Warts-and-all: the real practice of service design

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Introduction

Service design practice, discourse and education are still nascent in Australia where most designers are trained in fields such as industrial design, architecture, communication design, and to a lesser degree, interaction design (a field that is equally nascent). Academic research on service design has so far been limited (Kimbell and Seidel 2008) and much of the knowledge generated from business contexts has been proprietary (Tether 2008). These factors have led to a lack of critical engagement in examining and investigating the complex contexts that surrounds service design projects. This also adds to the challenging obstacles for designers seeking to establish and embarking upon a service design-led practice in Australia.

The paper critiques service design case studies that are often documented and reported in a manner that abstracts and generalises the realities of this field as obstacles to understanding the 'real' practice of service design. Through attempts to clarify, systematise and advocate the benefit of service design, authors might gloss over the messy realities and the contextual knowledge grounded in action. This has resulted in practice-based knowledge being 'lost in translation'. This is a critical shortfall. It becomes a disadvantageous factor in developing learning frameworks for designers in similar contexts to Australia who are seeking models, methods, case studies and discourse on service design from established agencies and research institutions on service design across Europe. These case studies can, by default, construct an idealistic scenario of service design that omit issues such as relationship building, resources,

skill-sets and disciplinary boundaries that are integral to the realisation of projects and the adoption of a service design-led practice.

Within this context, the paper offers learnings drawn from a case study of a team of communication designers in Australia who attempted to undertake a project from a service design perspective. As practice-based research, reflection and critique was emphasised to reveal knowledge generated and situated in action. Numerous questions rather than answers have emerged from reflecting on the case study, which are presented as 'lessons learnt'. These lessons highlight logistical obstacles, issues of losing disciplinary identity and change management barriers that project stakeholders faced when embarking on service design projects. The discussion in this paper argues for the importance of documenting and reporting case studies that captures the grounded contexts as a way to facilitate knowledge generation and transfer. It also highlights the need to integrate knowledge from organisational theory and change management that examines, documents and addresses human-related challenges that are often omitted from service design discourse. These learnings are offered to the community of potential service designers who are broadening their current disciplinary practice and are seeking opportunities to create a service design practice. The aim is to provide 'signposts', particularly for communication designers intending to apply service design methods and thinking in their current or future projects.

One of the values of generating knowledge in service design and disseminating this as research is to assist and enable more designers to enter in this field. Our responsibility as design researchers is to apply service design thinking in the way we disseminate this knowledge to others. The unique knowledge situated and generated from service design context is complex, yet typical of practice-based design research. In comparison to those who argue for a 'clear consensus or an over-arching unifying framework' for service design (Saco and Goncalves 2008, p. 12), the paper argues that it can never be, nor should it be framed in such a way. If service design practitioners truly believe in its value and agency to companies, organisations and public institutions, then, accounts of the practice needs to be captured and articulated in ways that reflect the lived world.

Embarking on service design

Service design's strength lies in its resonance with fields such as industrial design, communication design, interaction design and experience design, as well as its overlap with service development, management, operations and marketing (Ainamo 2008; Holmlid 2007). This resonance enables designers, trained in other fields and disciplines, to embark on creating a service design-led practice with a degree of familiarity, as well as readily seize opportunities in undertaking service design. This paper reports from a case study of communication designers seizing an opportunity for broadening their design thinking through embarking on service design. These communication designers already had familiarity and knowledge of service design methods and discourse. Yet, typical of the design commissions that came through their studio door, the design project was not defined as service design by their client. Instead, the project in discussion began its life as a conventional web design brief. The client was a non-profit organisation that provides engineering knowledge, technical assistance and resources to communities in developing countries. The designers, whose main domain and experience lay in visual communication and interaction design, were commissioned to provide aesthetic and experiential guidance to the web-programming development that the clients had already initiated.

The discussion that follows will explain how the designers saw an opportunity to shift a project that had a technological, 'problem-solving' emphasis, to a holistic design approach to re-consolidate the activities, engagement and experience of an organisation and their stakeholders. In attempting to do so, the author reflects on key incidences and challenges that were encountered throughout the project duration, to reveal learnings that are situated in practice.

