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Toolkits as a means for Community Engagement

A critical reflection on how toolkits facilitate community engagement through dialogue exchanges among participants.

I. Introduction

One of the designerly approaches to conducting research is by engaging in the creative act of *making*, which can be facilitated through the use of probes, toolkits, and prototypes (Sanders et al., 2014). This essay has a particular focus on toolkits as a means of making.

Toolkits use a design language which can be used by non-designers to express their ideas about how they want to live, work and play in the future (Sanders, 1999). They give users a space to express their experiences and opinions, positioning them as experts and acknowledging their potential to contribute to interdisciplinary solutions (Caruso and Frankel, 2010). As such, Bray et.al., (2022) state that toolkits are a starting point for developing community-led design tools that tackle complex subjects and in turn, generate rich insights.

In the MA:UX Macro Unit, we worked with Southwark Council to create a toolkit that allowed residents to envision the future of Southwark in 2030. During the testing of the toolkit, it was widely noted that it encouraged dialogue exchange between participants. This essay will undertake a critical evaluation of the aforementioned dialogue exchange.

II. The Toolkit

The toolkit includes a set of prompt cards to help residents visualise the future and form narratives. The cards are sorted into three categories titled Task Cards, Place Cards, and Object Cards (Table 1).

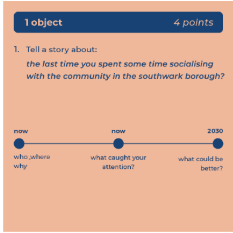


Task Cards	Place Cards	Object Cards
		
Includes tasks and questions aimed at tapping into personal experiences to help people envision the future in a specific context.	Cards with places around Southwark borough, designed to prompt and inspire observations and idea about the future, based on specific location.	Cards with objects, designed to prompt and inspire observations and ideas about the future.

Table 1: Card decks present in the toolkit

III. Observations

When evaluating the 'Southwark 2030' toolkit, it was primarily observed that the toolkit prompted dialogue exchange between the participants.

1. Dialogue Exchange between the Participants

Sanders (1999) argues that the use of tangible means for the creative act of making is essential for users to express themselves and facilitate collaborative communication.

This can look like a provision of materials such as pens or markers which can be used to

draw, write and express thoughts, and can be rearranged and built into artefacts (for example, with Velcro or stickers).

However, I propose that trust can also facilitate expression. Prior to the testing of the Southwark 2030 toolkit, the participants were given guidance on how to utilise the toolkit and its ultimate aims. Bray et al., (2022) note that the process of gathering ideas and then progressing towards their fulfilment encourages meaningful discussion by establishing trust. As part of the initial instruction, the participants were encouraged to use the cards to form a narrative about the future and share their opinions and ideas. This, in turn, facilitated dialogue exchange amongst some participants. This can be noted as a transfer of explicit knowledge, as it was one that used words (Polanyi, 1962). For example, notes were taken to record the dialogue exchange between two participants about student community space (Table 2).

Participant 1: *I see the Shakespeare Globe Theatre expanding with more plays and production, modernised for each generation, grows with each generation, operates at a larger scale, and maybe something about life as a teenager - that can attract students*

Participant 2: *I would also like to see open opportunities for students to engage with, which can be achieved with a better feedback system for the student community space*

Table 2: A conversation recorded between two participants, that talks about student community space

Therefore, it can be argued that dialogue exchange did take place even without tangible acts of making, and that the clear communication of process and aims prior to testing established an initial trust which allowed for this unrestricted idea generation to happen between the participants.

However, the lack of tangible means for expression also restricted some participants from initiating dialogue exchange (Table 3). It was observed that the participants struggled to clearly communicate their thoughts to others through words, using disjointed phrases, hesitation markers and broadly assuming that other participants would understand vague descriptions.

Participant 3: <i>I want shakesphere's globe to expand around the world</i>
Participant 4: <i>There might be a trend towards energy drinks in the future</i>
Participant 5: <i>Um...More purple pubs in future?</i>

Table 3: Recorded narratives of three participants, who were struggling to clearly communicate their thoughts

As Polanyi explains, tacit knowledge, which is intuitive and non-verbal, cannot be transferred through words (1962). Therefore, the use of tangible means to enhance communication is valid in some cases as it has the potential to "harness the collective and infinitely expanding set of ideas" (Sanders,1999). Furthermore, according to Caruso et al. (2010), the use of tangible means can reveal users' personal experiences about ideal scenarios that may not have been uncovered without such tools.

Based on this practical inquiry, it can be argued that designers should establish a way to share both tacit and explicit knowledge among participants for a rewarding dialogue exchange.

IV. Conclusion

This essay has illuminated how toolkits can facilitate conversation among participants and enable knowledge sharing. The first section demonstrates how dialogue exchange can occur even without the use of tangible means by establishing trust at the outset of the process. The second section examines the limitations of not using tangible means for participants to express themselves. Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that there are potential advantages to incorporating both verbal and tangible means of communication in a toolkit to access the tacit and explicit knowledge of the participants. This would ideally look like a clear communication of processes and aims before using the toolkit to establish trust, and also providing a means for tangible expression in the toolkit. Incorporating a means of tangible expression in the Southwark 2030 toolkit may have further strengthened the outcome.

References

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