

The value of designers' creative practice within complex collaborations



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This paper reports a case study investigating the productive value of designers' creative practice within complex academic-industrial collaborations in which a designer's practice had a formative role. Adopting a pragmatic approach, collaborators' experiences of this project were reconstructed through interviews and 'annotated timelines.' Collaborators were found to value the designer's work in responding to their particular concerns whilst also opening up new possibilities. This paper discusses how such benefit is attributable to the 'designerly thinking' of skilled designers, shifting the focus of work from problem-solving to problematisation and enabling participants to collectively formulate concerns, roles, and potentialities. The paper concludes that designers' creative practice can enable collaborative projects to build upon and transcend participants' expertise and expectations through 'creative exchange.'
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Collaborative projects are often rendered complex and challenging to undertake by the need to connect activities, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, and reconcile multiple agencies and concerns. Whilst involving collaborators who are untrained in design in creative activities can be a means of addressing these kinds of challenges, particularly in projects' early stages (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), this paper examines the value that designers' creative practice can hold for their collaborators through an empirical study of 'On the Precipice', a complex collaborative project in which creative practice enabled progress.

The importance of participation in design projects is widely studied and argued for (Vines, Clarke, Wright, McCarthy, & Olivier, 2013). For example, participation and influence by those likely to be affected by what is designed may satisfy their democratic rights and, in turn, better fit their practices and concerns (Carroll & Rosson, 2007; Ehn, 1993; Iversen, Halskov, & Leong,

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2012). However, there are also characteristics of skilled designers' practices that enable such projects to deliver successful outcomes. Numerous scholarly accounts claim that successful designers do tend to think and act in similar and particular ways, and propose models of such practice (Cross, 2007; Dalsgaard, 2014; Lawson, 1997; Schön, 1983). A common characteristic of such 'designerly thinking' (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Çetinkaya, 2013) is the role of making as *inquiry* rather than simply the realisation of preformed ideas.

Some writers (e.g. Dorst, 2011; Kolko, 2010) have used philosopher C.S. Peirce's concept of *abduction* to distinguish the mode of reasoning employed by designers from the inductive and deductive modes typical in everyday use. Accepting Gaver's (2012) caution that theoretical descriptions can underspecify design, such accounts of the "logic of what might be" (Martin quoted in Kolko, 2010) nevertheless draw attention to the importance of making functioning as *analysis and synthesis* (Gedenryd, 1998; Schön, 1983). Ingold (2013) extends this principle to a broad range of practices where making becomes an "art of inquiry [where] the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work" (Ingold, 2013, p 6). These accounts owe much to pragmatist philosophy (Dewey & McDermott, 1981); and, guided by pragmatism, Dalsgaard (2014) describes inquiring making as the development of situated knowing to operationalise an always emergent, never fully finalised world.

In the case presented herein, an experienced designer contributed to a collaborative project as part of her PhD research. Whilst creative practice can contribute towards or be the means of research (Archer, 1995; Frayling, 1994), in what follows we consider the value of creative practice *as a pragmatic inquiry into what might be* irrespective of whether this practice constitutes academic research. Indeed, approaches currently discussed as research through design (Gaver, 2012; Zimmerman, Stolterman, & Forlizzi, 2010) depend upon this 'designerly' quality of the practice within them – or 'makerly' if, like Frayling, Archer and Ingold, we consider artists, designers and other makers collectively. Such making is then of any artefact that serves an ongoing makerly inquiry (sketches, mock-ups, scenarios) in addition to the crafting of final designs.

On the Precipice (Nissen, Bowers, Wright, Hook, & Newell, 2014) was a six-month project investigating how digital technology could express audience experience, bringing together academic and industry partners and an experienced designer (who created all of the artefacts within the inquiry). The project was amongst several in a larger research programme, the Creative Exchange, investigating constructive collaboration with arts and humanities academics and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the creative industries.

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