

Learning together by doing together building local government design capacity through collaboration with design education

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Abstract

It is widely understood that the public sector in general and public services in particular must be radically reshaped in order to meet the needs of citizens in the context of diminishing public financing. Less well understood are the ways and means by which to do so, although most now accept that design practices and processes have a significant contribution to make. But how are we to develop and build design capacity within local government at a time of austerity? This paper introduces a one-year project that explores the potential for, and value of, strategic collaboration between design education and local government to better engage council staff, and the citizens they serve, in the development and application of design-led approaches to social and service challenges and to inform policy. The project prototypes a 'Public Collaboration Lab' (PCL), a place for collaboration, experimentation and experiential learning that brings together local government officers, design researchers and design students with front line council staff and service users to explore new ways of working to develop and deliver policy and services that may improve outcomes for citizens whilst reducing public spending.

KEYWORDS: collaboration, local government, design education, experiential learning, action research

Introduction

In the face of current and intensifying financial austerity within local government those responsible for the quality and continuity of public services recognise that innovation in service design and delivery is critical. The UK Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned report on *Whole Place Community Budgets* (Ernst & Young, 2013) suggests massive financial savings could be achieved by a collaborative approach to service delivery that aligns different agencies' objectives, activities and resources. Current research and

practice in design (Manzini & Staszowski, 2013) suggests that greater involvement of, and collaboration with, citizens also fosters improvements in service quality and efficiency in two ways: i) a *people-centred* service approach involving end-users in research, prototyping and testing of services (particularly those with complex needs and therefore multiple service requirements) can help to identify synergies across ‘service silos’ that may inform integrated approaches to service delivery and; ii) *people-led* services that engage citizens and other agencies in co-production processes to *design and deliver* their own services, enabled and supported by public agencies.

These ‘public and collaborative’ approaches to service delivery (services delivered with and by citizens and other agencies) seek to mobilise citizens as ‘active collaborative people’ rather than ‘passive individual people’, ‘service participants’ rather than ‘service users’ and recognise citizens as both ‘people with needs’ and ‘people as assets in meeting their own and each other’s needs’. However, despite the growing interest in these approaches, and the role of collaborative design activities in delivering them in public sector contexts, there is also an acknowledged gap in understanding design’s contribution in such scenarios (Junginger, 2014).

Public places for social and service innovation

For over a decade the design community has understood that ‘designers are having to evolve from [solely] being the individual authors of objects or buildings, to being the facilitators of change among large groups of people’ (Thackara, 2005). In 2006, Cottam et al. expounded a ‘transformation design’ approach at the intersection of service design and design for social innovation that is ‘unique in the complex problem solving space’ and ‘has been informed by an evolution in design practice... including the ambition to proactively transform systems and organisations’ (Cottam et al., 2006). For Cook (2011), the emergence at the beginning of 2000 of UK design practices operating within the public sector and realms of social change is linked to New Labour policies that focused on public engagement and user-centred public service reform (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2005). Concurrently, The Design Council’s Red team was set up as a response to this vision of public services being redesigned around the user (Cook, 2011).

The contribution of ‘design thinking’ and design practice to sense-making and problem solving in the face of complex challenges via humanising, visualising and synthesising is widely acknowledged (Brown, 2008; Cross, 2011; Kimbell, 2011, 2012). The Design Commission (2013) reported ‘in 2012, Ipsos Mori found that public sector leaders thought that ‘redesigning services to meet users’ needs in a different way’ was most likely to lead to significant improvements’. Also, that ‘the public sector would achieve a step-change in quality and effectiveness by more assertively embracing design practice’.

Increased austerity has highlighted further still the need for bringing design-led social innovation to bear on public policy and public services.

In response, government agencies in the UK and overseas have established what Nesta refers to as ‘i-teams’ (Puttick et al., 2014): ‘structures, capabilities and space needed to allow innovation to happen... drawing on the disciplines of design and user engagement, open innovation and cross- sector collaboration, and mobilising data and insights in new ways’. These ‘i-teams’ ‘create solutions to solve specific challenges, engage citizens, non-profits and businesses to find new ideas, transform the processes, skills and culture of government and

achieve wider policy and systems change'. Responses from design educators have included those of researchers and practitioners within the Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESIS) network's 'Public and Collaborative' research cluster (2013) who have documented, and in some cases contributed to (Parsons DESIS Lab/Public Policy Lab, Malmo Living Lab), what they refer to as 'Public Innovation Places' or 'PIPs' described as; "authorising environments' that foster experiments. They may have different names (Living Lab, Change Lab, Gov Lab, etc.), but they share common characteristics; such spaces can bring together a variety of actors, both public and private, with a diverse array of skill sets and expertise around a set of issues, to which they could innovate in a safe space free from many of the constraints of partner-specific mandates, policy issues, and procedural restrictions'.

Research into 'i-teams' and 'PIPs' is in its infancy and is currently limited to mapping their locations, configurations, funding, scale, thematic approaches, as well as case studies and recommendations for effective implementation. However, case studies, methods and tools are not sufficient to transfer solutions across operational contexts. For these approaches to achieve their full impact there is a need to understand the necessary conditions and infrastructures that might deliver the highest impact in a given context. Armstrong et al. (2014) highlight the current lack of detailed, critical research into these infrastructures, noting the difficulties they pose as a research subject, but suggest that 'these difficulties can be addressed by careful research design'. The current project represents just such a research design. Whilst tailored to the context of operation of the research partners, it provides a unique opportunity to explore the workings of such a collaborative environment, and has the potential to be an international exemplar in the field.

