

Jun 17th, 12:00 AM

Beyond Impact: Understanding and Communicating the Value of Collaborative Design Research

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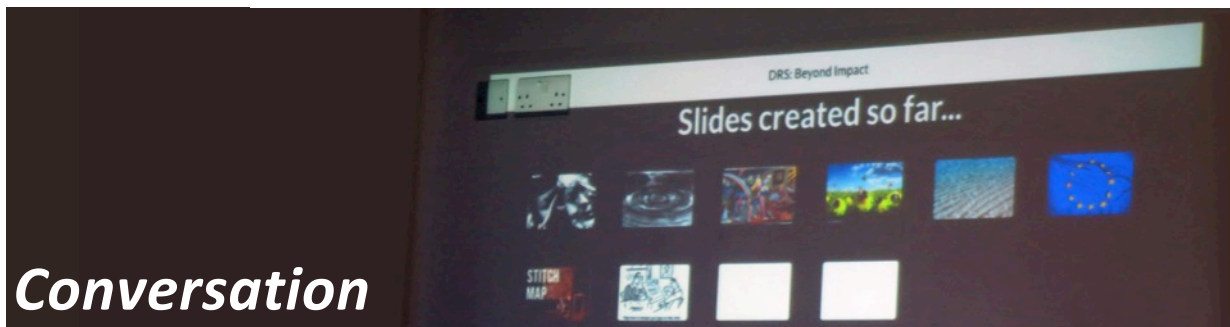
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Citation

Bowen, S., Whitham, R., Speed, C., Moreton, S., and Dima, M. (2016) Beyond Impact: Understanding and Communicating the Value of Collaborative Design Research, in Lloyd, P. and Bohemia, E. (eds.), *Future Focused Thinking - DRS International Conference 2016*, 27 - 30 June, Brighton, United Kingdom.
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Beyond Impact: Understanding and Communicating the Value of Collaborative Design Research

Keywords: impact, benefit, collaboration, research management

A conversation held at DRS2016 - Brighton

June 30th 2016, 11:15AM – 12:45PM.

This document is conversation proposal and documentation in one.

Catalysts

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Introduction

How can we capture, understand, and demonstrate the value of collaborative design research beyond economic impact?

This conversation explored how the value of design research programmes (Binder & Redström, 2006) can be understood and communicated beyond the immediate outcomes-based economic measures of impact often requested by funders. This had been a central



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concern for the four UK Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy, and ‘catalyst’ speakers from each Hub demonstrated how their research programmes had approached this challenge to stimulate participants’ reflection and discussion.

The conversation was structured to prompt, share and reflect upon participants’ perspectives and experiences on the topic of ‘beyond impact’ through three parts: two perspectives sessions, where catalyst speakers provided their perspectives and experiences on understanding and communicating the value of collaborative design research and participants captured their own perspectives in small groups; and a final plenary session where participants shared and discussed perspectives.

Slide Together, a networked iPad-based tool, was used to enable session participants to capture and share perspectives in the form of image and text ‘slides’ that responded to the prompt:

Create a slide to identify a challenge of communicating design research value beyond outputs.

These pages contain

- a short description of the background to the conversation.
- the perspectives of the four catalyst speakers
- and reflections from catalyst speakers following the session.

This conversation session is also documented online at <https://openlab.ncl.ac.uk/beyondimpact>. The site contains additional materials: the catalysts' presentations and the slides the participants created using Slide Together.

Background

Understandably, funders need to evaluate the effectiveness of the research they fund to guide allocation of future funding and promote research excellence. However, when this research intends practical application (as does much design research), the metrics used typically focus on ‘impact’ framed in economic terms (e.g. numbers of products created, company growth, or increase in ‘innovation capacity’), and impact that is measurable within, or soon after, the funding period – i.e. immediate economic impact. From of individual and institutional perspectives on research impact in UK Universities, (Upton, Vallance, & Goddard, 2014) conclude that impact measures are neither an adequate incentive for academics nor an adequate means of evaluating academic-industry collaborations, noting that much impact outside academia is difficult to trace due to its ‘secondary’ rather than direct relationship to research and that, even when impacts can be identified, “certain outcomes lend themselves to measurement or assessment more readily than others” (p8).

