Creative Industries Journal

ISSN: 1751-0694 (Print) 1751-0708 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcij20

Achieving a shared understanding in the creative industries: freelancers' use of boundary objects in collaborative innovation projects

Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano & Nicolas Le Grand

To cite this article: Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano & Nicolas Le Grand (2025) Achieving a shared understanding in the creative industries: freelancers' use of boundary objects in collaborative innovation projects, Creative Industries Journal, 18:2, 248-263, DOI: 10.1080/17510694.2023.2218656

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2023.2218656

Published online: 09 Jun 2023.

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES JOURNAL
2025, VOL. 18, NO. 2, 248–263
https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2023.2218656

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Achieving a shared understanding in the creative industries: freelancers' use of boundary objects in collaborative innovation projects

Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano[a] and Nicolas Le Grand[b]

[a]International Business, Turun Kauppakorkeakoulu, Turku, Finland; [b]Faculty of Engineering and Business, Turun Ammattikorkeakoulu, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how freelancers in the field of the creative industries capture and distil their clients' needs and wants in collaborative innovation projects. Our empirical data from sixteen collaborative product-development processes led by freelancers in Finland and Spain allowed us to identify that boundary objects were critical for the achievement of a shared understanding at the beginning of the development process. In the later stages, the use of these objects decreased drastically and dialogue became the focus. The existence of a project match – whether the project was relevant and interesting for the freelancer – and a personal match – perceived similarity with the client in terms of thought and sense-making processes – were crucial to ensure engagement. From a managerial perspective, this paper stresses the importance of finding a personal and project match, highlights the role of boundary objects to create a shared understanding and reinforces the importance of dialogue in development processes and collaborative innovation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 July 2022
Accepted 22 May 2023

KEYWORDS
Boundary objects; dialogue; collaborative innovation; freelancers; creative industries

Introduction

The creative industries (CIs) are nowadays regarded as critical for the economy and job creation by academic and public institutions (e.g. Mietzner and Kamprath 2013; European Parliament 2016; Boix-Domenech and Rausell-Köster 2018) and they have grown at an above average rate in the last decade (Konrad 2013). These CIs, defined as those industries 'which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (UK DCMS 2001, 5), have become pioneers in new organisational and business forms and they are increasingly seen by firms and governments as hubs for managerial innovations and experiments (Lampel and Germain 2016).

These CIs are also a good example of another trend we have lately witnessed, as the majority of their workforce consists of freelancers (Banks et al. 2002; Eikhof and

CONTACT Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano algocr@utu.fi

Haunschild 2006; Mietzner and Kamprath 2013; Lampel and Germain 2016). These freelancers, also known as iPros, sole traders, or contractors, can be defined as 'self-employed knowledge professionals ranging from engineers, consultants, writers and IT specialists through to members of liberal professions such as lawyers and accountants' (Leighton 2015, 81). Although their importance is evident in numerous sectors, accounting for 14% of the total employment in Europe in 2018 (Eurostat 2019), they have been systemically neglected in the academic research (Leighton 2015).

Putting these two realities together (the increasing role of CIs in the economy and the importance of freelancers for the sector), we realised that, although these CIs have enjoyed extensive coverage in the academic research in recent years (e.g. Caves 2000; Potts and Cunningham 2008; Martin-Rios and Parga-Dans 2016; Gouvea et al. 2021), the literature on these industries does not explicitly separate freelancers from the rest of the organisations in the sector. This non-separation of freelancers from other types of organisations is also a common issue in the public statistics (e.g. Rapelli 2012; Leighton 2015), even though we have literature pointing out the special characteristics of CIs and the heterogeneity of freelancers (e.g. Potts et al. 2008; Rapelli 2012). In other words, there seems to be an implicit assumption that there are no major differences between different types of CIs and that the processes utilised by freelancers, in this case, are no different from those of larger enterprises. This assumption would imply that their distinctive characteristics and restrictions play a very minor role, if any, in the way in which they operate.

In addition to this assumption, we have already witnessed, for decades, a swift move towards more collaborative and open innovation (e.g. Chesbrough 2003; von Hippel 2005; Yström and Agagué, 2020) and the benefits of customer and client involvement have been highlighted in a variety of industries as a way to enhance perceived product value, increase the probability of product success, create more creative products, or reduce development costs and risks (Kristensson, Matthing, and Johansson 2008; Hoyer et al. 2010; Fuchs and Schreier 2011). The CIs are not an exception and their clients are seen as inextricably linked to their creative processes (Banks et al. 2002). The relevancy of client involvement is clearly seen in subcategories of CIs such as in the design-related industries (Goodman-Deane, Langdon, and Clarkson 2010), musicians and record labels (Caves 2003), theatre plays (Dempster, 2006), or videogame development (Tschang 2007). Client importance is such that managers of CIs have the clients in mind even when they define creativity as 'having the ability to identify, distil and capture the client's problem and develop and provide an effective solution' (Banks et al. 2002, 258).

Collaborative and open innovation is an opportunity for freelancers in CIs but, in order for them to succeed in incorporating clients into the development process, there is a need to identify and capture clients' needs by bridging different worlds, the world of the client, with its own terminology and expertise, and the world of the freelancer, with its particularities. Integrating diverse knowledge is oftentimes a prerequisite for the development of innovative products and services (Leonard 1998) but, in order to do so, mechanisms for transferring and integrating knowledge across organisational boundaries, and bridging these different worlds, need to be in place (Star and Griesemer 1989; Carlile 2004). This issue is not foreign to the CIs, in which there is a need to implement processes of integration that can oftentimes leverage

diverse sources of creativity to develop collective creative products (Cohendet and Simon 2007).

Innovation scholars have recently been asked to pay further attention to the different cognitive dynamics of actors engaging in collaborative innovation with the aim of increasing our understanding at the organizational and individual level (Yström and Agagué, 2020). Moreover, with regards to knowledge integration, we still seem to lack specific research on the activities and practices of individuals in terms of how knowledge is transformed, integrated and utilised (Thune and Gulbrandssen, 2017), in what Gabrielson and Berggren (2011, 91) refer to as 'key practices of knowledge integration at a micro level'. Overall, there is a need to move the discussion from the organisational to the individual level but this move is especially challenging, though extremely relevant, for freelancers who work alone and for which these two levels blur. The processes used by these economic actors are likely to differ from those of larger enterprises due to their distinctive characteristics and restrictions due their size; that is, the liability of their smallness (Freeman, Carroll, and Hannan 1983).