Project background

Upon discussion with the clients, the designers quickly realised that the project had potential to be a service design project. The website brief included developing functions of web software that would allow organisation members to share, organise, generate knowledge and disseminate information, in order to assist communities on the ground more efficiently. The designers saw potentiality for the website to be a 'hub' for organisational staff, members and communities on the ground to meet, discuss and work on-line. This was potentially a new service for their stakeholders that their current web system could not offer. In parallel, the organisation was transitioning its objective from a provider of engineering and technology advice, to an organisation that facilitates and provides resources to network, share and exchange specialized engineering knowledge for education and community development. As such, they were looking at the website as a catalyst and a vehicle to launch their re-branding and provide this new 'service'. The designers saw this as an opportunity to embark on a holistic design approach to re-consolidate the activities, engagement and experience of the organisation to align with its new brand and vision.

The project description occupies hybrid spaces of interaction design, communication design and system's design. For this reason, Stefan Holmlid (2007; 2008) and many other experts in service design who argue for a clearer differentiation between the various fields could insist that the ambiguity is problematic, and therefore the project does not fit their definitions of service design. Discussion on disciplinary boundary is salient and aspects of transitioning it are addressed in this paper. However, the author asks the readers to overlook the project's ambiguity of hybrid fields. The project was an attempt to *embark* on service design and to shift the focus *towards* it. It therefore does not claim that it was successful in being a service design project – in fact, there were many obstacles that had hindered this from happening.

A critique of 'simple recipes' and revealing 'warts and all'

In most service design case studies, what should manifest here is a discussion of tools, methods and interactions that were undertaken in order to design various services for the stakeholders. This would enable this case study to be nicely and neatly documented with novel insights for communication designers. However, in contrast to the 'neat and tidy' version, the author will reveal the 'warts and all' side of the story. The aim for this is to highlight the misleading potential of case studies that frame descriptions and discussion of tools, processes and systems generically. Generic description of tools are presented, for example, in Service Design Tools website (Tassi 2009) and an overview of methods and tools presented in Stefan Moritz's 'Practical Access to Service Design' (2005). The 'simple recipes' depicted here have lost the complex realities of design practice in its endeavor to promote 'toolkits' for service design. Service Design consultancies such as IDEO, Live Work and Engine use tools and techniques to enhance growth and provide differentiation for their clients, yet these consultancies have few distinguishing features based on service design methods alone. Snowden (2004, p. 148) cautions of 'management fads' from industrial best practice that are 'often over simplistic recipes put together in haste without

thought or awareness of theory'. Such 'fads' tend to claim universality in its effectiveness, 'driven by the business needs of consultancy firms and technology providers who evidence an almost evangelical zeal in their claims for the benefits of adopting the latest approach' (ibid). This points to an obvious omission in service design discourse – situated knowledge, experience and human contexts are also critical agents in service design. Methods and tools alone cannot enable agency for designers or stakeholders in a project – other human-centred and logistical issues are integral to the realisation of projects and undertaking a service design-led practice. These issues will be explored further within this paper.

Service design, by nature, is not easy to undertake. Germination of projects begins in many different ways, as the section above explained, and the reality of practice can often be a 'frankenstein' design of all sorts when a coordinated, well-communicated and well-prepared approach is not in place. The lessons learnt from the project reflections are summarised under themed headings below. These lessons are offered to the community of potential service designers intending to embark on a service design-led practice.

Lesson one: Challenges in shifting the project focus

When the designers realised that the project required a service design approach, they initiated discussions with clients to re-evaluate the focus of the project. The discussion attempted to move the project emphasis away from designing the technicality of the website to examining the project more holistically. In short, the discussion centred on re-writing the brief and modifying the end outcomes. Two key issues then surfaced – one issue was the re-negotiation of costs and timeline; the other issue was a re-definition of roles.