Upton et al. suggest a shift from the outcomes of collaboration to its process, where evidence of systematic and active engagement is an indicator of likely impact. Our conversation explored how engagements with design collaborators, and the ecologies that

develop through them, can be communicated to demonstrate the value of design research (Figure 1).

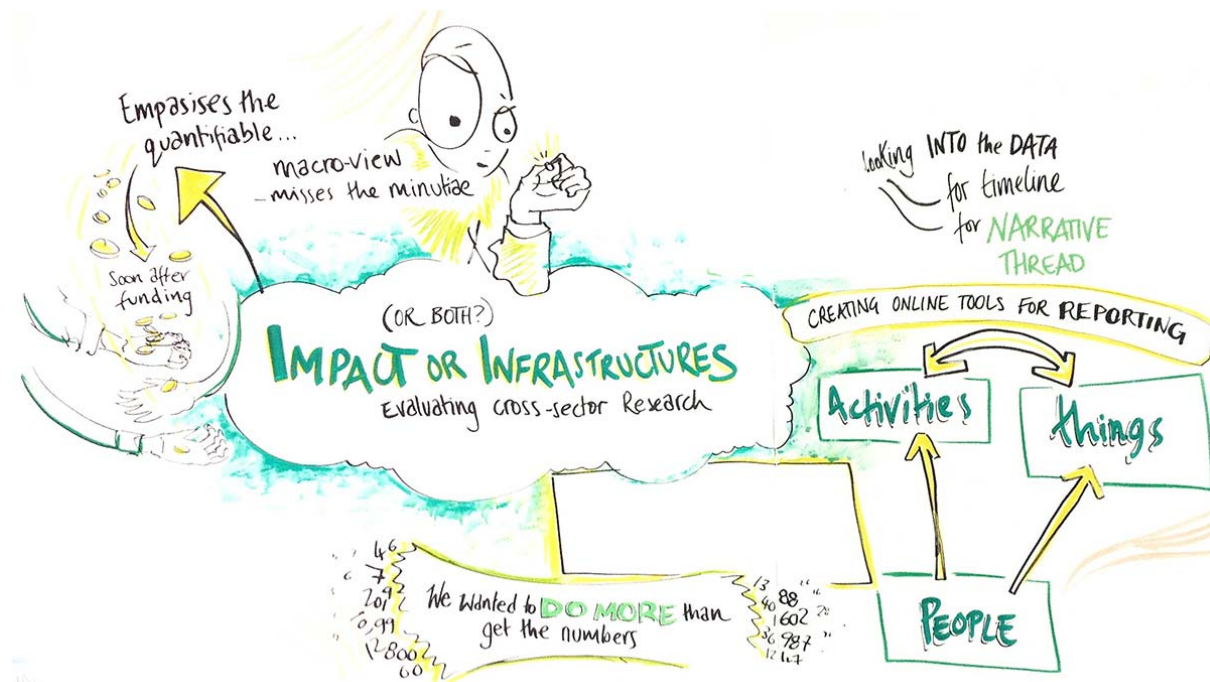


Figure 1: Illustration "Impact or Infrastructures"

UK Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy

The UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) committed £16M between 2012-2016 for four hubs (Creativeworks London, The Creative Exchange, Design in Action, and REACT) to "connect excellent research in the arts and humanities with a range of creative and cultural organisations [...] to accelerate growth and innovation, generate new and exciting knowledge exchange opportunities, foster entrepreneurial talent and contribute to the development of the UK's Creative Economy" (AHRC, n.d.). Although differing in their specific mechanisms, the four hubs share a model of connecting creative and cultural industries with arts and humanities academics via collaboration in design projects. Through around 200 such collaborations, the Hubs have prototyped new products, services, and media, enabled industry and academic partners to learn from and with each other, and developed new approaches to 'knowledge exchange' centred on design as a mechanism for collaboration. Whilst such outcomes may be readily quantified to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Hubs' work, the Hubs have also observed other beneficial consequences of design collaboration that are not currently recorded, e.g. the connections made between organisations that often lead to productive future collaborations. The Hubs have evidence of outcomes and of the collaboration process, and are exploring ways of communicating the latter to evidence the value of their research programmes.