Acknowledging all the above, this paper aimed at answering the following research question: How do freelancers in the CI field capture and distil their clients' needs and wants in collaborative innovation projects? More specifically, the aim of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, the paper will analyse the development activities that are undertaken in collaborative innovation projects with a special focus on how clients' needs become externalised and converted into specific product features. Secondly, the use of boundary objects, as a mechanism to externalise these needs, will be explored due to their proven relevancy for bridging different worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989; Carlile 2004). As the explanation provided in this paper is context-embedded, we also discuss the applicability of the findings to different types of industries and organisations.

As we address these goals, we specifically aim at contributing to the scant literature on how actors with limited resources – freelancers – engage in collaborative innovation in the CIs. In order to do so, we collected data from sixteen collaborative product-development projects and their analysis allowed us to identify that boundary objects were used at the beginning of the process to achieve a shared understanding on the basics of the project. The use of these boundary objects decreased to a minimum after this understanding was achieved and dialogue became critical in the later stages. The existence of a project and personal matches, and the role of external help, were also crucial.

We now turn our attention to the topic of collaborative innovation in the CIs and, specifically, how boundary objects are used in these collaborations. The paper then continues with a section in which the methodology of the research is explained in detail, continuing thereafter with a section containing the results and discussions. The paper concludes with a section in which the conclusions are drawn and suggestions for further research are given.

Theoretical background

For decades already, companies have been forced to operate in a world in which knowledge is fragmenting (Machlup 1984) and in which sources of knowledge are widely dispersed (Powell and Grodal 2004). As it became obvious that no company had enough resources by itself to satisfy every customer (Håkansson and Ford 2002),

organisational boundaries became more permeable to knowledge flow and innovation became more open (e.g. Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr 1996; Chesbrough 2003; Chesbrough and Crowther 2006). In other words, companies realised that they had no choice but to co-operate with their partners and customers to develop products and services (e.g. Sawhney and Prandelli 2000; Mahr, Lievens, and Blazevic 2014; Cui and Wu 2016) and embrace collaborative innovation (e.g. Pershina, Soppe, and Thune 2019; Caccamo 2020; Yström and Agogué 2020).

Collaborative innovation is a broad term coined to describe 'innovation activities or innovation processes involving multiple actors, organisations or individuals transcending boundaries (within or across organizations) with the purpose of creating and developing new products, services, policies, processes or business solutions' (Yström and Agogué 2020, 141). This collaboration and specifically open innovation are particularly beneficial for small firms that suffer from the liability of smallness (Freeman, Carroll, and Hannan 1983) as a way for them to overcome their limited resources (Bianchi et al. 2010; Wynarczyk 2013). Specifically, in the CIs, it is essential for small firms to overcome the liability of smallness by using external sources of knowledge that can help them identify innovative opportunities and complement their limited resource base with additional resources and new knowledge (Protogerou, Kontolaimou, and Caloghirou 2017). However, as beneficial as these collaborations are, they are not without their challenges.

As described by Pershina, Soppe, and Thune (2019, 2), integrating different diverse domains of knowledge is highly challenging due to divergencies in thought worlds: 'shared cognitive models and understandings that are deeply intertwined with specific knowledge domains and that define experts' schemes of interpretation, how they filter information and engage in methods, practices and work approaches.' Boundary objects, defined as flexible epistemic artefacts that 'inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the information requirements of each of them'(Star and Griesemer 1989, 393) are used due to their capacity to live at the boundaries. These boundary objects, such as prototypes, mock-ups, or whiteboards, serve as bridges for the overall innovation process (Pershina, Soppe, and Thune 2019) and are widely used in creative processes in general (e.g. Mahmoud-Jouini and Charue-Duboc 2008; Ness 2017) and in the CIs specifically (e.g. Cohendet and Simon 2007; Jarvenpaa and Lang 2011; Parmentier and Mangematin 2014). For example, in the videogame industry, boundary objects are used as a means of discussion when an issue needs to be seriously tackled (Cohendet and Simon 2007) and music objects (data files representing a piece of music) are the main vehicle of collaboration in music remix sites (Jarvenpaa and Lang 2011). In general, boundary objects, such as discussion areas, need to be set up for exchanging opinions and ideas if the CIs are to open up their firm boundaries (Parmentier and Mangematin 2014).

These boundary objects are a means of translation (Start and Griesemer, 1989) and are specifically used to represent, learn about and transform knowledge so as to resolve the consequences that exist at a given boundary (Carlile 2002). They are also an effective method for creating common ground among the actors who are involved in knowledge-transfer processes (e.g. Star and Griesemer 1989; Bechky 2003), a practice that is particularly important because this common ground serves as the base needed for understanding to be achieved (Bechky 2003). In other words, boundary objects provide the infrastructure needed to achieve the common ground in which greater

understanding, knowledge creation (e.g. Carlile 2002) and knowledge combination (Mahmoud-Jouini and Charue-Duboc 2008) can be achieved. As this infrastructure is created, knowledge becomes externalized, that is codified, and changes from tacit knowledge, as context-specific personal knowledge which is hard to formalize and communicate, to explicit or 'codified' knowledge, as knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language (Polanyi, 1966). Specifically, for the CIs, individuals oftentimes use boundary objects to create a common 'shared space for emerging relationships' (Paraponaris and Sigal 2015, 887). As represented in Figure 1, it is within this context that the cases analysed in this paper are expected to take place.

With this setting in mind, the paper now continues with a description of the methodology used to conduct the empirical, exploratory study described above. It will then continue with a section in which the data will be summarised into results and a discussion will be conducted. The paper then concludes with a section in which theoretical and managerial conclusions, as well as suggestions for further research, are presented.