Personas and scenarios

Broadening the project scope necessitated the designers to have a greater understanding of the organisation's diverse members, staff, volunteers and community groups. Key to this understanding was to imagine what experience and relationship these stakeholders could have with the organisation and situating the website as a facilitator of interactions, experience and relationship building. These understandings was critical in designing the website, the brand experience and any potential interaction among the various stakeholder groups. The clients quickly recognised the value and centrality of this knowledge in driving the design process, however, the significance of this knowledge was not fully understood until a persona and scenario exercise was conducted with them. Due to lack of time and funds to conduct in-depth interviews with the variety of stakeholders around Australia and South East Asia, several staff who daily work with these stakeholders participated in a two-hour workshop. Working in groups, the staff pooled and consolidated the knowledge they had of their stakeholders. The persona-hypothesis exercise was a catalytic tool in mapping out who the variety of stakeholders are, what their role, motivations and concerns might be. Then, hypothetical scenarios were generated to capture what the personas relationship and interaction with the organisation could be, based on the organisation's new vision. This activity facilitated the designers and clients to share and agree on a common purpose for the project. This was a necessary conceptual shift that was required to re-write the website brief that was technical and functionality-driven.

The effective use of personas and scenarios are well-documented in service design as a way to re-frame and re-position the project brief and scope (see eg. Jégou & Manzini 2008; Parker & Heapy 2006). For this reason, it is of little interest to the author to discuss the

details of these tools, and instead, the following discussion reveals the poorly documented practical consequences of shifting project focus and boundaries.

The persona-hypothesis and scenario workshop was effective in communicating and clarifying how the project focus can be re-situated to manifest and facilitate the organisational vision. However, the client signaled reluctance in paying more for the project and pushing back the delivery timeline. They were a non-profit organisation with restricted funds. It was critical that the website was launched at their annual gathering of members. The clients perceived that the designers had 'instigated' the project shift that resulted in 'moving the goal posts'. As a result, the designers were asked to reduce their commission rate and work longer hours in order to deliver what was discussed. Despite the shortcoming, the designers still saw potential in continuing with the project. They saw value in delivering benefits to the organisation as well as the value to their learnings, experience and research. The root of the problem was the client's expectation for an outcome that they had not budgeted for, due to lack of experience and understanding of working with designers in such contexts. The client's lack of understanding will be discussed further in another lesson-theme. In the end, the project was predominantly funded through the university that the designers were associated with. Even though such compromises navigated the project through tricky waters, the issue of cost and time pressures dogged the project throughout its duration. In hindsight, it was naive and unsustainable to undertake a project of this scope and kind with such limitation on resources placed unfairly on one party.

Issues of re-framing a project scope and focus, and its associated fiscal and time-pressures are rarely discussed in service design, even though it's a common complaint conversed around the designer water cooler. Placing an emphasis on human-centred, experiential, holistic approaches to designing 'services' and systems are ideal models to strive towards. Established institutions and design agencies, such as EMUDE (Jégou & Manzini 2008; Meroni et al 2007) or ThinkPublic (2007) are exemplars of social innovation in providing inspiring visions for a better future. Yet, as this case study reveals, the ideal models are harder to manifest in reality even for well-intended, socially-focused organisation. Designers equipped with service design methods and experience can only go so far if the clients are unprepared and under-resourced in initiating changes they desire. The author argues for more explicit and candid accounts that detail how others may have negotiated these obstacles with their clients so that other designers may benefit from past experiences.

Lesson two: Transferability of skills and knowledge

The knowledge expertise and discipline-specific skills provide anchor to ground and inform designers, as well as provide them with confidence and identity. However, a service design project often requires more skills and knowledge-base that are covered within one disciplinary field alone. The complexities of service design projects require 'generalist' professionals with broad expertise (Koskinen 2009). Popular service design methods, such as card games, story-telling and mapping exercises are a mixture of tools originating from various fields such as ethnography, interaction design, industrial design and communication design. Multi-disciplinarity is often a characteristic of service design projects, yet some case studies (see eg. Koskinen 2009) do not discuss *what it means* and *how it feels* to move beyond the boundary of one's own disciplinary field. This aspect is an omission that neglects human-centred concerns of the designer, which contrasts with emphasis for the concerns of clients and other stakeholders in a design project. Multi-disciplinarity promotes the need for service designers to be a 'jack of all trades', when the majority have been trained to be 'masters' in

one disciplinary field. What skills and knowledge base can be transitioned to move into a service design 'space'? What can be acquired and what can be left behind? The project under discussion provided some illumination to these questions.

