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Abstract

This provocation invites reflection on the use of design workshops in research. We are concerned that often, design workshops don't work; at least, not as their facilitators might have intended, or as effectively as they could do. In this short paper we draw from our own experiences of organizing and attending design workshops, to observe common challenges in using design workshops as a research tool. Though critical, we intend this paper to serve as a point of reflection for running more purposeful workshops, and being able to better articulate the research and design developed through them.

Author Keywords

Design Workshops; Design Methods; Participation; RtD

CSS Concepts

Human-centered computing ~Interaction design~
Interaction design process and methods

Introduction

In various guises, the 'workshop' has become a stock-in-trade for design research in both industry and academia. Used throughout a design process or research project, there are innumerable approaches to running a 'design workshop'. Typically, these might

Our Workshop Histories

Our own research is broadly exploratory, drawing on design-led and qualitative methods, to understand the possible implications of emerging data-driven technologies in different contexts.

We estimate we have organized and attended at least 100 'design workshops' between us, even in our (relatively) short research careers. We frequently work with various external stakeholders and project partners beyond the academy, ranging from community groups and third sector organizations, to large banks and industry bodies.

As brief examples, in the past we have run workshops with varying degrees of success to: explore blockchain technologies with third-sector organisations [3]; analyse local pollution data with children[4]; and craft new relationships with data through crocheting [14].

range from creating spaces for particular communities, experts or stakeholders to articulate their views around a topic or technology (e.g. [9,11,19,20]); exploratory and generative activities to develop new design opportunities (e.g. [1,13,15]); or perhaps gaining feedback on a specific prototype or design artefact (e.g. [10,12]).

Design workshops are particularly common as a means by which to engage participants in a design process and very often, these workshops will ask participants to contribute constructively to some kind of design or prototyping activity. This enables stakeholders to input directly into designs, which both captures their specific expertise, and gives them a voice in the process. Judging by their wide adoption across all manner of research projects, design workshops can clearly be a powerful and effective tool. However, reflecting on a series of craft-based design workshops, Rosner et al. [18] offer a thorough sociological critique of workshop practices for the CSCW community. In their work, they frame workshops as 'research interventions' and note the multiple roles workshops can play. Crucially, like others [7,11,21] they invite reflection on the way workshops both open up and foreclose certain kinds of participation.

Building on these approaches, in this short provocation, we aim to reflect more deeply, and pragmatically, on the nature of workshops *as a research tool*. Whilst research is not always the primary aim of workshops, we see this as essential to the DIS community where there is a need to be able to articulate or present interesting learnings regarding processes and outputs to others. Reflecting on our own experiences of facilitating and attending many design workshops (see

sidebar) we wish to highlight tensions that emerge where workshops aim to create space for explorative and generative design activities and simultaneously deliver empirical qualitative research. As such, we also see this provocation as continuing discussions about how design and practice-led research generates new kinds of knowledge [5,6,8,17].

Observations

We first offer a series of observations, based on our own experiences of facilitating and attending many design workshops. We aspire that other researchers may recognize the challenges we raise here, or at the very least, have pause for thought as they organize future workshops.

#1 Workshops are deeply ambiguous activities

Our initial observation is simply that workshops are deeply ambiguous activities, for all those engaged. As Rosner et al. [18] already note, workshops invoke a whole range of prior investments and understandings about who and what a workshop is for. In this paper, we are focused primarily on design workshops towards research – but participants and even facilitators might view them as something else entirely: a networking opportunity; a free lunch; an example of public engagement. There will always be varied views and roles of a workshop, but from a research perspective, we suggest this ambiguity can lead to challenges, for example regarding if and how data is collected, or who even attends the workshop in the first place.

This ambiguity often resides within research teams themselves. In our own experience, planning a workshop is sometimes a mechanism to postpone decision making or in lieu of a more specific or concrete

Workshop Multi-tasking

The ambiguity of workshops creates a pragmatic challenge where the roles a researcher must undertake become blurred. Besides the organizational effort ahead of a workshop, a single researcher might find themselves at a workshop playing: a host, a compere, an expert, a matchmaker, a listener, a note-taker, a motivational speaker among other things. This multitasking comes with the territory of any kind of participatory work, but nonetheless, we should reflect on how it might diminish or limit the kinds of research and data gathering one might hope to do at a workshop.

We also note that carefully structured facilitation is a crucial tool to manage voices and shared participation in a workshop, but when this very active role is taken by a researcher, other activities like note-taking and observation become more challenging.

research activity. There is often a sense of doing a workshop and seeing what happens. Iterative and design-led practices are replete with such exploratory approaches, but we should be reflective about the implications this ambiguity can have when we subsequently attempt to account for workshops as part of our research process.

#2 When should a workshop not be a workshop?

