?

Products and services

Describe your products/services?

Have you had customer contact and sold you product/services?
The most important types of products, customers, and segments?

Resources

Whom and what technology was in it from the start: People? Your background? Experience? Education? Knowledge?
What was your economic point of departure? Did you have overview/insight in the financial aspects?
What about equipment/technique/machines/ facilities?
Did you have the necessary people, finance, equipment, and knowledge? If no, then what did you do? Did you work creatively with the existing resources, or did you organize the missing parts?
How would you assess your resource-situation? Strengths and weaknesses?

Goal setting, planning, and analyses

What made you start this venture/business? What was the driving force?

What ambitions did you have for this venture? What is it leading to?

How are your ambitions/ideas fitting with the development of the venture/business?

How did you decide to start this? How did you reach these decisions?

What about the financial side of the venture? Have you made calculations, economic assessments, budgets etc?

How did you make them? What do your economic assessments and budgets build on?

Supplementary questions for expanding knowledge on Goals, planning and analyses:

How are you assessing goals and targets for the business? Did you put up some very clear and concrete goals for the business, or is it more meaningful to look at what happens, and how things are developing?

If yes to goals and targets: Which goals /targets did you decide on? Are they written or are they more “in your head”?
What do you think of Business plans and planning? Is it useful? Formally or informally? What are your plans?
Do you make plans for the short or distant future? Or do you have a more intuitive thinking on ex. products, customers, suppliers, competitors etc.
Do you make plans and analyses and/or systematic analyses before you decide and act (major actions and decisions already accomplished), or are you more acting before and analyse afterwards? Or is it simultaneously? What did you do in the actual/concrete cases?
How do you decide for major decisions?
What about the business-plan? What can you (not) use it for? What do you use it for? What do you not use if for? Formal or informal? What is the content, and what are your plans?

How would you describe your approach: did you make analyses or systematic assessments? Or did you more improvise and decide intuitively?
What about economic analysis and calculations? Did you do any of these? Why (not)? How did you do them, and what are they based on?

Opportunities

Development of the present products, production, and processes. How is (was) this?

Do you see any new business opportunities/ventures?

Possible new business opportunities: How were they discovered/ created?

How are the processes in innovation including a) product development, b) market development, c) developing of work processes, d) organizational development?

Relations and network

Describe your network?

Collaboration and relations to suppliers: how do you find suppliers?
Collaboration and relations to customer: how are you getting customers?
Participation and the character of network with other firms, public institutions, business service etc.?
Are there collaborations beyond your business relations already mentioned?

Predicting the future

How do you see the future for the business?

How does the business look in 3 or 5 years? Can you say something about it? Possible ideas or visions for the future?

Do you think you can plan for the distant future?

Do you think you can predict the future? How? How long time? Do you try to do this? How?

Formal or informal growth-intentions, plans, visions, strategies, business-model etc? (important to put the question very open)

What tools/analyses did you use?

If there is anything I have forgot to ask, can I call you?

Second Interview Guide: 2. Round 7. Entrepreneurial logics and processes – what happens?

1. What has happened since last time …..

Last time (start of February) you told that you…. (Point of departure is an interesting issue/ what was going on/ or in the early process or plan 3 months ago, when the programme started).

Tell me about this, and how it has happened and what is the situation now?

What has happened since last time? Ask for details: Development of new ventures or approaches to the idea/product, contacts/network/people, resources etc. (relate to above and first interview).

What challenges/problems are you fighting just now?

What has been the most *unexpected* challenge/barrier for you?
What has been the most difficult until now?

Programme and expectations

How did you experience the programme until now? In relation to your experiences?
= Why or why not did it (not) live up to the expectations? I.e. good and "less good" features…

Collaboration with the advisor? How is it taking place in practice? Anything, which could be improved?
Maybe a difficult question: Do you have the feeling that you learned something? What?

Goal setting, planning, and analyses
How do you see the goals and targets for the business: Have you created new concrete goals for the business or is it more meaningful to look at what happens, and how things are developing?
Has the participation in Programme made you look differently at goalsetting, planning, and analyses of market, customers, competitors and yourself? Why?
Do you make or think differently about plans and analyses now, in relation to earlier? How?