Transition of roles is a frequent and necessary part of a designer's skill, requiring agility and versatility in moving between negotiation, ideation, facilitation, production, collaboration, organisation, and so on. In this project context, one of the communication designers adopted a project-management role to coordinate and facilitate the project. In this role, visualisation skills was utilised to map each stage of the project. This skill was critical in documenting and capturing conversations, proposing alternative design directions, highlight structural, functional and conceptual holes of the project, and brief other team members who were absent from the discussions. Agile, lateral thinking skills, common to design, were also called upon when negotiating tricky problems. To add, familiarity with interaction design, experience design and human-centred design provided critical conceptual scaffolds in keeping the project true to its re-written brief, and prevent any design decisions and processes from falling back into technical, functional realms. The valuable role of such skills and knowledge background are commonly reported in many case studies in service design (see Jégou & Manzini 2008; Kimbell & Seidel 2008) so further elaboration will not be made here.

However, lesser-known and unrepresented skills are the ability to guide, facilitate, critique, propose, listen, communicate and accelerate discussion among project stakeholders. In a project-management context, these skills became invaluable. Interestingly, these were teaching and learning skills developed as an educator-researcher. In particular, the 'scaffolding' that designers create (Sanders 2002) and educators can provide (Bruner 1996) in co-creating a shared understanding and to build an open, learning, exploratory, discursive environment was significant in this project context. The project manager was constantly pursuing this role, summoning these skills and experiences in action research in order to navigate the project journey. Undertaking roles and tasks, as-and-when they were perceived to be effective, was a necessary requirement to intuitively 'feel their way' through the project.

This experience contrasts with graphic designers who were also on the project team. These designers were brought on the team to develop the new brand for the organisation. They had no experience and knowledge of service design, and hence, found the ambiguous qualities of designing a 'service' experience, problematic. Their prior training as graphic designers emphasised ideation, visualisation, crafting images, typographic treatment and production processes. Their confidence in re-branding lay in skills of visual identity design. Some tasks required these skills, however, the design process required them to 'let go' of the need to provide aesthetic solutions. It was important for them to open up their understanding of branding from designing 'things', to triggering experiences and generating potential engagements. However, they had found this task uncomfortable and confusing. The graphic designers had genuine passion in design through expressing their creativity visually. This was how they identified their role. Much of the confusion can be accounted to a lack of experience and preparation for undertaking a project of this kind. Yet their feeling of uncomfortableness highlights a significant obstacle from transitioning from one field to another, that is often obscured in service design literature.

Loss of identity

The move away from 'products' to 'services' signals a warning call to many designers who have defined their skills, experience and applied knowledge with the production of artefacts (eg. graphics, furniture, buildings, technology or fashion). It is an identity crisis that is

looming over the horizon. A designer's insecurity is also fuelled by the role of sustainability in service design that promotes the reduction or removal of 'things' (Jégou & Manzini 2008). Insecurity is also propelled by a cynical view towards service design that by losing their 'mastery', designers simply become a 'jack of all trades' (Poynor 2008)[1]. The removal of the artefact is akin to robbing a designer of their identity. They are no longer bound by the things they 'make'. This issue was causing anxiety and confusion among the graphic designers on the team.

