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Exploring Co-design in the Voluntary Sector

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Abstract

Co-design is an approach to design that emphasises the creative contribution that can be made by potential users, clients and other stakeholders in developing products, systems or services. Co-design is widely used in the commercial sector to accelerate user acceptance and reduce product/service failure. Co-design is also becoming widespread in the public sector as a way of engaging citizens in design exploration. However, little is known about the capability of voluntary sector organisations, particularly small and medium sized organisations to undertake co-design activities; and resources that describe how to implement co-design tend to be oriented towards the needs and the context of larger commercial organisations.

This paper presents findings from an ongoing investigation into co-design capability in small-and-medium-sized third sector organisations in the UK. The investigation combines an on-line survey, in-depth case studies and interviews.

Introduction

One definition suggested for design is “*making things better for people*” (Richard Seymour quoted in Design Council, 2008). Such a definition should align well with the concerns of the voluntary sector. As organisations increasingly find themselves competing to attract funding and resources to support their missions and to deliver services, their ability to innovate and develop new ways of delivering services will be crucial to their success. The Charity Commission (2007) report that there are still barriers preventing small-and-medium-sized charities from competing for public service delivery contracts effectively and that many small-and-medium-sized charities do not achieve the full cost recovery for services that they deliver. Apparently, there is a need to help them develop better services and to capture the full costs of providing those services.

Co-design is a particular approach to design that emphasises the creative contribution that can be made by potential users, clients and other stakeholders in a product, system or service. Co-design is defined as collective creativity of designers and people who are not trained in design through the whole design process (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). Co-design is widely used in the private sector for both products and services, to accelerate user acceptance and reduce potential failure. Co-design is also becoming widespread in the public sector as a way of engaging citizens. Co-design reflects a shift from user-centred design (user-as-subject) to participatory design (user-as-partner), which again aligns well with the concerns of the voluntary sector.

However, little is known about the capability of the voluntary sector, particularly small and medium sized organisations to apply co-design techniques; and resources that support co-design tend to be oriented towards the needs and the context of larger commercial organisations. This study aims to

“understand small-and-medium-sized not-for-profit organisations’ state of knowledge of co-design and develop guidance to help them effectively co-design with their beneficiaries to deliver better services at lower cost.” We are employing a mixed-methods approach, combining an on-line questionnaire, in-depth case studies, semi-structured interviews and on-line discussions to explore knowledge about co-design, current practices, existing barriers and perceived benefits/risks of co-design in the third sector. This paper presents some preliminary findings from this study.

Literature Review:

What is co-design? Co-design refers to a range of approaches to design that engage the collective creativity of designers and people who are not formally trained in design. As with other participatory practices, degrees and forms of participation in design can vary (see Dearden & Rizvi, 2008 for a discussion). Co-design can be distinguished from techniques such as ‘user-centred design’, by the active involvement of end-users and other ‘non-designer’ stakeholders at key stages, such as: problem definition or opportunity selection, research and analysis, generating ideas, development, testing, marketing, manufacturing, distribution and after-sales support (Sanders and Simons, 2009). Thus, co-design goes beyond traditional user consultation and/or user research.

Why use co-design? Carroll & Rosson (2007) suggest that participation in design has two distinct bases: a moral basis highlights the right of people to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, and a pragmatic basis emphasises the detailed (often tacit) knowledge that users and their representatives bring, that can lead to more successful or appropriate designs. Good use of co-design could lead to several social benefits, such as encouraging self-help and behaviour change, as well as growing social networks to support resilience (Bolye and Harris, 2009).

Making as a part of co-design. Most descriptions of design place a strong emphasis on iteratively creating and evaluating prototypes. Designers are also increasingly using creative practice as a way of opening up design discussion (e.g. Sanders, 2002; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Bowen & Petrelli, 2011; Wright & McCarthy, 2008; Dearden et al, 2006). These authors argue that engaging non-designer stakeholders in creative tasks (e.g. model making, storytelling, photography and acting) and in collaboratively reflecting on their creations, enables richer empathic understandings between co-design partners than can be achieved by traditional methods.

