Managing Stakeholder Involvement in Service Design:
Insights from British service designers

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Abstract

The global shift towards a service-based economy has led many organisations to rethink their operations and strategies from a service-centred point of view, which is intangible, customer-oriented and relational (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Professionals and scholars from different disciplines have subsequently pioneered practices and research in the field of service. As a response, Service Design, with its creative- and people-centred nature emerged as a distinct discipline.

Designing a service system requires input from all stakeholders, which include internal stakeholders from the different organisational functions, as well as external stakeholders such as user groups and supply teams. When design specialists are involved, they are expected to bring skills and approaches that not only balance complex stakeholders' requirements but also create embodied solutions to meet these needs. Consequently, to achieve the best solution, acknowledgment and input from multiple stakeholders are essential to designer's decision-making.

This paper reports emerging insights from some British Service Design practitioners who were interviewed as part of the empirical studies of an ongoing PhD research project. The project initially asked, 'How do designers, as external consultants, manage multiple stakeholder involvement in Service Design projects?'

In this paper, the theoretical and empirical contexts are briefly reviewed, which lead to three specific research questions. A three-stage qualitative research approach is then introduced of which two have so far been carried out. Two case studies are introduced, which lead to two emerging categories of designers' approaches to multiple stakeholder management, namely *leading* and *facilitating*. In order to develop these emerging categories, further study is required, which forms the final stage of this research project and which is detailed at the end of this paper.

Introduction

The emergence of Service Design has encouraged a wide range of new design practices in multi-disciplinary collaborative projects in both the private and public service sectors. There are two drivers behind this emerging design phenomenon. The first is the fast-growing service sector in the current socio-economic environment where the experience-focused and knowledge-intensive nature of services necessitated a service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), in order to understand the human factors in both business operations and public policy making. The second driver came from the design profession's internal development. Designers, as a profession, had been developing implicit practical knowledge about integrating experience and technologies, but now recognised their value in contributing and sharing knowledge from Design explicitly with experts from other disciplines to develop services. As a result, an emerging profession has developed rapidly over the past decade, consisting of people from different design-related backgrounds who share the ambition of introducing design methods and approaches to service development and innovation. Collectively, they call themselves 'service designers'.

In the UK, Service Design practice can be traced back to the early 1990s, when Bill Hollins and colleagues started using the term Service Design as part of their business consulting practice (Hollins and Hollins, 1991). Since 2001, an increasing number of design consultancies have been established, entirely or partly devoted to the practice and the exploration of Service Design in different contexts, scopes and emphases. Some design agencies quickly developed into businesses, with approximately 15 designers from different backgrounds who would team up to work on projects to deliver design solutions that covered multiple media, from printing to web content. Meanwhile, some design agencies remained as a core team of two or three people, working with clients as facilitators at certain stages of the service development process. The client bases of these design practice varies from regional development agencies to local schools, from global financial service providers to start-up local businesses.

Working in this relatively young but fast-growing new profession, service designers are constantly pushing the boundaries of what they do, how they work and with whom they work, by experimenting with the design techniques and the people-centred approaches in the context of New Services Development (NSD). Although the academic studies of NSD can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s when marketing researchers, such as Shostack (1977; 1984) and Normann (1984), began to study the science behind service development, both theoretical and practical developments on this subject are primarily generated in the field of Management Science rather than Design. Thus, when designers take part in NSD activities, their first intention is to explore the environment in which their design solution might be implemented, often by managers. They ask fundamental questions that had been long overlooked by service managers who made their own assumptions, for example 'What is the customer's day-to-day experience of using your service?' This exploratory nature of many Service Design projects makes it inevitable for the designers to engage as many people as possible, in order to paint a whole picture of the different faces of a service.

Current socio-economic changes have placed multiple demands on all aspects of the service development process. To achieve the best solution, this process requires input from all stakeholders, including internal stakeholders from the different organisational functions as well as external stakeholders such as user groups and supply teams. Because the implementation of service design often relies on primary stakeholders' efforts, engaging with multiple stakeholder groups, not only clients or end users, becomes an important feature of the service designer's practice.

When design specialists take part in a service development process, their task is often to bring in tools, techniques, strategies and knowledge that not only balance complex stakeholders' requests but also create embodied solutions to meet these needs. In order to understand how service designers could achieve this, the research project was initiated with three interconnected questions:

» Who is involved in a Service Design project?