Reflecting on this ambiguity, we suggest that the term 'design workshop' has itself become a rather loose term, and often simply a placeholder to indicate some kind of participation from an audience. For participants, we suggest this may create challenges in managing their expectations. Other qualitative research methods are often much more conceptually clear. In an interview, a researcher is likely to ask lots of questions and listen carefully to the answers. Focus groups clearly demand opinions. Ethnographic work involves observation and note-taking. But who knows what will happen in a design workshop? None or all of the above?

We ask: how could we better describe the activities of a design workshop to support a research-focused orientation in participants? What framings make participants feel comfortable about data collection, maximize rich discussion, or naturally produce materials that can serve as research data or articulate novel ideas? How can we be clearer about the kind of commitment or engagement expected from participants, before, during and after a workshop?

While it is easy to reach for the familiarity of a workshop format, we might ask, when should a workshop be a series of structured and recorded meetings or focus groups with carefully recruited

participants? Alternatively, could a workshop be explicitly positioned as an ideation or feedback session? Our provocation here is both that we might use better terminology to set expectations for a workshop, and that on some occasions, we might move away from running a 'workshop' at all.

#3 When do design workshops require more or less structure?

Implicit in our arguments thus far, is a tension between more open-ended, exploratory and unpredictable activities, and more controlled, and structured data activities that lead to defined outputs.

Workshops can create a playground for participation, but it can often be challenging to account for what happens in that playground. In our experience, by encouraging interactivity and open-mindedness, workshops often manage to generate creative and novel ideas, but with time constraints, tend to be less successful at refining or thinking through the real-world implications. Being accepting of all ideas, pursuing a 'yes and' attitude may lead to intriguing lines of design inquiry, but without careful follow-up it becomes challenging to corral these towards empirical or designerly insights.

Imposing structure, also reflects a balance of power between researchers and participants in determining how a workshop unfolds. Decisions about structure could also be better negotiated ahead of a workshop with participants [7,11,21]. Our provocation here is for researchers to think more carefully about just how structured workshops can and should be. In doing this, we might ask ourselves about the inherent qualities of workshops over other research and design methods.

Workshop Ethics and Consent

As an exploratory activity, it's often unclear what ongoing commitments might be made and expected following a workshop. This may especially pertain to data collected, or design ideas generated during a workshop. How this is negotiated will have implications for what researchers can and should be able to do next.

Pragmatically, gaining consent for data gathering activities often feels awkward or formalizes what should be a more relaxed or informal session. Workshops can implicitly employ so-called 'Chatham House Rules' (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/chatham-house-rule>) where more formal recording feels inappropriate, or would disrupt other aspects of the workshop. If participants do opt out, there can be a sense of having an incomplete picture, or considerable labor required to exclude them from other data capture.

What does the workshop format uniquely offer and how can we structure workshops to reflect this?

#4 Gathering and sharing workshop data is difficult

In our experience, whether towards formal analysis, design outcomes, or simply a record of what happened, data collection at a workshop is often fraught. Pragmatically, recording a workshop relies on capturing many conversations, voices and interactions at once. Some of these may be profound, others are simply small talk. We believe many researchers will have held onto rolls and rolls of flip-chart papers and post-it notes from old workshops, as something to be eventually deciphered and turned into valuable research data.

In this respect, we find the quality and yield of research data generated from workshops is often disappointing and inconsistent, compared to what might be expected from other qualitative or design methods. One approach can be to develop structured materials and activities that themselves generate a telling or evocative material record of opinions and events (e.g. [1,15,20]). However, perhaps most important, is that this record is appropriate for the analysis or dissemination that researchers wish to pursue.

Catch-all methods of capture like audio or video recordings can be intrusive, and they can be extremely difficult to analyse after the event. This can often also lead to postponement of identifying what is most salient or important to capture. Overall, we find there are considerable tensions between: the workshop as an experience for participants; as a resource for design; and as a tool for research. These competing priorities have to be skillfully negotiated by researchers.

We also often see challenges in how workshops and their data should be represented afterwards, for participants, publics and particularly more formal academic outputs. The rigors and expectations of analyzing and presenting ethnographic and interview data are well-established, and can draw on expertise in other fields. By contrast, it's profoundly unclear how to best articulate what workshops are really doing. While alternative formats such as annotated portfolios [2] have been experimented with to represent knowledge generated through design artefacts [16], arguably we lack a similar discussion in reporting design workshops.

Closing Provocations

We have turned to the *Provocations* track at DIS to start a better conversation about design workshops as a *research tool*. On the surface, our observations, relate to pragmatic reflections about things we might take more care over: from language and clarity of purpose, to structure and data collection.

More broadly however, we see this as an important part of maturing methods in HCI and design research. In doing so we hope to create a space to think more carefully about how and when empirical methods can be used in workshop contexts. Equally, we see opportunities for design workshops to focus more explicitly on developing creative design outcomes that underpin strong design-led research, and set aside efforts of empirical rigor. Clearly there is no single right way to do a design workshop, however our observations do suggest that the multi-faceted nature of workshops means they are adopted in ambiguous ways as a *research tool*. We hope this paper offers a point of reflection and an opportunity for further innovation and best practice in our approaches.

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