Who should be involved in co-design? Although all stakeholders should be involved in co-design, not everyone is interested in ‘creating’ products or services. Sanders and Stappers (2008) classified people into four groups according to the level of creativity and motivations (see Table 2). Different groups of people require different support. While people who are on the ‘doing’ level may need trained designers to lead them through the design process, those who are on the ‘creating’ level may prefer to be offered a ‘clean slate’ to work on.

Level	Types	Motivated by	Purpose	Example
4	Creating	Inspiration	‘express my creativity’	Dreaming up a new dish
3	Making	Asserting my ability or skills	‘make with my own hands’	Cooking with a recipe
2	Adapting	Appropriation	‘make things my own’	Embellishing a ready-made meal
1	Doing	Productivity	‘getting something done’	Organising my herbs and spices

Table 2: Four levels of creativity. Source: Sanders and Stappers (2008)

How is co-design used in the third sector? Co-design has proved to be useful for third sector organisations, as it excels at increasing stakeholder engagement, which could lead to higher productivity, higher creativity, and lower costs and risks (Ramaswamy and Gouillart, 2010). For example, Aid to Artisans (www.aidtoartisans.org) uses co-design between trained designer(s) and a

small community of artisans as a means to create value for the community beyond immediate economic opportunities.

What barriers have been identified? Involving people who are not trained in design can be problematic. Sanders and Westerlund (2011) pointed out that novices may spend too much time on one early idea rather than exploring many possibilities. Moreover, they may find it difficult to create ideas if they do not think that they are creative or have sufficient knowledge to contribute. Even recruiting users could be challenging. The recent study on community co-production of public services shows that most people are willing to engage in activities which do not need much effort from them and do not require getting in touch with others (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2008). Activities that imply getting involved with others were ranked as most demanding. Hence, finding users who are willing to be involved design work that requires rich interactions with others can be difficult.

Survey results

Data collection is still in progress at the time of writing. Thus far, 30 responses have been received. Of these 80% of respondent organisations provide services and the majority (60%) of respondents are local and/or community-based organisations. Although our results are preliminary, some patterns seem to be emerging.

Most organisations can be classified as using co-design in the sense that they involve users in key activities in service development. Users' inputs are strongly evident in the early stages, e.g. reviewing current performance (68%) and generating ideas (64%). However, the involvement decreases in the detailed development stages. For example, regarding service user involvement in 'planning the main points of contact with the service' (i.e. 'touchpoints' in the service design jargon): 32% of respondents only consulted service users or representatives at this stage (rather than involving users directly), 8% did not involve users or representatives, and 32% reported that this was not a stage that they went through. Similarly, 60% reported that simulating how users might experience the new service (e.g. via role playing) was not a stage that they applied and only 8% involve users in such activities. Only 40% actively involved users in reviewing new service proposals.

There is a general agreement that user involvement is beneficial, with respondents highlighting the following benefits as important: increasing the range of ideas (100%) and improving the competitiveness of efforts to secure resources (83%). However, many organisations were concerned that user involvement had a moderate or high risk of leading to unrealistic expectations (89.6%), slowing down the decision making process (87%), and requiring a lot of resources (91%).

Most organisations reported very limited use of designers in stages of service development. None of the organisations deploy designers to lead the project. Few perceived designers as co-decision makers (between 9% and 13% for different stages of design). When asked to give an example of a project in which the organisation had worked with trained designers, 11 of the 15 examples offered focus on graphic design (e.g. logos, printed materials) and/or web design, and only one was a clear service design example. It may be that voluntary sector actors are not aware of service design as an emerging specialisation.

Although inputs from trained designers are considered positive, e.g. saving time and money (48%) and improving the competitiveness (74%), respondents felt that employing designers is a luxury that they cannot afford (74%). Moreover, respondents were concerned that trained designers might not have the right skills to work with their beneficiaries (65%) and could slow down the process (70%). Interestingly, only 22% of respondents reported receiving support from volunteer designers.

Case studies

Case Study 1: MERU

MERU is a regional charity operating in the Southeast England that exists to help disabled children and young people achieve aspirations by giving advice on appropriate assistive equipment and co-designing custom-made solutions if a suitable device does not exist.