Design education/local government collaboration

Recent reports from both the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (Armstrong et al., 2014) and the Design Commission (2013) recommend 'HEIs and public sector organisations explore possibilities of further research and knowledge transfer work' using design-based methods. In response to this call University of the Arts London and London Borough of Camden have partnered in the creation of a programme of collaborative activities that will:

- Undertake demonstrator service and policy innovation projects as a series of 'experiments' within a specially created 'Public Collaboration Lab' (PCL) to redesign public services through the application of collaborative design-led approaches.
- Increase understanding of Higher Education (HE) design institutions' role in supporting innovation practices within local government through design-led action learning.
- Explore the potential for co-design to democratise public service reform and improve public outcomes.
- Co-design evaluative frameworks for assessing the role and impact of design in local government service reform.
- Propose means by which the pilot study could be scaled up and scaled out within other contexts.

The current project builds on previous collaborations between University of the Arts London and London Borough of Camden. In 2011, the University collaborated with the Borough and citizens in a local action research activity. The research revealed the need for greater knowledge exchange between the diverse actors involved and a common framework

to structure collaboration. The collaborative, design-led action research resulted in a number of service blueprints which were rarely implemented, in part due to a lack of ownership of service concepts either by engaged citizens, or by the Council, or both, suggesting greater strategic involvement of the Council was required (Thorpe & Gamman, 2013). In 2013, a prototype was created to test the potential for more strategic collaboration. A one-day workshop brought together 100+ diverse actors including academics, community groups, heads of service and project managers from Camden Council and other local authorities. It resulted in an increased understanding and acknowledgement of the potential of design education/local government collaboration in social and service innovation learning and practice. The current project builds on this experience establishing a collaborative 'Public Innovation Place' anchored around a strategic partnership between HE and local government. The initiative has become of increasing significance to Camden in light of imminent funding cuts and is pioneering both in establishing the Public Collaboration Lab model and in assessing its efficacy.

By 2017, funding to Camden from central government will be cut by 50%. Public service delivery cannot continue on a 'business as usual' basis. Consequently, the Council is leading public consultation and reflection around the re-design and delivery of their public services. The Council has identified several challenges linked to specific public services including exploring alternative delivery models for the Home Library Service (HLS), and a range of other services linked to Adult Social Care. Cross-cutting challenges include the need to extend digital service delivery and support citizens to be more digitally confident and enabled to make use of online services, finding opportunities to integrate volunteering into service delivery and seeking opportunities for 'cross silo' service integration. This proposal addresses both specific (library services) and cross-cutting aims. The focus on the HLS, whilst apparently modest in its scope, allows for exploration of processes, experiences and changes to outcomes using this collaborative service design project-based learning approach and responds to the UK Public Service Transformation Network's Service Transformation Challenge Panel (2014) call for 'a new person-centred approach to help specific groups and individuals with multiple complex needs'.

Methodology

This research project is multi-layered applying Lewin's (1948) Action Research that values 'the development of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on private troubles (Wright Mills, 1959 in Adelman, 1993). The 12-month research project applies a diverse range of 'open' collaborative, iterative and 'agile' (Beck et al., 2001) approaches to tackle the context of local government that is complex, networked and frequently agonistic in nature.

This open and collaborative approach allows a diversity of disciplinary methods, skills and expertise to be brought to bear on a variety of local government challenges. Within this process, design practices and 'design thinking', introduce an abductive approach to sense-making and problem solving. Design practices applied include ethnographic research methods that support empathic understanding and help recognise the diverse needs and agendas of different people, visualisation of information and concepts, and iterative prototyping of possible solutions that help understanding and collaboration across different groups. The Public Collaboration Lab applies these methods working with service providers, service users (or proxies) and other agencies to co-define users' needs and co-develop service

prototypes, as well as a way of working; a 'lab' model to be tested and evaluated for efficacy and impact. The team is synthesising and documenting insights and learning to share with people inside and outside HE and local government.

The research is delivered across three streams 'Person Centred Service Experiments', 'PCL Prototyping' and 'Evaluation'. Between them they; i) map and explore precedent activities in this area to understand and articulate the different types of collaborative working between design education and local government; ii) deliver contextually specific collaborative 'experiments' – projects that seek to demonstrate the potential for different kinds of collaboration between design education and local government; iii) interrogate and evaluate these collaborations to understand their impact and outcomes from the diverse perspectives of the stakeholders involved (HE professionals and students, local government officials and service providers, and citizens). The work is being delivered in 'sprints' of various durations, from 4 weeks to 6 months. At the end of each 'sprint' progress is reviewed by a trans-organisational and multi-disciplinary group that agrees priorities for the activities to follow. At key stages in the project Open Knowledge Sharing Workshops share insights and findings with people and agencies inside and outside the project, increasing opportunities for knowledge exchange and impact. Finally, in addition to the evaluation of each sprint, the PCL itself is evaluated as a platform for promoting and enabling collaborative design projects, aiming to understand the experiences, values and outcomes of all those involved.

Discussion

This recently initiated and on-going research presents emerging findings for discussion, including;

- A mapping of the UK landscape for collaborations of this nature, including a framework for collation and comparison of these activities;
- Examples of 'experiments' conducted to date exploring the contribution of design and design methods to diverse operational contexts of local government - including public consultation and engagement around changes to library services and the collaborative and speculative redesign of a Home Library Service.
- A review of these activities, describing the working practices, impacts and outputs of the Public Collaboration Lab and the diverse motivations, goals, values, experiences and outcomes of the stakeholders involved.

We will share these processes, experiences and outcomes across the Lab and draw lessons for future collaborative design projects of this kind.

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