   Some of the primary stakeholders might interact directly with designers, however, some stakeholders can be difficult to identify, or reach without assistance. Due to the scope and limited resources, this research project focused on primary stakeholder groups, who are important to designers.

» What is the designer's role while interacting with different stakeholders?

   As suggested earlier, designers' activities are often part of a more general NSD process, along with many other parallel processes that influence the way the designer relates to stakeholder groups in the project. Thus, it is important to understand the designer's role in this multiple stakeholder environment.

» How do designers engage a range of stakeholder efficiently and effectively at different design stages, within the time and resource limits?

   Designers do not passively respond to the stakeholder dynamics in the project. Instead, they actively propose approaches to working with different stakeholders under different conditions. This research project does not specifically study the tools and techniques used by designers, rather, it explores the reason why certain techniques are favoured by service designers in order to reveal the embedded strategy behind the use of these techniques.

Research Context

Extant research has concentrated on understanding the influence of all stakeholders on an organisation's operation and development. Initially Freeman (1984) proposed the stakeholder as being, 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives.' This proposal fundamentally challenged the managerial emphasis on *share*holder in the 1960s and 1970s, and suggested that an organisation is, and should be, operated in response to other internal or external needs such as customers or government. Thus, stakeholders are often categorised then analysed from a management perspective. However, the current stakeholder theories 'have moved away from an entirely corporate-centric focus in which stakeholders are viewed as subjects to be managed towards more of a network-based, relational and process-oriented view of company-stakeholder engagement.'(Andriof and Waddock, 2002).

According to quantitative research conducted on stakeholder impacts on project success, clients and end users are significantly more important than any other stakeholders (Karlsen, 2002), even though most primary stakeholders are considered as influential in determining the project's success (Cleland, 1998; Jergeas *et al.*, 2000; Elias *et al.*, 2002; Karlsen, 2002). Karlsen (2002) suggested that stakeholders holds different powers that affect the result of a project. The client often has control over the information and resources, while the user makes the decision of whether the project is a success or not. These power relationships form a complex and changing network, within which the project management operates. Ignoring, misunderstanding or mismanaging key stakeholder groups could cause unexpected problems to the project's progress and increase the risk of failure. Therefore, understanding

stakeholder needs, interests, and powers becomes an increasing requirement for the management of any type of project, including NSD projects.

Interestingly, the literature of NSD has a different but connected origin in Service Marketing. In the early 1980s, with the expansion of the service economy, marketing managers and scholars were the first to observe, and create solutions for, the many service failures and inefficiencies experienced by customers (Fisk and Grove, 2009). With the proposals of key concepts, such as 'moment of truth' (Normann, 1984), 'service blueprint' (Shostack, 1984) and Gaps Model for controlling service quality (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), the studies of NSD quickly developed an emphasis on one particular stakeholder group: service users. This shared recognition of customer-centred NSD approach gave birth to several NSD models that claimed to deliver successful service solutions by putting user/customer at the heart of the design process.

Although these theories and models are important in understanding how service had been developed traditionally within an organisation, there is no general acknowledgment of the contributions from service designers at strategic decision-making level. Early research in NSD recognised the importance of utilising customer perspectives in service development, however, the methods they employed to understand customers relied heavily on traditional marketing tools such as focus groups, interviews, satisfaction surveys and benchmarking. The use of design was limited to the presentation of a service to fulfil tactical problem solving in areas such as advertising, packaging and interior design. As a result, designers are only engaged in the very last stages of the NSD process, which was dominated by managers from different departments.

Nonetheless, the world of practice provides some vivid demonstrations of how design professionals may be a powerful force to not only encourage new perspectives and new thinking but also to integrate different stakeholder needs through co-design in NSD processes.

As part of this fast growing young profession, British service designers are gradually developing experience, practical knowledge and skills, and establishing client relationships in the area of service development and innovation over a range of private, public and charity sectors. The practice is becoming more diverse and larger in scope thanks to a raised recognition of Service Design. Early studies in this research project suggested that some design agencies develop systems and processes to manage Service Design projects more formally, while others rely on intuition to navigate their path among different stakeholder groups. The empirical knowledge of how designers work with people from different backgrounds and motivation in complex project environments, however, is not clearly articulated in Service Design. Although many designers have been actively presenting at conferences, sharing their experience on project websites or personal blogs, these reflections have never been collected, synthesised and conceptualised, or even theorised. A systematic investigation of how designers manage Service Design and how the tacit knowledge from these practices can be linked to existing theories is noticeable by its absence.