Figure 1: MERU's product (left-hand side) and design facilities (right-hand side)

MERU collaborates with service users and other stakeholders, such as parents, carers, healthcare professionals and/or social service officers, to develop custom-made solutions for individual users. Their co-design process involves participation from clients at three main stages: developing the design brief, designing the solution, evaluating the outcome.

The process is led by a trained designer who starts a project by arranging a face-to-face meeting with users and stakeholders to identify problems, capture physical and emotional requirements, and develop a design brief. Next, the designer will work with users and other stakeholders to generate ideas. Since most service users have mobility impairment, it is not practical to expect service users and other beneficiaries to be physically present at all stages of the design process. As a result, most communications are carried out through emails and/or phone calls. Designers reported that children and young people like to be involved in aesthetic aspects of the design, e.g. choosing forms, colours and patterns but are less interested in functional and technical aspects. Once the design is completed, the product will be evaluated by an independent reviewer (another trained designer) before the handover. A final assessment is conducted three months after the handover to make sure that the users and other beneficiaries are fully satisfied with the product.

Observations: A major challenge felt by MERU is that some of their clients may lack confidence to co-create and/or make decisions. Moreover, a conventional approach to co-design where designers and users engage in creative workshops may not be suitable for some users. It is not practical to expect service users and other beneficiaries to be physically present at all stages of design. In addition, highly participatory co-design processes in this area could require a lot of staff time, which the designers and the organisation felt were too demanding given their limited resources.

Case Study 2: The Blackwood Foundation

The Blackwood Foundation is a regional charity promoting independent living and assisting people with a disability or support needs. The charity aims to be “*a catalyst for innovation, development and improvement*”. The work mainly focuses on design and technology. The foundation is still in the early stage of service development, but is keen to involve beneficiaries in co-design.

The foundation conducted 11 consultation and engagement workshops with approximately 100 people Scotland-wide in 2010 as a means to capture what people with a disability or support needs really want. Their results showed that many workshop participants have strong potential to play co-creating roles. Using Sanders and Stappers's framework (see Table 2) many of their participants are

'creators'. They know what they want and have already designed/modified products and/or built environments to suit their needs. However, there are very limited opportunities for these 'creators' to engage in the development process. There is need to utilise their knowledge and creative skills by giving them more opportunities to co-create with trained designers. In addition, it was noted that most people do not know about existing products/services to support their independent living, so there is a need to enable people to exchange knowledge more effectively.

These findings led to the development of [bespoken](#), a social media site for exchanging ideas, tips, problems and recommendations on independent living. This site was later used to facilitate the pilot scheme that encourages users to co-create a new design with a designer (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Workshop activities (left-hand side) and online discussions between users and a designer (right-hand side)

This case study confirmed that it is unrealistic to expect all users to play very active co-creating roles, but also highlighted that there are many people who can and are motivated to contribute. One main challenge is to identify activities that people with different levels of creativity could contribute without feeling of being left out. The bespoken digital platform could help people with mobility impairments play a more active role in design processes, and could help trained designers and potential beneficiaries to connect. The experience from the pilot design challenge scheme reveals that it is important to encourage trained designers to fully utilise users' insight and creative skills. Currently, the belief that "all people are creative" is not commonly accepted (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). Some designers and people in leadership positions might find it difficult to relax control and allow end-users to make key decisions.

Discussion

The research to date has been exploratory and it is premature to draw firm conclusions, however the initial findings raise questions and issues that need to be considered by both the voluntary sector and by design researchers.

It appears that sector actors are ready to actively involve service users and their representatives in the early stages of service design (reviewing existing services and identifying areas for improvement). However, later stages of the service design and development process see lower levels of participation, and many organisations appear not to undertake some activities that service designers might view as critical. It may be that third sector organisations are not aware of emerging service design methods and expertise that are being applied in private & public sectors.

For design researchers, practitioners and educators, there are also major challenges. Certainly there is a need to consider how existing methods and techniques can be adapted to support the involvement of users with special needs, and design educators need to consider how their students learn to collaborate and communicate with users with special needs. The limited evidence of active design volunteering may represent an interesting opportunity for third sector organisations and design schools to work together to mutual benefit.

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