Future? *(= if there is time)*

How do you see the future for the business?

How does the business look in 3 or 5 years? Can you say something about it? Possible ideas or visions for the future?

Do you think you can predict the future? How? How long time? Do you try to do this? How?

Formal or informal growth-intentions, plans, visions, strategies, business-model etc? (important to put the question very open)

What tools/analyses did you use?
If there is anything I have forgot to ask, can I call you?

Third Interview guide: 3. Round 7, Entrepreneurial logics and processes – outcome and learning

What did you learn? What is your point of view on planning, analysis and improvising? Has this changed? The Future?

What has happened since last time …..

Last time (start of February) you told that you….and in May you said …..(Point of departure in an interesting issue/ what was going on/ or in the early process or plan 3 months ago, when the Programme began and in May).

Tell me about this, and how it has happened and what is the situation now?

What has happened since last time? Ask for details: Development of new ventures or approaches to the idea/product, contacts/network/people, resources etc. (relate to above and first interview).

What challenges/problems are you fighting just now?
What has been the most unexpected challenge/barrier for you?
What has been the most difficult until now?
The programme and expectations

How did you experience the programme? In relation to your expectations? How did it work? What has really happened in the 5

months? What happened in the meetings and camps? Did you get something out of it? What did you do with it?
= Why (not) did it (not) live up to your expectations? i.e. ? I.e. good and ”less good” features…

Maybe a difficult question: Do you have the feeling that you learned something? What?
What elements (camps, advisors, springboard, industry-experts, networking with other participants) did you have the most benefit from? What did you get from them?
Has this changed you way of thinking and/or acting? How?

Goal setting, planning, and analyses

How do you see the goals and targets for the business: Have you created new concrete goals for the business or is it more meaningful to look at what happens, and how things are developing?
Has the participation in Programme made you look differently at goalsetting, planning, and analyses of market, customers, competitors and yourself? *How* has Programme changed you? Why?
Do you make or think differently about plans and analyses now, in relation to earlier? How?

Future? *(= if there is time)*

How do you see the future for the business?
How does the business look in 3 or 5 years? Can you say something about it? Possible ideas or visions for the future?
Do you think you can predict the future? How? How long time? Do you try to do this? How?
Formal or informal growth-intentions, plans, visions, strategies, business-model etc? (important to put the question very open)
What tools/analyses did you use?

If there is anything I have forgot to ask, can I call you?

Appendix G): Working papers: Resources of the interviewed participants

Abbreviations of table

- Corporate spin-off, CSO (the idea has sprung from an existing venture and has a network)
- Indirect university spin-off, ISO (Industrial employer + university)
- University spin-off, USO
- External idea (university, customer, inventor, supplier etc.), EI
- Own idea (other sources of ideas), OI
- Previous entrepreneurship experience, SE (Serial entrepreneur)
- Indirect entrepreneurship experience, ISE
- Proof-of-concept, POC
- Proof-of-market, POM

Explanation of the categories:

- **Capital:** Have the ventures received some kind of funding, or have they been bootstrapping? The investors vary from being seed environments, public/private investors, venture capital investors, business angels or public funding. Most companies with investors have a board. Only in a few cases does the board actively participate in the creation of the company and the decision-making.
- **Access to business knowledge**: This category refers to the actor's own experience with entrepreneuring or business education and access to a network with business knowledge or experience surrounding the venture that could potentially contribute with business understanding and practices. This category represents access to business tools for investigating the market and making strategies. In many cases, these resources are available but not actively exploited.
- **Use of Business knowledge:** When the use of business knowledge is marked as 'Little', it means that the strategic and managerial thinking is non-systematic and ad hoc. The business plan is not used as a living document, and the approach to customers is based on gut feeling and coincidental. This category indicates whether the use of business knowledge is moving the venture forward. When the venture is not showing any progress it is most often related to lack of proof-of-concept (technical challenges) or lack of market understanding (business model challenges). 'Little' is an indication of appearing to have knowledge, network and experience – or having access to it but not applying it effectively.
- **Industry knowledge/ network:** This category refers to the kind of industry-specific knowledge that the venture might have access to on the basis of previous (working) experience, secondary affiliation from being a supplier/subcontractor in the industry or other kind of access. The venture may also have actors attached, such as board members, partners or suppliers to the venture, who know the details of the industry and the market(s) it operates within. 'Little' is an indication of appearing to have knowledge, network and experience – or having access to it but not applying it effectively.