The Search for Service Design Stories

The rapidly growing Service Design practices in the UK provide a rich empirical basis for a more inductive approach for this research. Grounded theory, as a well-established qualitative research methodology (Glaser, 1978; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2006; Flick, 2009), provided key inspirations for the design of the exploratory studies. Therefore, rather than

setting up a hypothesis to begin with, empirical data was analysed simultaneously with the process of data collecting to allow theoretical categories to develop from the 'ground'.

The major empirical investigation adapted a multiple case study research design (Yin, 2003, 2009), which involved the participation of five British based Service Design agencies. One case study was carried out as a pilot study and the research results came mainly from the remaining four case studies.

By employing a multiple case studies design, the four studies captured the richness of the empirical context of Service Design, which was dynamic and full of completely different projects carried at differently scopes with different clients. As an exploratory research, this project did not aim to exhaustively represent all possible types of stakeholder management in Service Design practice. However, by investigating as divers cases as possible, within the scope and resources available, the results could offer demonstrations of existing ways of managing stakeholder involvement, and potentially identify gaps overlooked in current Service Design practice and research from a designer's perspective.
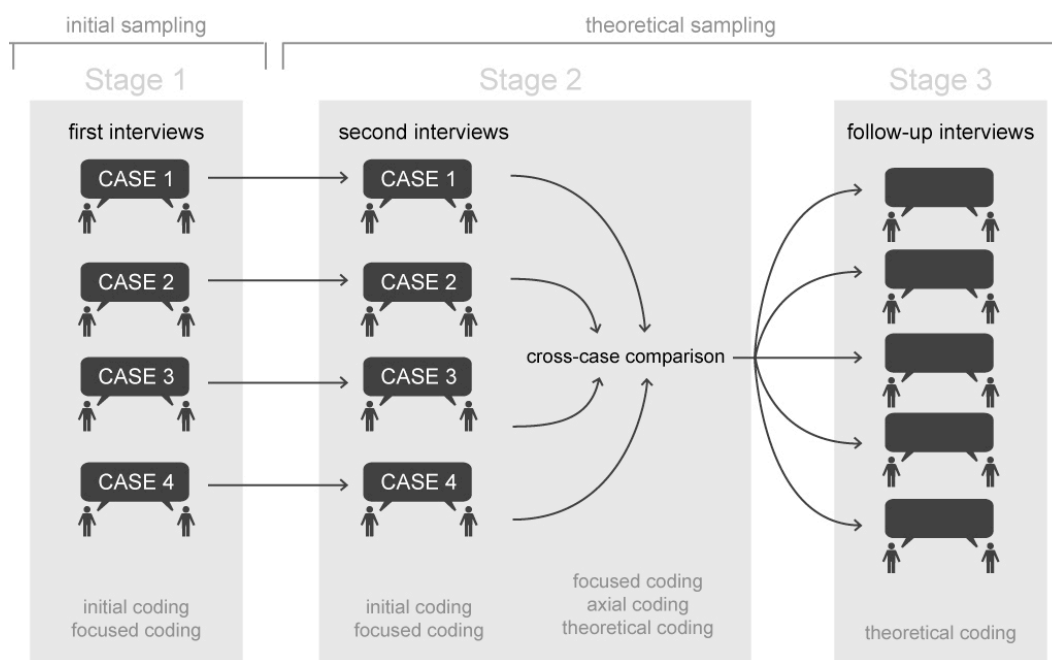

Figure 1, Research design for empirical investigation

With each case the empirical investigation consisted of three major stages (see Figure 1):

1. Initial sampling was carried out by collecting descriptive reflections on a selected service design project from the participants. Each participant selected and described one project from their experience as a Service Design story. The method used at this stage was episodic interview (Flick, 1997), along with tools that were designed to help participants to produce a visual narrative during the interview (see Figure 2). The data, from both interview transcripts and the visual narrative, were analysed separately for each case study after the first interview.

Figure 2, Examples of visual narrative produced by participants

2. A second visit to the same participant focused on questions raised from the comparison between the narrative map produced by the participant and a conceptual framework developed on the basis of a selection of Service Management theories (Han, 2009). This semi-structured interview allowed the discussion to centre on certain aspects of their particular case. The data from the second interviews were analysed and summarised separately, in the form of a case report. All four case reports were sent back to the participants for comment. At the same time, a cross-case analysis was carried out to compare the results from each case study. The cross-case comparison allowed some initial categories to emerge from the grounded data.

