

Experience and expertise: key issues for developing innovation capabilities through service design.

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Abstract

Public organisations need to rethink the ways they innovate and improve their services. Service design has become a means to achieve innovation capabilities through service design projects with the purpose of *both* enhancing innovation capabilities, *and* creating new service. Based on observations, interviews and project documentations this exploratory paper reflects on the role and articulation of design expertise, how and if it may be transferred through design projects. Further, the relation between learning by doing and learning through expert examples is discussed through a pragmatist lens.

KEYWORDS: innovation capability, design expertise, experience, exploratory

Introduction

Currently there is a need and development of renewed thinking about how to build innovative organizations and organizations that inherently hold capacities for continuous improvement and development work. Most prominently this is seen within public sector organizations, where time for dedicated service development work is scarce and therefore it should preferably be integrated in the employees' regular work. In answer to these challenges, design and service design are promoted and applied as a competence and skill (Bason, 2014). Lack of continuity due to use of consultants, lack of attention paid to implementation and high costs have been spelled out as weaknesses when designers enter into the public sphere (Blyth & Kimbell, 2011; Mulgan, 2014). However, in these situations the main purpose of conducting a service design project is to build innovation capabilities, although new service proposals might be both a wanted and expected outcome.

Processes focused on capability building are carried out in a similar way to ordinary service design processes. The main difference is that the participants – non-trained designers – do the design work, instead of trained designers. The designers instead coach and monitor the

process, similar to Manzini's (2015) idea of diffuse design (non-designers) and expert design (professional designers) knowledge in social innovation.

This exploratory paper reflects on tensions between inherent expectations of what design methods bring to the project and the knowledge of trained designers. The reflections are triggered by the authors' observations of explicit service design projects aimed at building innovation capability within public sector, and their discussions with the designers and participants. In the best case scenario, these projects might achieve good learning experiences, and interest in a new approach and relevant new services. However, they seldom result in grounded capabilities for conducting a distinct project without support in the future. Although these projects are focused on capability building much time is spent in achieving desirable design outcomes, and less time seems to be spent on securing the actual learning aims of the specific project.

One of the basic premises in innovation-capacity building service design projects is that design skills and methods are transferrable through the application of design methods¹. The kind of knowledge that is built into these methods and how and if that knowledge is transferrable are rarely discussed. In the following, these issues are explored based in knowledge of design expertise and a pragmatist position on learning.

Design knowledge: diffuse, novice and expertise

Recently Manzini (2015) presented a spectrum from diffuse design, defined as the human ability to conceive new solutions and change present situations, to expert design. Design experts, Manzini argues, have an enhanced and cultivated ability to design. Non-designer's design ability can be used and levered through facilitation and coaching by expert designers (Manzini, 2015). Oftentimes service designers are argued to be facilitators and mediators, process leaders and coordinators (e.g., Inns, 2007). The specific competence of designers is important to articulate when designers enter into organizations where other skilled professions such as HR personnel are better trained to be facilitators and coaches. Is it really facilitation that the designers do, or is it something else? According to Dorst (2015) framing and re-framing are specific areas of design expertise, Stephens and Boland (2014) note importance paid to bodily senses and aesthetic knowledge, and Schön (1983) highlights reflection-in-action through visualizations and materializations, while Cross (2004) explicitly points out that "ill-behaved" problem-scoping is more important than problem analyses.

Experienced designers tend to reinvent and modify the specific method and the application of it to fit the situation at hand. Designers do this based on profound practice experience acquired through years of design education so they become experts in design. It is well known that becoming an expert demands being engaged in a specific activity for an extensive number of hours. This expertise is used to make reflective decisions in relation to the situation based on intuition, whereas novice designers are more result focused (Bason, 2010; Dorst, 2015).

¹ See for example IDEO's <http://www.designkit.org>

A pragmatist perspective on capability building through experience

In design education, design doing is often promoted and held high. This approach consists of the project-based studio tradition in combination with intense studies in the workshops to acquire craft skills and practice experience. Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey emphasized the role of experience in education as well as in life in general. For Dewey, experience “is simply what occurs when we carry out transactions with our environment.” (Garrison, 1998, p. 66). However, Dewey criticizes understanding experiences as only a ‘knowledge affair’. For him two ingredients are necessary for educational experience: interaction and continuity. Thus emphasizing the actual acting in a situation, and how this affects how we “anticipate, recognize and respond to future experiences, in effect how experiences will change our habits“(ibid.).

So to set out educational design projects as learning by doing makes sense. This involves exposing the participants to design by doing the design work themselves, using methods that include user research, constructing and analyzing insights, idea generation and proposing solutions, while senior expert designers coach and facilitate the process. However, this set up does not seem to work fully in regard to sustained innovation capability through design knowledge, as we will discuss later in relation to the two cases presented below.

Examples from the field

Here two examples of service design projects framed as innovation capability projects are presented. Due to the format of an exploratory paper the projects are briefly presented with the purpose to convey their character. The projects had a stated purpose to develop capability within the organization to apply design methods and approaches after the end of the project. Both projects used service design processes for this purpose. The first project was set within a county council, the second within the educational sphere. In both cases there were double aims of first, learning and second, new solutions.

Children and young people's participation, County Council

The Convention on the Rights of the Child² states that a child has the right to be heard in relation to all matters that concern the child. In order to better meet this article a county council decided to train a group of employees in service design. The goal was to find new ways to involve children in the development and improvement of health-care services.