Table Appendix G

	IDEA GENERATION	ENT. EXPIRIENCE	INDUSTRY	CAPITAL	POC/POM	ACCESS TO BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE	USE OF BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE	INDUSTRYKNOWLEDGE/ NETWORK
ROUND 3								
Com01R3	ISO	SE	Clean tech	Investor	No/ No	Investor/Experience	Little	No
Com02R3	CSO	SE	Med. device	Investor	No/ No	Investor/Connect DK	Little	Little
Com07R3	USO	SE	Clean tech	Investor	No	Investor/MBA	Yes	No
Com06R3	CSO	No	Bio-tech	Investor	Yes/ No	Investor	No	Yes
Com03R3	OI	No	Edutainment	Bootstrap	No/ No	MBA	Yes	No
Com05R3	OI	No	Marketing	Investor	Yes/ No	MBA	Yes	No
Com04R3	USO	No	Bio-tech	Investor	No/ No	Investor	No	No
ROUND 4								
PCom01R4	CSO	SE	Med. Device	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience/ MBA	No	Yes
ROUND 5								
PCom13R5	OI	No	Health care	Bootstrap	Yes/No	No	No	No
PCom09R5	CSO	No	Bio-tech	Investor	Yes/ No	Salesperson/Investor	Little	Yes
PCom09R5	OI	SE	Fashion	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience	Yes	No
PCom11R5	USO	No	Software	Investor	Yes/ No	Investor/ Distributors	Very little	No
PCom08R5	OI	No	Edutainment	Investor	No/ No	Investor/ Co-founder	No	No
PCom15R5	CSO	SE	Tele	Investor	Yes/ No	Investor/Network	Little	Yes
PCom05R5	CSO	SE	Software B-B	Investor	Yes/ Yes	Investor/Experience	Yes	Little
PCom02R5	CSO	SE	Clean-tech	Investor	No/ No	Investor/ Experience	Little	No
PCom07R5	OI	SE	IT Platform	Investor	No/ No	Investor/ Experience	Very little	No
PCom14R5	CSO	SE	Clean-tech	Investor	Yes/ No	Investor/ Experience	Little	No
PCom04R5	CSO	No	Construction	Investor	Yes/ Yes	Investor/ Board	Yes	No
PCom03R5	OI	SE	Tele	Investor + Loan	Yes/ Yes	Experience	Very little	Little
PCom01R5	ISO	No	Fashion	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Experience/MBA	Yes	Little
PCom10R5	CSO	No	Med. Device	Investor	No/ Yes	MBA	No	Yes
PCom12R5	CSO	No	Software	Investor	Yes/ Yes	MBA/Experience	Yes	Little
ROUND 7								
PCom02R7	OI	SE	IT Platform	Investor	Yes/ Yes	Experience/MBA	Yes	Yes
PCom01R7	OI	No	IT Platform	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience	Yes	Little
PCom07R7	CSO	No	Clean-tech	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience	Yes	Yes
PCom08R7	USO	SE	Bio-tech	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Tech-Trans	No	No
PCom03R7	OI	SE	Platform	Bootstrap	Yes/ No	Experience/ Network	Little	Little
PCom09R7	CSO	SE	Med. Device	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience	Little	Yes
PCom04R7	USO	No	Bio-tech	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Tech-Trans	No	No
PCom05R7	USO	SE	Bio-tech	Investor	Yes/Yes	Experience	Little	Little
PCom06R7	USO	No	Bio-tech	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Experience	Little	Little
PCom10R7	ISO	SE	Marketing	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Experience, start-up	Yes	Yes

PCom10R7	ISO	SE	Marketing	Bootstrap	Yes/ Yes	Experience, start-up boot camp input	Yes	Yes
PCom11R7	CSO	No	Security	Bootstrap, Rejected investor	Yes/ No	Experience with processes, not industry	Little	Little
PCom12R7	OI	No	Hardware/ Software	Investor	Yes/ No	Experience/ Investor	Yes - Denmark	Yes
PCom13R7	EI	SE	Bio-tech	Investor	Yes/ Yes	Some experience	Yes - Denmark	Yes
PCom14R7	EI	SE	Med. Device	Investor	Yes / No	Experience	Little	No

Appendix H): Codes for reading interviews developed from participant interviews

The method for developing these themes has been to work with the initial themes of the interview guide, but also to listen to what the respondents wanted to talk about. That is why I talk about themes that have 'sprung from the material' – emphasising the inductive research method. With a relational learning perspective I have been listening to the conversations that the respondents were interested in having.