3. At the time of writing, the project is moving from stage two towards stage three. The plan for stage three is to arrange follow-up interviews in order to develop the emerging categories and to complete some properties of each category. Compared to the initial four case studies, the follow-up interviews are expected to cover a wider range of service designers according to the specific category that needs to be developed.

The diversity in current Service Design practices, in both scope and number of client segments, makes the search for four Service Design stories an insightful journey. Some projects took place in completely different contexts, yet they share many similarities; while others looked similar at first glance but ultimately took separate paths. As one of the participants argued, there is no 'typical' project in their practice – each project is unique in its own right. However, from each Service Design story, there are lessons that can be learned and shared.

Due to the limited space in this paper, only two of the Service Design stories are presented here, derived from different clients in different scopes and by two design agencies with different structures, yet their approaches to involving stakeholders in the process had significant similarities.

Service Design Story 1

This story comes from Live|work, a London based Service Design consultancy set up in 2001 by Ben Reason, Chris Downs and Lavrans Lovlie. It is one of the first design consultancies that claim to devote specific effort to Service Innovation and Design and now employs 13 people in two offices and a portfolio of projects from both the public and private sectors. Their client list includes the BBC, Experian and the NHS.

Ben Reason, the director of the London office, told the story of a project called 'Make It Work'. The design team worked with Sunderland City Council, a group of end users, and a

range of people working for local service providers, so as to develop services to help jobless people from that community to get back to work. Over 400 people were involved in the design process, although not necessarily all directly with the designers. The design process had two major stages but within each stage there were iterations which were constantly developed and refined into a service prototype and the model. The first stage built a methodological foundation and a business plan for a pilot to be carried out on a larger scale at the second stage. A community of 'activity coalition' was built during the one-year pilot. In the second stage, the designers ran workshops with local service providers and helped them to develop individual service blueprints that suited their own operation and segment. The knowledge generated collectively within this process was again distributed back to the community, by working with stakeholder groups and designing customised solutions with the people who delivered the services.

Ben suggested that this project followed a formal project management process introduced by the client. The designers had a clear vision of the key stakeholders involved in this project at the beginning of the project. A major emphasis was place on interacting with users and the extended stakeholders, who were managers and delivery staff from the local service providers. The designers, as part of the service development team, led the development of the earlier stages. They then acted as facilitators during the later stage to allow other primary stakeholders to take on the major responsibility of generating and diffusing the new service solutions with secondary stakeholders who did not have the opportunity to interact with the core design team.

The complex interactions among different stakeholder groups suggested that there was the need for a consistent knowledge transformation process that supported these interactions. Producing visual narratives helped to stimulate and record the knowledge transformation, however, the key to truly affect the way services are operated at local level, was to understand the motivation and the culture that drives different forms of stakeholder interactions.

Service Design Story 2

Story 2 comes from We Are Curious, a design studio established in 2005 by two young graduates from Glasgow School of Art, Florence Andrews and Esme MacLeod. Interestingly We Are Curious does not explicitly claim that they practise Service Design. For them, Service Design is not a label with which to impress a client but the underlying principle of their people-centred design approach.

Florence Andrews shared a Service Design story of developing a voluntary service that brought different community arts and the local people together in Whitecrook, Clydebank in Scotland. Although the designers did not declare their practice as being Service Design to the client, their people-centred engagement with all the primary stakeholders led to a successful community event, which was visited by over 700 people and to a business plan, which brought the client over £100,000 in funding, so as to continue the service for the subsequent three years.

The client, Community Arts Open Space (CAOS), was a newly established group of six voluntary members, thus, the project was mostly led by the designers. Rather than wait to be told who could be involved in the design process, the designers actively reached out to meet the primary stakeholders face-to-face, the latter including local residents, local community arts service providers and local interest groups. Apart from using normal research methods such as interview and observation, the designers created events on a small scale, with the help of some service providers, to actively engage with the local community. For example,

they facilitated a workshop for the local youth club, getting children and young people to draw pictures of where they lived and the things that were important to them. With these children, the designers also made a short film telling stories of the lives and the hopes of the local youth. These highly interactive events not only gained the designers collaborative relationships with the service providers and the local interest groups but also provided rich inspiration and ideas of how these services could be more widely recognised by the public of Whitecrook. As a result, apart from the client and the designers, this project managed to involve a large number of stakeholders from the general public, local community arts service providers, local interest groups and local schools, as well as other artists and designers.

