

Early-Stage Innovation Centered on Making for Youth Mental Health: A Design-Led Approach

Abstract While the use of making in participatory co-design is common, I argue for the benefits that making-led participatory co-design can bring to two fields where its use is rare: early-stage innovation and mental health. I draw evidence from my situated cooperation with service users and providers of a regional UK mental health trust. The motivation for this action-research was twofold: to envision a better youth mental health service, and to explore how primary and secondary schools can practice mental health prevention. I observed that where there was an absence of co-making in a researcher's stakeholder engagements, communicative exchanges became heavily verbal, and this increased the relational intensity between actors. As a result, the discussion of service user experiences – coping with mental health conditions and the struggle to access mental health services – became more challenging for contributors. By contrast, stakeholder engagements driven by co-making transcended the verbal. Making brought a level of informality that enabled participants to lighten relational intensity, soften professional/cultural boundaries, and open up to each other. A low-fidelity visualization is described that I propose can help maintain stakeholder agency and sustain relations between co-actors for the longer term.

Keywords

Making
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Verbal

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1 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

2 In her review of the Transition Design Symposium event (June 2016, Schumacher College, Devon, UK) Briony Turner reports on closing remarks delivered by Cameron Tonkinwise. Briony Turner, "Event Review: Transition Design Symposium 17–19 June, 2016, UK," *Sustainability Transitions Research Network Steering Group Newsletter*, June 20, 2016, [http://www.transitionsnetwork.org/files/20th%20STRN%20newsletter%20\(June%202016\).pdf](http://www.transitionsnetwork.org/files/20th%20STRN%20newsletter%20(June%202016).pdf).

3 Bryan Boyer, Justin W. Cook, and Marco Steinberg, *In Studio: Recipes for Systemic Change* (Helsinki: Helsinki Design Lab, 2013).

4 Jason Chilvers and Matthew Kearnes, eds., preface to *Remaking Participation: Science, Environment and Emergent Publics* (London: Routledge, 2016).

5 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 8.

6 Ezio Manzini and Adam Thorpe, "Weaving People and Places: Art and Design for Resilient Communities," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.003>.

7 Chilvers and Kearnes, *Remaking Participation*, 7.

8 Fabiane Lee-Perrella is an artist and designer running a small participatory public art practice called Flour, a lecturer at UAL's Camberwell College of Arts for the BA 3D Design Course, and co-founder of Early Lab. "Beings," accessed March 24, 2018, <http://www.ourflour.com/flour/the-flumps/>. See also <http://www.ourflour.com/flour/> and <http://earlylab.org/>.

9 Early-stage design (as practiced by Early Lab) is the practice of design at the very early stages of an innovation process. Incorporating design into the innovation process much earlier is part of a preventative strategy of greater scope better suited to enabling the favorable conditions

Subtext: Design as a Set of Practices in Transition

The popular perception of the purpose of design is a product of how people see it being used: supporting the dominant economic model, the prevailing worldview.¹ Business-as-usual is a powerful advocate of design – especially when it is materializing social relations through liberated, differentiating mass consumption.² A very effective synergy this has been but as is all too clear, one that is exacting a socio-ecological price that has been accelerating alarmingly over the last thirty years.

Over the last ten or fifteen years, in an attempt to address looming crises, designers have been altering the traditional set of agencies they are known for to better support societal transitions toward sustainable practices, systems, and cultures of resilience. Steering clear of the traps that design, critical of prevailing models, has historically been vulnerable to – which include being co-opted or dismissed as merely in dissent – designers are cultivating a meta-discipline sensitive to the myriad system interdependencies that constitute an extremely complex and unpredictable world.³ Designers are developing, with varying degrees of success, participatory methodologies and processes that construct small-scale versions of democracy. These democracies are not merely representative; they afford people agency to collectively enact and communicate visions of how they think the world – or at least their lives – ought to be.⁴

Societal transition to sustainable practices will require complex boundary-spanning cooperation and collaboration among people unlike one another. Diverse transdisciplinary teams must work together in ways that can magnify relational values at the molecular scale of the specific encounter and the environmental scale of enabling systems. This kind of deep cooperation is difficult to achieve, and especially so when lifestyles in the globalized, developed, technocratic world – characterized by pathologies of convenience – are de-skilling people of the art of genuine cooperation.⁵

This article presents the action-research of Early Lab as an example of one way that designers are altering established forms of practice, in the way described above, to better meet the complex socio-ecological challenges characterizing the present time and exemplified by the current trends that are weakening communities-in-place.⁶ Early Lab prioritizes making – making things to visualize, physicalize, and externalize thoughts and feelings. Making is at the center of its methodology in an approach to very early stage situated participative engagement and co-envisioning with groups of people.

However, the potentialities born of the act of making are severely underutilized in early-stage innovation practice that has emerged predominantly as a design thinking predicated on verbal and written exchange – the kind of design that is more easily understood by global corporate business. Furthermore, the public participation methodology of design thinking for business-as-usual stands accused of helping institutions create merely the appearance of openness, responsiveness, and transparency – providing a veneer that obscures a neoliberal hegemony perpetuating itself through tightening dynamics of closure that deliberately holds publics back from the mechanisms of decision making and self governance.⁷

As an early-stage type of design-led participatory co-innovation centered on making, the future of the Early Lab project rests on the mission of equipping contributing actors to avoid/escape co-option by the forces of business-as-usual through their development of emergent forms of collective self-governance.

Early Lab

Early Lab – of which I'm a co-founder, with Fabiane Lee-Perrella⁸ – is an early-stage⁹ design practice working to support social innovation. At the molecular scale, we

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