Methods

This research was designed as a qualitative study due to its exploratory nature and by acknowledging that, due to the special characteristics of CIs and freelancers, existing theories might not have adequately captured the complexity involved (Creswell 2013). Establishing cause–effect relationships might have been 'simplistic' in the face of this complexity (Stake 2005) and we therefore focused on 'particularisation' as the understanding (verstehen) of the uniqueness of the cases – the collaborative innovation projects – in their entirety. In other words, we wanted to understand the particular rather than generate a law-like explanation. we did so by embracing the context, narratives and personal engagement as part of the research (Stake 1995).

The selection process ensured that the cases met the previously stated definitions for freelancers and CIs and data were collected from the freelancers due to their leading role in the development. In order to identify information-rich cases, we decided not to choose them randomly, but purposely, with the objective of gaining insights that could not have been gained otherwise (cf. (Siggelkow, 2007)). we selected critical cases that could eventually produce a deep understanding of the phenomenon (e.g. Patton 2001; Creswell 2013) by following a process in which we firstly contacted personal contacts. These contacts were given information regarding the nature of the research and were asked whether they wanted to participate and/or if they had contact with other professionals who might be interested. Secondly, the individuals who agreed were contacted and their cases were assessed and, as recommended by

Figure 1. Creation of a common ground for knowledge transfer in the CIs.

Strauss and Corbin (1990), analysed to ensure a certain level of homogeneity that could contribute to building the necessary codes for the analysis. The individuals with potentially rich cases were contacted once again and semi-structured interviews were carried out in Spain and Finland for a total of sixteen collaborative innovation projects.

The sixteen selected projects ranged from graphic design to music composition and from TV show piloting to theatre play script writing. In addition to semi-structured interviews, secondary data, comprising presentations, mock-ups and informal interviews, were also collected for triangulation purposes when available. A description of the projects can be found in Table 1.

The CIs are very heterogenous because the field comprises organisations that undertake a wide range of activities and are of diverse size (Martin-Rios and Parga-Dans 2016) and the very definition of CIs has been critized in the past (e.g. Higgs and Cunningham 2008) and regarded by some scholars as being a catch-all term (see Banks et al. 2002 for a detailed discussion). In addition, the self-employed group to which freelancers belong is highly heterogeneous by its very nature because it may include 'farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, doctors, architects, entertainers, sport-men and women, computer programmers and analysists among others' (Blanchflower 2000, 478). Moreover, self-employed workers can be very similar to entrepreneurs aiming to exploit business opportunities, while at the same time their self-employed status can be due to forced relocation, and their income and activities can be very close to those of the unemployed (see Earle and Sakova 2000, for a review).

Due to the diversity of the projects, an interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure the compatibility of the answers. As we focused on particularisation, the interviews were conducted in a manner that ensured that specific relevant topics were covered for every project while still ensuring the level of homogeneity that made the analysis possible. The questions covered topics such as the importance of trust or the use of metaphors and prototypes. These interviews lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure confidentiality, the freelancers are given fictitious names in this paper.

The data analysis was conducted in three steps, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), but first-order topics were established in advance due to the

Table 1. Freelancers and projects.

Project	Freelancer	Country
Corporate image for a yoga instructor.	Samantha	Spain
Corporate image for a yoga academy.	Samantha	Spain
Wine labels for a family-owned vineyard.	Robert	Spain
Wine labels for a large vineyard.	Robert	Spain
Corporate image for a luxurious restaurant.	Gary	Spain
Corporate image for a clinic offering a wide range of services.	Gary	Spain
Corporate image for a digital marketing agency.	James	Spain
Corporate image for a photographer.	James	Spain
Album cover and booklet.	Anthony	Spain
Illustration for the 'walkthrough' of a phone application.	Johnny	Spain
Music for an advertisement campaign.	John	Finland
Theme music for a series of historic documentaries.	John	Finland
Writing and directing a theatre play for children.	Raul	Finland
Editing a script to turn a series of children books into a film.	Raul	Finland
Entertainment show for TV.	Gabriel	Finland
Pilot for a TV show.	Gabriel	Finland

researchers' theoretical sensitivity (Glaser 1978). These topics emerged from a pre-understanding of the theme and the researchers' work experience, and included codes related to the use of boundary objects or the importance of trust. QSR NVivo was used for the first interviews to ensure that the initial codes would emerge by following a rigorous process for analysing, managing and shaping the data (Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012; Creswell 2013). Overall, the inductive coding process was conducted by following the Gioia methodology (Gehman et al. 2018) and a review can be found in Figure 2.

The first step of the analysis involved an open-coding process in which the data coming from the interviews were fragmented with the aim of discovering new categories and new topics and to refine the first-order topics. As new codes arose after the first interviews and as the complexities of the phenomena emerged, the focus slightly changed to concentrate on the relevant issues (Stake 1981; Sinkovics and Alfoldi 2012). The themes that emerged in this phase related to the need to find a project and client match, the importance of knowing the client and the importance of synchronous means of communication.

Following the open-coding stage, a second step, axial coding, was performed. In this stage, the previously developed themes were applied to the empirical data to then move to the last stage, selective coding, in which the aggregate dimensions were created and related to the previously developed codes.

This analysis coexisted with data collection, as these two happened cyclically rather than sequentially. As we collected and analysed the data, we believed we had reached data saturation – the point in which the data were not yielding more insights (e.g. Creswell 2013) – after the Spanish interviews. We further continued data-collection efforts by adding Finnish interviewees, but these did not allow us to identify new or conflicting themes. We therefore proceeded to the last coding stage in which the previously developed dimensions were integrated and refined to build theories. In this last stage, concepts were established and statements were made to generate a plausible conceptualisation of how freelancers in the CI field capture and distil their clients' needs and wants in collaborative innovation projects.

Results and discussion

The first data analysis reveals a setting similar to the one presented in Figure 1, as the freelancers pursue the creation of a shared understanding with their clients. The beginning of the collaborative innovation coincides with the use of boundary objects, such as images and stories, to understand the history and characteristics of the project, the organisation and the overall needs/wants of the client. These boundary objects are used to achieve a shared understanding through which a highly abstract concept can be developed. This concept is then deconstructed into smaller entities, stories and keywords that form the creativity concept, and subsequently, the final product. These activities were described by Samantha when she stated that: 'When I start a project, I like to make a group of images, associated words, concepts and metaphors. I like making it visual and then lay it out for the client. The idea is that the concept transmits. After this, I keep going around the concept, looking for keywords and metaphors that will influence the typography and the realisation.'