Themes for coding, which was done manually by the researcher with all participant interviews;

- Outcome of participation: learning, strengthening, change of thinking and actions, reflections on gains or the lack of it
- Challenges/ needs: Challenges and needs articulated by respondents
- Actions: what have they done/ performed/ achieved during the time of the programme (not necessarily as a direct outcome of the programme, but progress in general)
- Network/ partners/ alliances: What do they have, how do they articulate it, have they gained new, how do they act about it
- Capital/ funding/ Investor: Needs of the venture and how they act around these this them
- The relationship and interactions with the advisor (s) and the programme
- Own recognition of strengths and weaknesses
- The development of the Business model/ technology/ customer focus/ organizational set-up
- Future of the venture and plans
- Selection – the experience of the selection process
- How is the venture doing? Legitimacy of their story?
- Attitude towards incubation and support programmes
- Attitudes towards advisors and network

Appendix I): Working paper based on field work: Retrospective reflections on expectations of the researcher during the fieldwork

- I was surprised by the scepticism of the entrepreneuring actors towards the incubating programme and the programme advisors
- I was surprised by the local language of the advisors when they spoke about the participants
- I was surprised that the field had no language for learning – only deliverables and business models
- I was surprised that the programme advisors said they were not working with the development of the participants' networks
- I was surprised that some of the participants had been ordered to participate by their investor, as a prerequisite of receiving funding
- I was surprised how difficult it was for me to identify some kind of impact on the participating ventures, based on their participation in the incubating programme
- I was surprised that many of the participants did not have proof-of-concept or proof-of-market – considering the programme's focus on growth
- I was surprised that none of the participants had entered into a growth phase – there were no real 'gazelles' among them
- I was surprised how few of the participants actually had a product to sell
- I was surprised that many of the participants were not high-potential start-ups or nerdy engineers but instead had business and management degrees and thus did not match the original target group of the incubating programme or of my research proposal
- I was confused about the use of the phrase 'elite entrepreneurs' to signify someone who could be discovered or created
- I was confused by the resistance many of the participants expressed towards public initiatives compared to their expectations about what to receive from the programme
- I became curious about the programme's selection process and criteria
- I became curious about how venture potential was evaluated by advisors, incubation programme management and investors
- I became curious about the expectations of the participants and their assessment of their own needs and capabilities
- I became curious about how the participants were doing a year after graduating from the programme, and whether they had changed their behaviour, sold any products, established partnerships etc.
- I became curious about how the programme advisors had experienced the process of working with the participants
- In the interviews and dialogues I was surprised by the emphasis the participants placed on the relationship and interaction – or the lack of it – with the advisor as well as with investors, employees and other related actors
- I was surprised to find that trust and rapport between the participant and advisor were taken for granted – and that most 'first meetings' were about identifying a problem to solve, not about getting to know each other
- I was surprised how little the participants knew about the programme and what to expect immediately after they had been accepted into the programme
- I was surprised how little the participants talked about customers and the actual sale of products – maybe my questions did not invite that?
- I was surprised that participants who had both a network and capital did not necessarily act on it or seem to know how to use it

- I was surprised how passive and complaining many of the participants were, expressing themselves in a way that indicated they were not assuming responsibility for their own process but expected someone else to do it
- I was surprised to hear almost no talk about the creative process of building the venture on the supply side; instead, the focus was squarely on deliverables and add-ons, and neither the demand nor the supply side addressed the issue of creativity. It seemed as if the creative stage had been completed, and now the focus was to be on plans and strategy
- I was surprised that alterations made to the incubating activities dealt mainly with the content (what) dimension rather than the process (how) dimension.

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