The designers constantly switched roles between project leaders and workshop facilitators in parallel, something which makes this story complex but interesting. For the client, the designers led the project by demonstrating design methods for conducting research, managing PR, and prototyping user test events. Yet, for most other stakeholders, the designers' inputs mainly lay in helping them to propose what they could do as part of the events and to develop proposed activities with them.

Most of the user interactions in this project happened in real time via face-to-face interaction and both formal and informal conversations. However, the designers' skills in visualisation and using experimental means had a positive influence in motivating stakeholder participation and stimulating creativity among people from non-design backgrounds.

Emerging Insights

Live|work and We Are Curious have completely different backgrounds in practicing Service Design. One is a design company with international offices and well-known clients like BBC and Orange. One, on the other hand, is a studio-based partnership run by two young design graduates with a special focus on community-based projects. Yet, the approach they employed to work with multiple stakeholders have two clear similarities.

Firstly, supporting the client's decision-making was considered fundamental. In both studies the designers suggested the importance of having the client's appreciation of putting user experience at the centre of a service system and experimenting with new ideas with different stakeholder groups. In return, designers shared their knowledge and techniques to ensure that the design solution supported the client's decisions in this project and even in the future. The client was regarded as not only being the one who control the resources, but also the one who would learn what design approach means to NSD in order to replicate it if necessary. As Ben suggested, designers must be aware that they would not be running the services for the client. Large amounts of work might be done by designers in the beginning, but the client and their stakeholders would be the ones who eventually deliver the services on a daily basis. Therefore, in both projects, the design team were keen on clearly communicating their process and taking the client through the learning curve. In this sense, the designers led and even mentored the design process with support from clients and other primary stakeholders.

Secondly, by embracing the culture, resources and existing operational structure in the local situation, the design solution became more sustainable. The need for a flexible operational structure has encouraged many organisations to reach out for more network-based supply and delivery systems, internal or external, in order to respond to sudden changes in the market or policy areas. The two cases both embraced this need, by allowing different parts of the design solution to be localised by certain stakeholder groups. The operational power was

distributed, along with the recognition of Service Design. In both case studies, the designers acknowledged that it is essential to facilitate the local service providers to find their voice and claim ownership in the service system, for the purpose of supplying, delivering, or both. For example, in Story 1, the designers hosted different workshops for stakeholders from each individual services provider that took part in the pilot stage, in order to develop their own service blueprint and touchpoints for their particular service. The purpose was to build '[…] a coherent service without forcing them all to turn into part of the same thing' (Reason, 2009). At this stage, the designers became invisible facilitators who gave stakeholders the confidence to express their own needs and develop their own ideas.

Interestingly, although the designers in both examples undertook two basic roles in the whole project, as leader and as facilitator, how they managed to switch between the two represents a significant difference. In Story 1, the designers focused on leading the project then moved on to a facilitating approach to a wider range of stakeholders in the later stage. In Story 2, however, the designers constantly switched between the two approaches throughout the project, according to the needs of the different stakeholders. Hypothetically, there are both internal and external factors that cause differences in stakeholder involvement. The internal factors came from the designers' capability, knowledge and confidence in managing different stakeholder groups. These factors influence with whom designers choose to have direct involvement and how designers would prefer to interact with them. Then, there are external factors which include the scope of the project, organisational culture and existing structure within the service provider organisation/network, the capability and confidence of the client, and also the motivations of the stakeholder groups to engage with designers.

Amongst these factors, how knowledge is generated and diffused among all stakeholders and designers seemed highly influential. The intangible nature of service makes the NSD process knowledge-intensive, which means the tacit knowledge embedded in individuals or groups has an increasingly significant impact on the shaping of a service system. Compared to the traditional centralised development model, the increasingly network-based supply and delivery system makes the knowledge generation and sharing process more complex than ever. In both cases, the service designers were closely involved in the process of knowledge generation and diffusion in a collaborative manner. However, how the knowledge flowed among the different stakeholders and in what order or structure, seemed to guide the way in which the designers chose to engage these stakeholders in the process. For example, in Story 1, although there was no mention of a knowledge management policy *per se* to the designers, the relatively rigorous NSD project management required a rather focused and controlled way to diffuse the knowledge created in the business plan to different local service providers. Thus, the designers took the leading approach, in order to generate new knowledge around user experience first, and then distributed it back to the delivery system by facilitating new knowledge generation at a smaller scale. In Story 2, the grassroots nature of the voluntary sector encouraged bottom-up knowledge generation structure, therefore, the designer successfully weaved the facilitating approach into the process of leading and mentoring their client simultaneously.