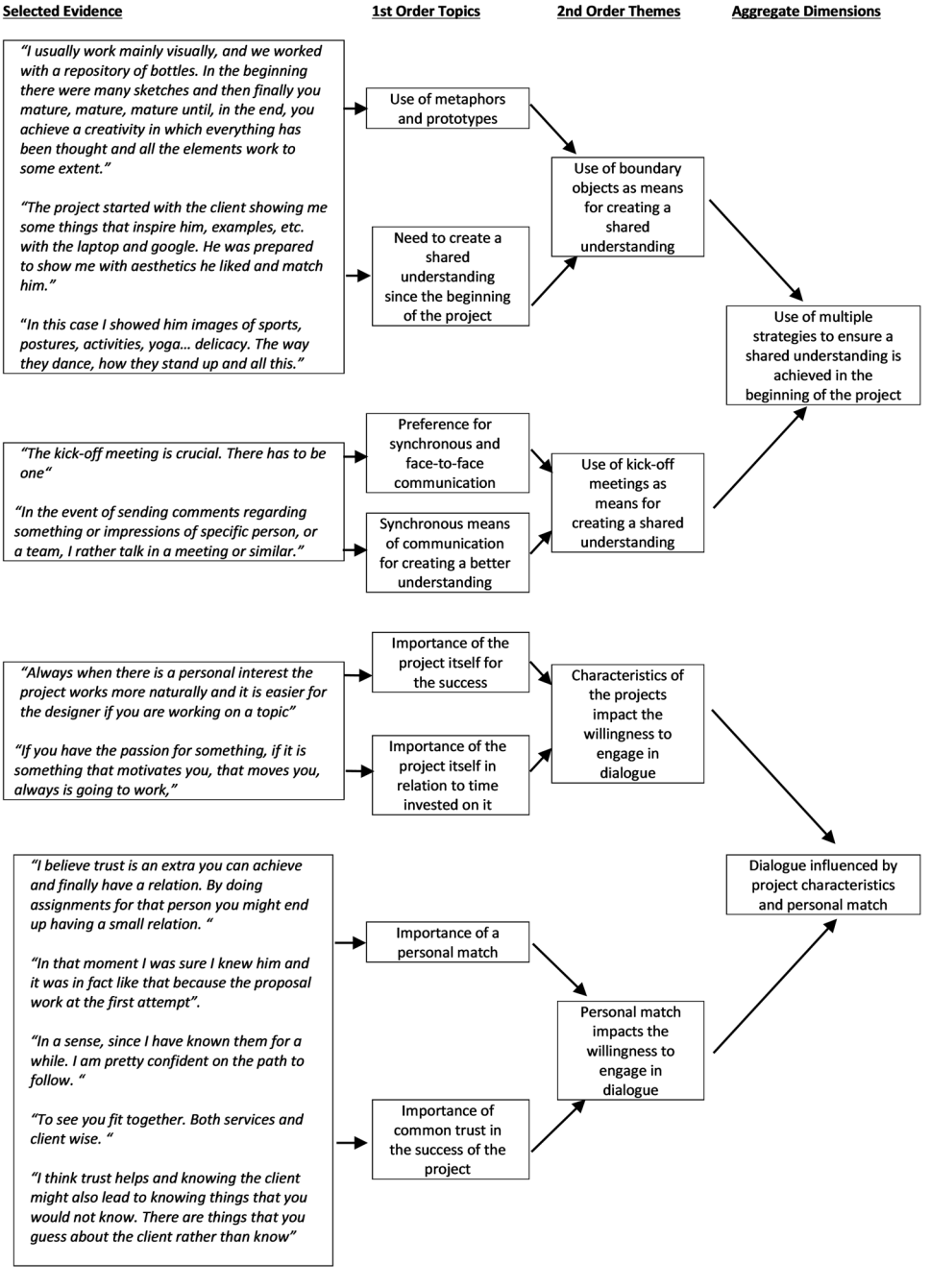

Figure 2. Review of the inductive coding process.

This process was portrayed by James when he talked about a collaboration project for a digital marketing agency. The initial concept was developed based on 'the client's enthusiasm with steampunk as a dystopia of a baroque futuristic world' and 'the concept of emotion applied to technology'. James highlighted how, in his and his client's opinion, digital agencies were lacking emotions in their projects at the

time and how this reality mingled with the client's passion for steampunk. These concepts created a common ground (shared understanding) in which both actors were at ease and made them think of the Wizard of Oz's tin man: 'A romantic machine one does not seem to understand completely because it is a man in the form of a suit of armour. One does not really know what's inside, but it works. The only thing missing is the heart; it is deprived of emotions.' These inputs made the freelancer design a logo in which a heart was the main element and in which emotions, and the client's passion for steampunk, were present.

In order to achieve the shared understanding that actors need to share and assess each other's domain-specific knowledge (e.g. Carlile 2004; Ness 2017), boundary objects were used. The objective, as Gary puts it, is to 'try to get to a territory in which we both felt at ease'. This establishment of a common ground of shared knowledge is critical for creative processes (e.g. Ness 2017), but achieving it was not an easy task because the freelancers and the clients came from different social worlds. Robert, for instance, described one project in which the client struggled to understand that 'maybe they are the experts in, for instance, distributors, but I am the expert in the solutions for the distributors'. Also, as Gabriel explained, 'Coming in into a different organisation where there is already an established way of doing things can distort the communication. They say things and I interpret them in the wrong way. There might be a slight barrier that they have ways of doing things that of course I am not aware of when coming from the outside.'

In order to overcome these barriers, boundary objects, as defined by Carlile (2002) or Star (1989), played a key role and were used as bridges. These objects are shared and shareable across different problem-solving contexts, and were the means used to achieve a shared understanding. These objects have the capacity to provide an infrastructure where current and more novel forms of knowledge can be *jointly* transformed, producing more shared knowledge (Carlile 2002, emphasis added). Their use in the creation of the shared understanding is clear and was emphasised, for instance, by Samantha, when she stated that 'through images everything is way easier' or her already stated focus on creating something visual for the client. Similarly, Gabriel used 'samples of what it (the TV show) could look like' and received feedback from the client.