In service design, designers are defined by what they can enable, not what they 'make'. Paradoxically, this definition compounds the confusion that had already existed on what design is and what it can provide. Tether (2008) explains such confusion as barriers that creative, innovation-related design practitioners face from businesses. Often, businesses demand relevancy of design through its cost, role and activities with clear, tangible rewards. However, Tether argues that design is a complementary asset that enhances the value of other assets. Design's contribution to a company's bottom line is a difficult quality and activity to demonstrate. Service design is an even harder value to 'sell' to new clients. This is due to design qualities being intangible and regarded as a complementary or potential asset. Designing for a future scenario also requires many months and years to manifest. The lack of understanding design's fiscal contribution echoes observation from the case study discussed earlier when the clients were reluctant to cover the cost, time and resource allocation in designing and implementing their desired service.

Issues of losing one's identity, loss of confidence and expertise that stem from stepping out of a specific disciplinary field are significant obstacles when embarking on service design projects. There is a sense of liberation as well as mourning when leaving one's disciplinary identity to adopt another. The usual and familiar expectations need to be re-negotiated within oneself, and those who work together on projects. Unless a designer is trained as a service designer and educated in a service design curriculum, it is assumed that they will embark on a project with their particular sets of disciplinary knowledge, training, experience, 'cultural' baggage and expectations, whether they are architects, industrial designers or graphic designers. These are complex challenges in crossing disciplinary boundaries and remain hidden and often undisclosed in service design discourse. Many of those practicing in service design, for example, Chris Downs from Live Work, or Clare Ryan from Seed Foundation or Ezio Manzini have backgrounds in industrial design. They have successfully transitioned from one field into another; yet, the signposts are not given for those who want to follow their path. As the discussion above highlights, a critical examination is required in order to illuminate how designers can make the transition from their field of expertise into a broader context.

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1 Chris Downs from Livework presented one of their service design projects at conference on the future of communication design. Among the audience graphic designers, there was a mixture of anxiety and uncomfortableness. Many acknowledged that the projects by Livework represented the way the design industry was evolving. However, some felt that they were ill-equipped in making this shift, causing concern that they may be left behind. A well-known critic in graphic design, Rick Poynor, had commented on this incident on the Eye journal blog http://blog.eyemagazine.com/?p=73.

Lesson three: complexity of power dynamics and human relationships

The persona and scenario workshop undertaken by staff and designers was a key activity in sharing ownership, cultivating a common purpose and re-situating the project focus. Frequent meetings and discussions continued with two staff members, who were critical in communicating the progress back to the organisation. These two members of staff became the advocate for the organisation, informing the design process with knowledge of organisational activities, its culture, community and membership. Organisational values of inclusiveness, hands-on learning and empowerment were central qualities and experience of the website design and branding. These values were also reflected in the way staff members and designers conducted their meetings, due to a natural synergy and respect of each other's knowledge they brought to the team. These discussions were critical in building a collaborative working relationship among the team, fostering an open, informal, inclusive forum to air any concerns that surfaced during the project.

This collaborative process later ran into problems when early prototypes of the website and branding were presented to other staff in the organisation for their feedback. Even though the overall direction was considered effective and the feedback was positive, the director of the organisation signalled discontent with the project. What was most concerning to the team was the director's evaluation of the project purely based on personal tastes and expectations. The team initially assumed that the director had not been briefed thoroughly on project process and progress via the two staff members who were part of the team. However, upon initiating a meeting with the two staff members and the director, the team quickly realised that the director had held personal ideas of what the website should be. Instead of trusting his staff and the design team to continue with the progress made, he insisted on taking control, exerting his power as the organisation's director and demanded changes to be made to the website that he felt were important. What was most alarming was his lack of respect for the staff and designers who were perceived as being subservient to his position during this difficult meeting. The team acknowledged that his opinion was valid as a stakeholder, yet they raised concern that his desires could not over-ride the consideration of the broader stakeholder group that had been discussed and consolidated by this stage of the project.