In summary, both stories demonstrated that the service designers, intuitively or purposefully, selected leading or facilitating approaches to manage multiple stakeholder involvement in the project environment. However, if the situation changed, the designer-stakeholder relationship would change accordingly, which may lead to a change in the designer's approach. So far, the study recognises the need to manage knowledge generation and diffusion as a being a key factor that influences the designer's decision-making in leading and facilitating stakeholder involvement. Yet, this discovery requires further investigation in both

literature and empirical studies, in order to clearly articulate properties that explain the conditions, expressions and consequences of leading and facilitating approaches.

Further Development

On the basis of the two Service Design stories described here, two basic approaches for managing multiple stakeholder involvement are recognised, namely 'leading' and 'facilitating'. The project investigated four Service Design stories and, in addition to the two approaches described here, proposed a third approach namely 'producing', which is not discussed in this paper. The three approaches were treated as initial categories and their properties are still under development.

The next stage of this study serves the purpose of developing these categories in further depth. Participants in the four case studies will be contacted again, to discuss the implications of the three categories. A list of questions will be sent out to a wider range of service designers via the internet, so as to stimulate discussions regarding the factors that influence the service designer's approach to different stakeholder groups. Furthermore, literature regarding Knowledge Management in innovation projects will be reviewed, in order to gain a holistic understanding of the relationship among organisational culture, structure, and knowledge generation and diffusion among the different stakeholders.

Research Implications

Service Design has always been characterised with its concern for people and their experiences. However, the discussion seemed to have been largely focused on service users, who are one of the primary stakeholder groups with whom service designers need to engage in their practice. So far, little discussion has been carried out regarding the means whereby service designers manage their relationships with the other stakeholder groups such as delivery agencies, although they play equally important roles in developing and implementing the design solution. This study recognised this gap in understanding how Service Design is operated in practice, and relied on grounded data collected from practicing service designers who have rich tacit knowledge and experience in managing multiple stakeholder involvement in different projects. As a result, the aim was not only to explore and to capture a vivid image of Service Design practice, but also to offer insights that seem to have been overlooked in both research and practice.

The preliminary findings suggested a holistic approach to perceive Service Design as a process of knowledge generation and diffusion in a social context, which involved a complex network of stakeholders. Within this context, designers select or mix, intuitively or purposefully, different approaches in order to maximise the impact of the design techniques they employed in the process. Thus, a better understanding of how these approaches worked so far offers the opportunity to assess, improve and plan for Service Design practice in the future. Furthermore, understanding how multiple stakeholder involvement in Service Design projects could provide inspiration for design education to recognise some new qualities required in the increasingly complex future practice and to prepare new designers accordingly.

In addition to the benefit to design practice, linking Service Design with literature from disciplines such as Service Management, Stakeholder Studies and potentially Knowledge

Management, provides references for these disciplines to recognise the contributions of Service Design in the development of Service Knowledge (Fisk and Grove, 2009). Consequently, the tacit knowledge embedded in the various practices could provide inspiration for the continuing study of service development and innovation from all disciplines.

As an exploratory research project, this PhD study also served as a source of inspiration for developing qualitative research in emerging design practices. The research methodology demonstrated a wealth of knowledge embedded in this new design profession, which allowed rich concepts to be developed and connected to developments in a wide range of various disciplines outside design. Despite the fact that Service Design is relatively immature in its theoretical development, it is highly active in experimenting with new ideas, new tools and new approaches to working in complex contexts. Therefore, the constantly changing social and economic environments in which design is operated needs design practitioners, researchers and educators to learn from what has happened and is happening in Service Design and to generate useful knowledge that would benefit future generations of new design professionals. As Richard Buchanan (2007) stated in the Emergence Conference:

'[…] be careful about trying to put Service Design into too tight a box. It serves for a while to keep our attention focused, but we're going to breathe out again. It's another one of those terms that's going to come and go. We want to gather the learning we can now, affect the discipline and move ourselves forward.'

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