In the CIs, the use of boundary objects (figures, notes and sketches) is oftentimes highlighted (e.g. Jarvenpaa and Lang 2011; Paraponaris and Sigal 2015) but, surprisingly, such boundary objects were hardly mentioned by the interviewed freelancers for any other means than the creation of this shared understanding. The use of sketches and visual metaphors was always emphasised as part of the beginning of the development process, for instance, by Johnny, as a tool to 'sell a big idea and then work on polishing the need' or by John when he explained that he asks 'the client to give me examples of music that they like or music that they want the final product to sound like because then you can lock the client into one position. I then make a demo song and if the client is alright with it, I just go and finish the product.' The freelancers seemed to use these boundary objects as a means to establish a common shared understanding but then quickly moved into the creation of the final product.

As portrayed in Figure 3, after a shared understanding had been achieved, the focus changed to establishing an on-going dialogue that informed the development. As this dialogue becomes the force that pushes the development further, it also allows

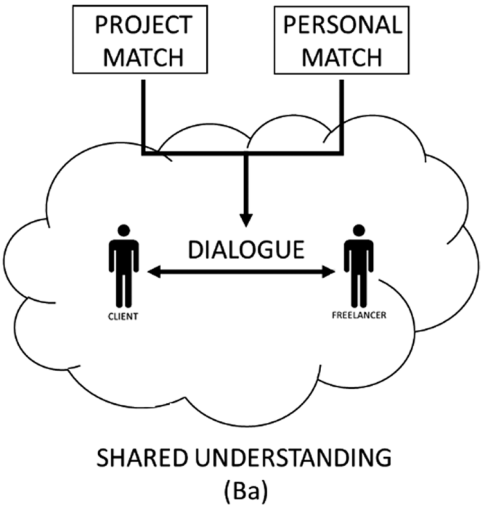

Figure 3. Dialogue engagement and its influencers.

the freelancer to increase his or her understanding and makes him/her able to ask better and more relevant questions. This increased understanding also nurtures the dialogue, as expressed by Gary when he talked about a development process in which he 'was able to understand more quickly and make questions with more insight'. This dialogue was highlighted by Samantha as well when she mentioned that she insists 'on personal contact, on talking a lot so things emerge', whereas Gary mentioned that 'we met up a number of times and discussed sport, his activities… with no hurry, until we had a scope and an agreement on where to go to.' In a different context, Gabriel also stated that he likes: 'meeting face to face, where I can read what I have written with the correct intonation and the correct phrasing so it doesn't get lost in translation'. In these meetings, he can 'get immediate feedback, an immediate reaction, because especially in comedy, you don't get a second reaction, you can't repeat.'

As the dialogue became the main activity driving the development, the willingness of the freelancer to engage became influenced by a variety of motives including the distinction between projects that bring only money and those projects that are closer to the freelancer's passions. This 'project match' was expressed by Gary as: 'Always when there is a personal interest, the project works more naturally, and it is easier for the designer.' Moreover, this passion influences the willingness to use time in the dialogue, as highlighted by Anthony when he stated that: 'If you believe the project is going to be more fun, perhaps you do not mind using more time for it compared to other projects, because you know the time used is going to be more pleasant and the results are going to be more enriching.'

In addition to this 'project match', the need for a 'personal match', knowing the client in every aspect, professionally and personally alike, and having a relatively similar sense-making process, was also highlighted as a main influencer for engaging in dialogue. Not having this match inhibits the understanding of the needs themselves and impacts the relationship between the actors. As Gary put it: 'There is a need to see that you fit together. Both services and client wise. (…) If this "feeling" is not

present, the project will not be successful.' Although this *feeling* is inherently related to the client and to the freelancer themselves, and to the project at hand, it seems to be influenced by the capacity of the freelancer to build trust with the client throughout the dialogue. In this regard, Gary again stated that: 'There is a need to communicate trust in what you do and make it clear that you believe in the client's business. The best way to do so is to make the questions you really understand and pursue understanding over the whole client's business.' Similar views were portrayed by Robert when talking about trust being, 'in the end, a relationship that you work on from the beginning till the end of the project. If you start well, and you manage the steps, probably the project will end up going well.'

Additionally to the findings above, the freelancers highlighted that asking for advice from external actors is a common practice and every project that was analysed was completed with at least a certain level of external help. As expressed by Samantha, 'I always ask for an opinion', Robert, 'I always try to consult', or James, 'I always consult.' In this regard, social networking and informal communities are relatively common in a variety of industries (e.g. Sawnhey and Prandelli, 2000; Longo and Narduzzo 2017) and are recognised as a source of creativity for the CIs (e.g. Cohendet and Simon 2007; Konrad 2013). Similarly, freelancers seem to gather advice from professionals in their network but also from personal contacts who can give them a user point of view on their work.

Conclusion

In this paper we tried to answer the question: How do freelancers in the CI field capture and distil their clients' needs and wants in collaborative innovation projects? Our analysis of sixteen product-development projects led by freelancers portrayed an accurate picture of how this innovation collaboration took place. As previously expressed in the literature (e.g. Bechky 2003; Cohendet and Simon 2007), the initial focus was on the creation of a common ground and, specifically, the development of a shared understanding between the freelancers and the clients. After this shared understanding was achieved, an abstract concept was created, and the development was mostly carried out by the freelancers with a focus on an informative dialogue with the client. This concept was consequently deconstructed and became the main ingredient for the final design.

As the paper specifically explored the use of boundary objects in these innovative collaboration projects, we found that the use of these objects mostly happened at the beginning of the development and that dialogue became the focus after a shared understanding was achieved. The literature emphasises the use of boundary objects in creative processes (Mahmoud-Jouini and Charue-Duboc 2008; Ness 2017) and we know they are widely used in the CIs (e.g. Cohendet and Simon 2007; Jarvenpaa and Lang 2011; Parmentier and Mangematin 2014) but the interviewed freelancers did not use these objects extensively after the creation of the shared understanding and focused on dialogue, as they individually developed the final product.

