

Cracking open co-creation: Categories, stories, and value tension in a collaborative design process

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In this paper we show how stories and categories help to frame and express values in a car accessory design process. We consider how a group of designers plan two co-creation workshops through categorising participants in ways that impact upon the subsequent process of design. We then describe how two stories emerge during the design process, additionally structuring design discussion through linking ‘past particulars’ – experiences and behaviours that the co-creation process reveals – with ‘imagined particulars’ – stories that place specific actors, objects and relations into an imagined context. We propose a key function of stories within this collaborative design process as holding value tension, allowing contrasting values to coexist together.

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The recent resurgence of interest in the concept of framing as a way of both analysing and thinking about the design process has usefully focused our attention on structures that anchor the flow of discourse in design processes (Dong & Macdonald, 2017; Dorst, 2015; Jornet & Roth, 2017; Paton & Dorst, 2011; Umney, Lloyd, & Potter, 2014). Rather than looking in detail at specifically cognitive elements of understanding, as did the first Design Thinking Research Symposium (DTRS) common-data study (Cross, Dorst, & Christiaans, 1996), framing aligns more readily with social and constructivist ways of looking at design behavior, and comes closer to how design professionals conduct and describe their own activity. In effect, frames serve to structure practices of design, and also how objects, including people, are perceived within those practices (Ensink & Sauer, 2003; Umney & Lloyd, 2018).

Related to the concept of framing is that of storytelling (Lloyd, 2000, McCloskey, 1990), since frames are at least partially expressed through the co-construction of verbal stories (Goffman, 1981). Storytelling and narratives are widely studied in relation to creative practice (Beckman & Barry, 2009; Oak, 2013) as well as “how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane

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situations” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In our view, storytelling is a more effective analytical orientation as it implies a time-based operational logic; a sequence of actions by actors that make sense through a narrative arc being created or told. Our recent studies have looked at the interleaving of narrative in the presentation and performance of design (Lloyd & Oak, 2016; Oak, 2013) that has allowed us to explore aspects of expertise, authority, and gender through critical analyses of the narrative voice telling the story.

The data that we use in this paper came from the eleventh in the series of Design Thinking Research Symposia (Christensen, Ball, & Halskov, 2017) and provided us with an opportunity to develop the concept of storytelling as it occurs in collaborative design and co-creative practice. The DTRS11 dataset featured a series of eighteen collaborative design sessions of (mainly) Scandinavian designers preparing and then analysing two day-long co-creation workshops that took place with potential Chinese consumers. The workshops were held in China with the aim of developing new product ideas for the emerging luxury automobile accessories market. Collaborative design sessions took place both in Scandinavia and China, and two background interviews before and after the design process, provided context for looking at the data. The dataset thus provides a unique window into the current corporate design world and the practices labeled as ‘collaborative design’, ‘design thinking’ and ‘co-creation’. Figure 1 shows a timeline for the 22 session of the dataset and design process. Sessions 2–5, 7–12, and 14–21 featured the designers in real-time video. Sessions 6 and 13 featured Chinese participants and were presented partly in time-lapse video and without transcripts. Interviews in sessions 1 and 22 were audio only. Sessions varied in length between 10 min (6, 13) and 100 min (5) with an average time of 47 min, and total time of 17 h, 20 min. The design process itself could be summed up as the design of three different things: workshops, stories, and car accessories.

At the beginning of Session 2 Ewan, the chief designer and main protagonist in the dataset, sets down his intention for the co-design process to: ‘basically crack open co-creation in general and then maybe calibrate our expectations’ (Line 5). Likewise this paper seeks to critically examine aspects of the co-creation process by first, considering the selection of participants in the co-creation workshops along with the construction of contrasting values that results. We then look at a number of ideas around the concept of story, storytelling, and narrative as they apply in the dataset before focusing in detail on two particular stories that emerge: ‘sexy commitment’ (which is also considered elsewhere by Dong and Macdonald (2017) ¹) and ‘Mercedes guy’. The paper’s main contribution is to outline how, in terms of expertise in design thinking, stories can help to frame, express and negotiate what we term *value tension*: conversational narratives that enable participants in design to simultaneously present opposing values without the need to resolve them.

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