The project was a joint initiative by the children's rights group and the internal design department at the county council. Employees from the children's rights group were sent to an action learning course run by a design agency, set up in collaboration with the internal design department.

The course was set up as a normal service design project, ending with a set of tested prototypes. The designers presented each phase of the design process, with tools and methods, in workshops. In between each workshop, the participants carried out the design

² Unicef (n.d) FACT SHEET: A summary of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved October 7th 2015 from <http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf>

work back at their respective departments. During this period, the participants had phone contact with the designers to receive support and coaching. The designers did not take an active part in the design work.

Each workshop started with debriefing the work done since the last workshop, in which the participants discussed their experiences and received feedback from the designers.

When talking to the participants about six months after the project, most of them were focusing on the design outcomes and issues for taking them forward to full implementation. Some were reflecting on the tools and methods they had learnt. Even though they saw value in them, they were unsure about the possibilities to continue using them. Apart from a need to better integrate continuous development work in the organization, they also mentioned the need for continued support from the county council's in-house design team for continued or future work of this sort.

Exploring digital learning aids, Elementary school

There are a multitude of digital tools to support both teaching and learning in primary education. The project was set up with the ambition to engage both teachers and pupils in the exploration of how and what tools were used, and ultimately suggest new ones. One explicit aim was to open up the hierarchical educational situation and invite the pupils' knowledge that sometimes exceeds that of the teachers in this area.

The process consisted of a set of workshops where the designers introduced different service design methods, and the teachers (and on some occasions pupils) tried them out by themselves. In between the workshops the designers coached the teachers over the phone or e-mail. However, the basic set up was that teachers conducted the research, analyses, formulated insights and then moved into idea generation and prototyping, coached by the designers. There were workshops when the designers took a more active role for advancing the process, or called in specific expertise such as interaction designers to visualize ideas. According to them the purpose of taking a more active part was to "secure" the process. An example was to make sure the research results were interesting and complex enough to generate "qualitative insights". As the project developed there were difficulties in finding interesting proposals for new solutions, and to 'transfer methods' became the main focus of the project.

The double aim of the projects, and the final focus on methods or design outcome brings attention to the tension of learning something, in this case service design knowledge, and the expectations of achieving a satisfying result from that first experience.

Discussion and conclusion

This short explorative reflection brings attention to three major issues that need to be addressed by service design as research and practice to keep momentum as a change agent within the public sphere. First, an extensive focus on learning by doing leaves little room for reflection and continuity; second, difficulty in the projects to focus on both outcome and learning instead of attending to their relation to each another, and third, the designers' need to reclaim awareness and respect for their own expert knowledge.

Setting up the knowledge transfer as learning- by-doing design projects makes sense from a pragmatist perspective, because it addresses the interaction ingredient articulated by Dewey (Garrison, 1998). However, the above-described projects rarely achieved a sustained capability by the participants and the organizations. The focus was primarily on the transfer of the methods and lacked space for a deeper reflection about results and methods. Part of the expert designers competence was to reinvent and modify the specific method to fit the situation at hand (Dorst 2015). This competence has been built up through the second ingredient for educational experience, continuity, where designers throughout their training have reflected on outcomes and methods from prior projects, and based on this adjusts future actions. The projects could not offer the participants this kind of reflection as they were often one-off interventions. This is actually somewhat ironic as one argument for transferring design knowledge to the organizations is to make sure development work does not become one-off projects due to the cost of procured design competence.

Another aspect worth reflection is how the design outcome affected the learning in the projects. On the one hand, a results-focused culture within the public sector (Bason, 2010) made the participants focus on the design outcomes from the projects, leaving the knowledge transfer in the backseat. However, the quality of the design outcome might also affect the learning from the projects. If the methods in the hands of first-time users do not generate the expected results, will there be incentives and interest in using the methods again? In a follow-up interview after the children's rights-project, the designer reflected upon this project in relation to others. She said in a rather surprised tone of voice that actually, the learning experience among the participants seemed to be better in projects where design experts entered the process and also conducted more direct design work. It is not difficult to imagine that in the first contact with design, a mix of diffuse and expert design work can be fruitful. The organization's own work creates experiences of interaction, and expert design work, which can deepen analysis, reframe insights or stretch ideas, supports reflections about methods and tools that will not be sparked when the organization works alone, without a designer.

The amount of time professional designers have performed specific aspects of design practice, such as framing, analysing and engaging with other people through, for example, prototyping should not be left unacknowledged. Even though this exploratory paper is not a call to reclaim the position of the expert, all-knowing designer sitting in the Ivory tower, we want to highlight that transfer of design knowledge is not just a matter of introducing methods. Designers should themselves acknowledge their expertise and take responsibility for how this knowledge, and not just methods, is transferred. The design-novice organizations cannot be expected to understand the reflection that goes into design practice before they have experienced it.

There is no doubt that an increasing number of people need to and will use their inherent diffuse design ability and design methods. Therefore it is relevant to further explore multiple ways to move from diffuse to expert design. Would it not be interesting to put emphases on specific design knowledge such as framing, aesthetic knowledge and reflection-in-action, and how that can be taught in the spectrum from diffuse to expert design, rather than just focus on methods and tools?

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