Previously, the literature on the topic of boundary objects has highlighted their important role for the creation of a common ground and in the analyzed projects their role was essential for the achievement of a shared understanding and as a starter for the dialogue. Without achieving a shared understanding through boundary objects, freelancers and

clients would have not been able to conduct a meaningful dialogue and make progress in their innovative collaboration. Moreover, during this dialogue process, this paper emphasises the need to have a project match, a positive freelancer's perception regarding the project relevancy and attractiveness, and to have a personal match, the freelancer's perception regarding the similarity of his/her and the client's sense-making processes. Positive project and personal matches ensure engagement in dialogue and lacking them inhibits the freelancers' understanding and can negatively influence the final outcome.

Finally, in addition to the paper's main aim contribute to the scant literature on how actors with limited resources – freelancers – engage in collaborative innovation in the CIs, we discuss the applicability of the findings to other types of organisations and industries outside the CI sector. As already discussed, the CIs are very diverse, and the freelancer population is heterogenous by its very own nature. Therefore, the findings of this study are context-specific and a contextual description is necessary to achieve an understanding (Stake 1995). Adding to the already stated focus on particularisation, any generalisation or transferability of the results should be drawn cautiously.

Creative organizations are characterized by a tension between creative work and business (Bérubé and Demers 2019) and, as highlighted elsewhere (Gonzalez-Cristiano and Sandberg 2019), freelancers' liability of smallness and economic pressure both place a burden on the shoulders of these economic actors. There is a need to acknowledge these tension and pressure when analysing the applicability to larger enterprises, because they might be the very reason behind the limited use of boundary objects. We live in a world in which companies are being forced to speed up their development processes, turn their ideas into products and launch them into the market at a never-before-seen speed (e.g. Wynarczyk 2013), a reality that is also well acknowledged in the CIs (e.g. Moultrie and Young 2009). In this context, limiting the use of boundary objects decreases development time and freelancers might be making an (un)conscious decision to limit their use to increase their economic returns.

With regards to the applicability of these findings to freelancers in other sectors, we would recommend that the special characteristics of CIs – that is, their dual nature (Caves 2000), their special organizational forms (Protogerou, Kontolaimou, and Caloghirou 2017) and industry dynamics (Peltoniemi 2015) – are fully acknowledged. As expressed at the beginning of this paper, further research on freelancers is needed, and the applicability of this paper's findings to other sectors and the analysis of their activities is still to be researched.

Regarding the paper's managerial implications, this paper stressed the importance of the use of boundary objects to create a shared understanding in collaborative innovation projects in the CIs. Ensuring this understanding exists provides the foundation for dialogue and it is critical to guarantee that both the freelancer and client can communicate effectively. Moving forward with the development process, dialogue is crucial and special attention should be placed on the fact that a willingness to engage in this dialogue is influenced by the existence of a personal and project match. Therefore, efforts aiming to achieve a shared understanding at the beginning of the development and a focus on personal and project matches are of the utmost importance in the context of collaborative innovation projects in the CIs.

Due to the exploratory nature of this paper, the opportunities for further research are extensive. Firstly, the cases were selected with the objective of achieving a certain

level of homogeneity to ensure the analysis of such a diverse range of projects was possible. This strategy made the development of an initial theory possible but, as recommended by Creswell (2013), a second step asks for the selection of a more heterogeneous sample of projects. Secondly, data were collected exclusively from freelancers and, in the context of collaborative innovation, including the client in the discussion would be relevant. In addition, these data were collected exclusively in Spain and Finland, and culture and other locational aspects might have had an influence on the findings. Therefore, more diverse data from clients and also projects from different cultures and backgrounds could be used to test and extend the initially developed theory presented in this paper. Lastly, this paper relies entirely on completed projects for which data were collected retrospectively and a study following cases in real time and in a more longitudinal manner will likely be of interest for theory development and testing purposes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano (MSc. Innovation Management 2010) is a D.Sc. candidate at the University of Turku and works as an Entrepreneurship and Innovation Education Manager in EIT InnoEnergy and as a visiting lecturer in Turku University of Applied Sciences and EU Business School. Fields of interest including but not limited to: Innovation and Knowledge Management, New Product Development, and co-creation/co-production processes, especially in the creative industries. algocr@utu.fi https://www.linkedin.com/in/alberto-gonzalez-63b92346/

Nicolas Le Grand (MSc. Economics, Organization and Management 2009) is a Senior Lecturer at Turku University of Applied Sciences. Besides knowledge management, his main areas of interest are motivation, performance and leadership. He is also involved in continuing education and provides leadership trainings for companies. nicolas.legrand@turkuamk.fi https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicolas-le-grand-6a4b654a/

ORCID

Alberto Gonzalez-Cristiano http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3804-9817

References

Banks, M., D. Calvey, J. Owen, and D. Russel. 2002. "Where the Art is: Defining and Managing Creativity in New Media SMEs." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 11 (4): 255–264. doi:10.1111/1467-8691.00257.

Bechky, B. A. 2003. "Sharing Meaning across Occupational Communities: The Transformation of Understanding on a Production Floor." *Organization Science* 14 (3): 312–330. doi:10.1287/orsc.14.3.312.15162.

Bérubé, J., and C. Demers. 2019. "Creative Organizations: When Management Fosters Creative Work." *Creative Industries Journal* 12 (3): 314–340. doi:10.1080/17510694.2019.1621619.

Bianchi, M., S. Campodall'Orto, F. Frattini, and P. Vercesi. 2010. "Enabling Open Innovation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: How to Find Alternative Applications for Your Technologies." *R&D Management* 40 (4): 414–431. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9310.2010.00613.x.

Blanchflower, D. 2000. "Self-Employment in OECD Countries." *Labour Economics* 7 (5): 471–505. doi:10.1016/S0927-5371(00)00011-7.

Boix-Domenech, R., and P. Rausell-Köster. 2018. "The Economic Impact of the Creative Industry in the European Union." In *Drones and the Creative Industry*, edited by V. Santamaria-Campos, and M. Segarra-Oña, 19–36. Cham: Springer.

Caccamo, M. 2020. "Leveraging Innovation Spaces to Foster Collaborative Innovation." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 29 (1): 178–191. doi:10.1111/caim.12357.