The session at DRS2016

The conversation was set up to be an open discussion between conference delegates as others already involved in design research with their own valuable experiences. The perspectives of the four Hubs were used to draw out the perspectives of others in the room and to encourage critique and debate.

Catalysts' perspectives

The catalysts each presented the perspective of their research programmes (KE Hub). Below is a summary of each perspective:

The Creative Exchange

The CX catalyst will explore tensions between capturing explicit, quantifiable value with approaches for exposing tacit, localised value in small networks or specific collaborative interactions. We present existing and prospective work on the practicalities of capturing impact at the micro and macro levels using a mixture of data visualisation, reusable tools, conventional research methods and instigated reflective moments. We consider the challenge and value of capturing informal, tacit connections and the potential for visualisation as a means to engage stakeholders in this process. Dynamic visualisations from a live database will be used to illustrate how CX has captured value, and participants will be invited to contribute their own experiences capturing tacit impact and making it meaningful outside of its specific context.

Creativeworks London (CWL)

The Creativeworks London catalyst will explore the design challenges and opportunities of building a community of interest through Knowledge Exchange. Creativeworks London has created a series of mechanisms to engage a wide spectrum of participants and enable cross-disciplinary collaborations in a very wide range of Arts and Humanities and the Creative Industries. We have been constantly investigating successful ways for creating and widening network collaborations, supporting inventions in multiple directions, grow connections in an affective manner. We provided agile and responsive funding process, followed brokerages all the way with several methods designed to empower those involved – signature events such as Ideas Pools and Research Labs. These have helped projects move from fuzzy inception to a more structured collaboration with recorded innovations. Reflecting on the process we have included all our tools and observations into a toolkit/guideline to help future projects. In this session we invite participants to discuss issues and opportunities for creating a community of interest, and ways to help sustain and evaluate the value of such communities.

Design in Action

Design in Action will explore how the digital economy is enabling design to shift from making small contributions in value chains to playing a more sustained roll in the management of value constellations. Through a narrative supported by case studies the team will address how different projects across the Design in Action portfolio reveal the widening role of design as it is employed not to simply design artefacts within a linear value chain, but to

mediate value across a constellation of stakeholders. We project a future in which design could be tasked with considering how ecologies of actions, behaviour and incentives could create virtuous markets of interaction, and unpack the implications for education and industry. Supported by service and product design examples, as well as a demonstrator using Bitcoins, participants will be able to take part in smart contracting to better understand the implications for emerging economic models in the digital economy.

REACT

In this part of the session, we explore what happens when you try to visualise an emergent network.

Between 2012 and 2016, REACT funded 53 collaborative projects which explored themes from interactive documentary, heritage and the future of books and print, to products for children and Internet-connected objects. These collaborations led to over £5 million in further investment and new research bids.

The REACT team sought to provide the right kinds of structure, levels of care, and interventions, necessary to see projects grow. The approach that underpinned this activity understood the network of people, places and things that made up REACT and its projects as part of an ecosystem, with interdependencies, unexpected outcomes, and emergent opportunities. By setting the right conditions for growth, amazing things can happen.

But how do you show that this approach works? How do you demonstrate the step from abstract values to meaningful outcomes? How do you visualise a cultural ecology?