Issues of power and control

This critical incident illuminated rifts within the management of organisation, the values that they espoused to have, and the director's resistance to change that impacted on the collaborative approach that was underway. Managers that do not trust their employees are commonly reported as one of the obstacles in creating an effective working environment (see eg. Best 2006; Jones 2003). Persons of authority can often be resistant or threatened by change, and outside consultants brought in to facilitate organisational change can also be easily dismissed by these figures on the grounds that the consultant 'did not really understand our situation' (Schein 2002, p. 37). Design teams in the past have navigated through politics and power dynamics that can potentially hinder ways in which people have input into a design process (see eg. Akama 2008). Furthermore, incidences of this nature can happen, even in non-profit organisations that are committed to inclusive, participatory and empowering values in their activities, mission and vision (Akama 2007). The director's intervention in this project context relates to the discussion earlier on the ambiguity and intangibleness that surrounds the value of design. His compulsion to take control could be

seen as a consequence of desiring tangible, immediate results from a design process that was still evolving and nascent in creating future services for the stakeholders.

Given that these power-dynamics are common challenges in working and designing environments, the team since reflected that the director should have been involved throughout the twists and turns of the project journey. Even though he participated in the personas and scenario workshop, the director was unable to attend any subsequent meetings due to other pressing commitments. This realisation highlights the significance of a service design team consisting of representatives who can inform and are valued by key decision-makers in the groups and organisations they represent. Building 'authentic trust' (Solomon and Flores 2001) among team members, between representatives groups and their organisations, is a vital process that cannot be taken for granted. It is a point argued by Solomon and Flores who explain that 'authentic trust' is a personal responsibility and commitment, requiring practice and action, rather than optimistic belief. Working with those with established relationships can somewhat circumvent these issues. However, without the presence of shared human qualities among project stakeholders, subsequent discussions, relationship building and any variety of service design methods cannot yield fruitful outcomes.

One can argue that a more informed and authentic collaborative process can begin once these issues have surfaced and have been discussed among project stakeholders. The designers have reflected on this project experience and discovered that there were significant shortfalls in communicating the value of the 'service' that was being designed, particularly to the director of the organisation. More could have been done to support and facilitate the changes among the staff and broader community. The project was poorly timed, poorly supported and poorly resourced. However, the wisdom of hindsight does not resolve the variety of challenges that this project encountered. These challenges include overcoming power-relational dynamics; identifying decision-making agents who can advocate and implement systemic changes; establishing authenticity of trust among project stakeholders and identifying conflicts in espoused value systems. Perhaps one could have come to know the real issues underlying the project *only* after the project had commenced – certain things may not be able to be predicted or circumnavigated. These human-related challenges are familiar and common occurrences in organisational theory and change management discourse (see eg. Schein 1996; 2002). Echoing the point made above, Schein (1996) discusses that initiating the intervention is the only way to learn the essential dynamics of systems within an organisation. Similar obstacles will surface in service design contexts because design interventions manifests within systems and organisational structures, impacting and filtering through to the behaviours, thought processes, feelings and values of every stakeholder.

In conclusion

Service design can, and does, offer innovative ways for re-shaping interactions that can occur among people. If one of the characteristics of service design is to facilitate organisations and communities to undergo a journey of transformation (Mager 2004), this journey of transformation needs to be *facilitated for designers* as well. This paper has only highlighted three lessons out of a myriad of experiences that had potential to be discussed here. Other experiences that were left out due to length of paper include relationship building workshops among team, negotiation between research-led and practice-led processes, agency of design in facilitating change management, and much more. Learning through practice is a perpetual

process that can enable designers to innovate as they encounter changing contexts and conditions. Experience of undertaking a service design project needs to be captured and articulated in ways that resonates with the realities of design practice so it can caution, highlight, provoke and provide rich descriptions of practice-based knowledge to designers. In comparison to service design agencies and practitioners who provide 'simple recipes' and proprietary methodologies that have little distinction, the paper argues that service design processes and methods should never be severed from its complex human and situational contexts. Design that is generalised, sanitised and exported out of its applied contexts loses its power and agency for potential interventions and transformations. Design researchers and practitioners need to heed caution from promoting service design methods in this way. If design practitioners truly believe in the value and agency of service design to organisations and public institutions through their contribution in addressing the social and environmental problems of our time, then, 'warts and all' of the lived world needs to be reflected in the accounts of their story-telling.

Acknowledgement

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