Carlile, P. R. 2002. "A Pragmatic View of Knowledge and Boundaries: Boundary Objects in New Product Development." *Organization Science* 13 (4): 442–455. doi:10.1287/orsc.13.4.442.2953.

Carlile, P. R. 2004. "Transferring, Translating and Transforming: An Integrative Framework for Managing Knowledge across Boundaries." *Organization Science* 15 (5): 555–568. doi:10.1287/orsc.1040.0094.

Caves, R. E. 2000. *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Caves, R. E. 2003. "Contracts between Art and Commerce." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17 (2): 73–83. doi:10.1257/089533003765888430.

Chesbrough, H. 2003. "The Era of Open Innovation." *MITSloan Management Review* 44: 35–41.

Chesbrough, H., and A. K. Crowther. 2006. "Beyond High Tech: Early Adopters of Open Innovation in Other Industries." *R and D Management* 36 (3): 229–236. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9310.2006.00428.x.

Cohendet, P., and L. Simon. 2007. "Playing across the Playground: Paradoxes of Knowledge Creation in the Videogame Firm." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 28 (5): 587–605. doi:10.1002/job.460.

Creswell, J. W. 2013. *Qualitative Research Inquiry & Research Design – Choosing among Five Approaches* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: SAGE.

Cui, A. S., and F. Wu. 2016. "Utilizing Customer Knowledge in Innovation: Antecedents and Impact of Customer Involvement on New Product Performance." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 44 (4): 516–538. doi:10.1007/s11747-015-0433-x.

Dempster, A. M. 2006. "Managing Uncertainty in Creative Industries: Lessons from Jerry Springer the Opera." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 15 (3): 224–233. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8691.2006.00391.x.

Earle, J., and Z. Sakova. 2000. "Business Start-Ups or Disguised Unemployment? Evidence on the Character of Self-Employment from Transitional Economies." *Labour Economics* 7 (5): 575–601. doi:10.4236/chnstd.2016.53009.

Eikhof, D. R., and A. Haunschild. 2006. "Lifestyle Meets Market: Bohemian Entrepreneurs in Creative Industries." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 15 (3): 234–241. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8691.2006.00392.x.

European Parliament 2016. "*Report on a coherent EU policy for cultural and creative industries.*" (2016/2072(INI)). European Parliament, Brussels.

Eurostat. 2019. "*Self-employed persons.*" https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20190430-1. Consulted 30.12.2021.

Freeman, J., G. R. Carroll, and M. T. Hannan. 1983. "The Liability of Newness: Age Dependence in Organizational Death Rates." *American Sociological Review* 48 (5): 692–710. doi:10.2307/2094928.

Fuchs, C., and M. Schreier. 2011. "Customer Empowerment in New Product Development." *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 28 (1): 17–32. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5885.2010.00778.x.

Gabrielson, H., and C. Berggren. 2011. "Inventors as Innovators and Knowledge Integrators." In *Knowledge Integration and Innovation: Critical Challenges Facing International Technology-Based Firms*, edited by C. Berggren, A. Bergek, L. Bengtsson, and J. Söderlund, 77–95. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gehman, J., V. L. Glaser, K. M. Eisenhard, D. Gioia, A. Langley, and K. G. Corley. 2018. "Finding Theory-Method Fit: A Comparison of Three Qualitative Approaches to Theory Building." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 27 (3): 284–300. doi:10.1177/1056492617706029.

Glaser, B. G. 1978. *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Gonzalez-Cristiano, A., and B. Sandberg. 2019. "When Running Fast is Not the Best Option: Failure of User Involvement in Design Development Processes." *International Journal of Product Development* 23 (4): 247–263. doi:10.1504/IJPD.2019.105485.

Goodman-Deane, J., P. Langdon, and J. Clarkson. 2010. "Key Influences on the User-Centred Design Process." *Journal of Engineering Design* 21 (2-3): 345–373. doi:10.1080/09544820903364912.

Gouvea, R., D. Kapelianis, M. R. Montoya, and G. Vora. 2021. "The Creative Economy, Innovation and Entrepreneurship: An Empirical Examation." *Creative Industries Journal* 14 (1): 23–62. doi:10.1080/17510694.2020.1744215.

Håkansson, H., and D. Ford. 2002. "How Should Companies Interact in Business Networks?" *Journal of Business Research* 55 (2): 133–139. doi:10.1016/S0148-2963(00)00148-X.

Higgs, P., and S. Cunningham. 2008. "Creative Industries Mapping: Where Have we Come from and Where Do Are we Going?" *Creative Industries Journal* 1 (1): 7–30. doi:10.1386/cij.1.1.7_1.

Hoyer, Wayne D., Rajesh Chandy, Matilda Dorotic, Manfred Krafft, and Siddharth S. Singh. 2010. "Consumer Cocreation in New Product Development." *Journal of Service Research* 13 (3): 283–296. doi:10.1177/1094670510375604.

Jarvenpaa, S. L., and K. R. Lang. 2011. "Boundary Management in Online Communities: Case Studies of Nine Inch Nails and ccMixter Music Remix Sites." *Long Range Planning* 44 (5-6): 440–457. doi:10.1016/j.lrp.2011.09.002.

Konrad, E. D. 2013. "Cultural Entrepreneurship: The Impact of Social Networking on Success." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 22 (3): 307–319. doi:10.1111/caim.12032.

Kristensson, P., J. Matthing, and N. Johansson. 2008. "Key Strategies for the Successful Involvement of Customer in the co-Creation of New Technology-Based Services." *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 19 (4): 474–491. doi:10.1108/09564230810891914.

Lampel, J., and O. Germain. 2016. "Creative Industries as Hubs of New Organizational and Business Practices." *Journal of Business Research* 69 (7): 2327–2333. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.10.001.

Leighton, P. 2015. "Independent Professionals: Legal Issues and Challenges." *International Review of Entrepreneurship* 13: 81–92.

Leonard, D. 1998. *Wellsprings of Knowledge. Building and Sustaining the Sources of Innovation*. Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Longo, M. C., and A. Narduzzo. 2017. "Transactive Knowledge from Communities of Practice to Firms: An Empirical Investigation of Innovative Projects Performance." *European Journal of Innovation Management* 20 (2): 291–311. doi:10.1108/EJIM-10-2016-0098.