Participants' responses

Responses to the organizing research question 'How can we capture, understand, and demonstrate the value of collaborative design research beyond economic impact?' were captured using a smart phone/tablet-based interface and made visible in the central workspace. After participants had shared perspectives on particular values of design research and the challenges or opportunities for capturing them, the conversation moved into a group discussion of broader concerns. These included:

Maps

- Some discomfort with the form of maps and mapping:
- Where is the contested, over the rhetorical?
- How legible are the maps – maps require certain expertise to be interpreted.
- Is there space for semantic labelling on maps?
- Mediums and modes of representation.
- Different standards of information and representation.
- Legitimacy.

Narratives

- Anonymity in networks/constellations.
- The attention economy – translation.
- Collaboration during a project.

- People have an interest in reflection – value to individuals.
- Democracy / agonism – who’s voice comes forward?
- Gaps between activity and reporting.
- Empowering people to tell stories about what they’ve done. Incorporating to different scales.

Formats

- Joint reporting between collaborators.
- 6-monthly reporting in the form of magazines.
- Accessibility.
- Working papers/articles.
- Encouraging online dialogue/backchannels.
- Reflections

Reflection

Simon Bowen, Conversation organiser:

I introduced this conversation with a proposition that the impact of cross-sector design research extends beyond what can be readily quantified as outputs or outcomes, and it was reassuring that participants’ experiences reinforced this claim. There was also common support for understanding research value in terms of, for example, networks, meshworks, ecologies and value constellations – as offered by the catalyst speakers. However, as the conversation progressed, it became clear that there are many forms of value that design research produces and that each bring particular challenges and opportunities for communication.

For example, our work within the Creative Exchange (CX) has sought to record, not only the outcomes of research, but the activities that produced or used these outputs, those involved, and the many connections between these things, people and activities. Dynamic visualisations of these entanglements can then illustrate how infrastructures of people, things made, and the know-how produced in this making evolve over time. And such infrastructures illustrate current impact and the potential for future impact resulting from these infrastructures. However, these visualisations are also problematic and can introduce their own forms of reductionism:

- They require expertise in their interpretation;
- They foreground certain aspects over others, i.e. that which can be reduced in terms of ‘made thing,’ ‘person/organisation,’ ‘activity’;
- They require abstraction and arbitrary judgement in making connections, i.e. what qualifies as a connection/entanglement;
- They introduce value judgements in what is recorded, and, in turn, what is understood by those interpreting them; and,

- They can only show a partial picture, e.g. the material captured will always have a finite boundary of connected things, people, activities.

During the conversation I was also aware that the perspectives offered by the catalyst speakers and my own resulted from post-hoc attempts to understand the value of cross-sector design research. The discussion showed that there are important practical questions about how to capture such value from projects' outset and as they progress. For example, what should be recorded, how can it be recorded, and what are the incentives for research partners (both inside and outside the academy) to capture such material?

In CX, capturing things made, people involved, activities, and the connections between them has been useful in terms of demonstrating impact to our funders. But it has also been useful as a reflexive tool that has drawn out specific narratives of research value, and enabled us to understand current and potential relationships between diverse work in a larger programme of research, and the value generated for those involved.

A major challenge, then, is finding approaches to communicating the impact of cross-sector design research that retain the breadth of research value, in a manner that delivers value to research partners as well as funders and is therefore more likely to be sustained.

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About the Catalysts:

Simon Bowen is KE Associate at Open Lab, Newcastle University where he is investigating the value of design-led academic-industrial collaborations, having previously worked in health service design and media technology.

Roger Whitham is a Lecturer within ImaginationLancaster at Lancaster University. His research focuses on collaborative interactions, tools, structures and practices, exploring the role that technology and design can play in this space.

Chris Speed is Co-Director of the Design Informatics Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh that is home to a combination of researchers working across the fields of interaction design, temporal design, anthropology, software engineering and distributed ledgers.

Simon Moreton is Impact Research Fellow at UWE Bristol and was Research Fellow for REACT. He is interested in the politics and practices of collaboration between HEIs and the creative economy. He is also a practicing artist.

Mariza Dima is a Human-Computer Interaction designer, researcher and design strategist. Her work focuses on interaction design in socio-cultural contexts, prominently in performance art, theatre, cultural heritage and in design for societal transformation.