Machlup, F. 1984. *Knowledge, Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance: The Economics of Information and Human Capital*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mahmoud-Jouini, S. B., and F. Charue-Duboc. 2008. "Enhancing Discontinuous Innovation through Knowledge Combination: The Case of an Exploratory Unit within an Established Automotive Firm." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 17 (2): 127–135. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8691.2008.00473.x.

Mahr, D., A. Lievens, and V. Blazevic. 2014. "The Value of Customer Cocreated Knowledge during the Innovation Process." *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 31 (3): 599–615. doi:10.1111/jpim.12116.

Martin-Rios, C., and E. Parga-Dans. 2016. "The Early Bird Gets the Worm, but the Second Mouse Gets the Cheese: Non-Technological Innovation in Creative Industries." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 25 (1): 6–17. doi:10.1111/caim.12131.

Mietzner, D., and M. Kamprath. 2013. "A Competence Portfolio for Professionals in the Creative Industries." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 22 (3): 280–294. doi:10.1111/caim.12026.

Moultrie, J., and A. Young. 2009. "Exploratory Study of Organizational Creativity in Creative Organizations." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 18 (4): 299–314. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8691.2009.00536.x.

Ness, I. J. 2017. "Polyphonic Orchestration – Facilitating Creative Knowledge Processes for Innovation." *European Journal of Innovation Management* 20 (4): 557–577. doi:10.1108/EJIM-05-2016-0049.

Paraponaris, C., and M. Sigal. 2015. "From Knowledge to Knowing, from Boundaries to Boundary Construction." *Journal of Knowledge Management* 19 (5): 881–899. doi:10.1108/JKM-01-2015-0034.

Parmentier, G., and V. Mangematin. 2014. "Orchestrating Innovation with User Communities in the Creative Industries." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 83: 40–53. doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2013.03.007.

Patton, M. Q. 2001. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation and Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Peltoniemi, M. 2015. "Cultural Industries: Product-Market Characteristics, Management Challenges and Industry Dynamics." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17 (1): 41–68. doi:10.1111/ijmr.12036.
Pershina, R., B. Soppe, and T. M. Thune. 2019. "Bridging Analog and Digital Expertise: Cross-Domain Collaboration and Boundary-Spanning Tools in the Creation of Digital Innovation." *Research Policy* 48 (9): 103819. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2019.103819.
Polanyi, M. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge.
Potts, J., and S. Cunningham. 2008. "Four Models of the Creative Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 14 (3): 233–247. doi:10.1080/10286630802281780.
Potts, J., S. Cunningham, J. Hartley, and P. Ormerod. 2008. "Social Network Markets: A New Definition of Creative Industries." *Journal of Cultural Economics* 32 (3): 167–185. doi:10.1080/10286630802281780.
Powell, W. W., and S. Grodal. 2004. "Networks of Innovation." In *The Oxford handbook of innovation*, edited by J. Fagerberg, D. Mowery, and R. Nelson, 56–85. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Powell, W. W., K. W. Koput, and L. Smith-Doerr. 1996. "Interorganizational Collaboration and the Locus of Innovation: Networks of Learning in Biotechnology." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41 (1): 116–145. doi:10.2307/2393988.
Protogerou, A., A. Kontolaimou, and Y. Caloghirou. 2017. "Innovation in the European Creative Industries: A Firm-Level Empirical Approach." *Industry and Innovation* 24 (6): 587–612. doi:10.1080/13662716.2016.1263551.
Rapelli, S. 2012. *European I-Pros: A Study*. London: PCG.
Sawhney, M., and E. Prandelli. 2000. "Communities of Creation: Managing Distributed Innovation in Turbulent Waters." *California Management Review* 42 (4): 24–54. doi:10.2307/41166052.
Siggelkow, N. 2007. "Persuasion with Case Studies." *Academy of Management Journal* 50 (1): 20–24. doi:10.5465/amj.2007.24160882.
Sinkovics, R. R., and E. A. Alfoldi. 2012. "Progressive Focusing and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research – the Enabling Role of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)." *Management International Review* 52 (6): 817–845. doi:10.1007/s11575-012-0140-5.
Stake, R. E. 1981. "The Art of Progressive Focusing." In Proceedings of the 65th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Los Angeles.
Stake, R. E. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Stake, R. E. 2005. "Qualitative Case Studies." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N.K. Denzin, and Y. S. Lincoln, 443–466. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.
Star, S. L. 1989. "The Structure of Ill-Structured Solutions: Boundary Objects and Heterogeneous Distributed Problem Solving." In *Readings in Distributed Artificial Intelligence*, edited by M. Huns and L. Gasser, 37–54. Menlo Park, CA: Morgan Kaufman.
Star, S. L., and J. R. Griesemer. 1989. "Institutional Ecology. 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateur and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-1939." *Social Studies of Science* 19 (3): 387–420. doi:10.1177/030631289019003001.
Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: SAGE.
Thune, T., and M. Gulbrandsen. 2017. "Combining Knowledge to Generate Novelty: A Study of Disclosed Ideas for Life Sciences Inventions." *European Journal of Innovation Management* 20 (3): 446–462. doi:10.1108/EJIM-11-2016-0114.
Tschang, F. T. 2007. "Balancing the Tensions between Rationalization and Creativity in the Video Games Industry." *Organization Science* 18 (6): 989–1005. doi:10.1287/orsc.1070.0299.
UK DCMS 2001. *Creative industries mapping document*. Government of the United Kingdom, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-mapping-documents-2001. Consulted 30.12.2021.
von Hippel, E. 2005. *Democratizing Innovation*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Wynarczyk, P. 2013. "Open Innovation in SMEs: A Dynamic Approach to Modern Entrepreneurship in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 20 (2): 258–278. doi:10.1108/14626001311326725.
Yström, A., and M. Agogué. 2020. "Exploring Practices in Collaborative Innovation: Unpacking Dynamics, Relations, and Enactment in in-between Spaces." *Creativity and Innovation Management* 29 (1): 141–145. doi:10.1111/caim.12360.