

Design Facilitation as Emerging Practice: Analyzing How Designers Support Multi-stakeholder Co-creation

Abstract Designers increasingly find themselves facilitating large-scale design events. Yet few have explored design facilitation as an emerging practice. This article examines the design facilitation practices used in two Norwegian case studies of multi-stakeholder events. We focus on the contextually designed tools designers create to help them facilitate. We then explore some critical dimensions of design facilitation. When used as visual overlays, facilitators' explicit knowledge of these dimensions can improve their capacity to analyze, evaluate, and plan how to design and use contextual tools during design events. By plotting how designers use facilitation tools sequentially during events, we render the flow of design facilitation practice visible and accessible. We suggest that an explicit awareness of these dimensions and flows can enable designers to build more inclusive and inspiring tools, orchestrate the flow of long-term participatory processes more deliberately, and better equip participants to work with complex systemic change.

Keywords

Design facilitation
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Introduction

As the field of design moves into the higher order, complex domains of organizational and social transformation, designers are increasingly obtaining input from a wide variety of stakeholders.¹ When designers and diverse stakeholders take on large-scale processes of change together, design facilitation plays an important role.² Facilitation is especially vital to the emerging fields of systems and service design, as the practice enables teams to “dive into the ecologies of services, into the world of needs and experiences of users and providers ... [and] visualize, formulate, and choreograph solutions to problems that do not necessarily exist.”³ Service design must be coupled with systemic design approaches⁴ if designers are to cope with the intricacies of service ecologies. Facilitation has been studied in soft systems thinking⁵ and operations research,⁶ but when it comes to systemic service design, few understand the importance of design facilitation. According to Lauren Tan, design facilitation is one of the seven emerging roles for designers working for the social good.⁷ However, as Tan also points out, “in the field of design, the role of the designer as facilitator is commonly acknowledged; but the limitations of the design literature are that they do not elaborate on this role, nor explore its practices.”⁸ Some key questions arise when designers approach their role as facilitators: Where and how to start? How should we plan and execute stakeholder meetings? What kind of facilitation tools – props, activities, and content, for example – should we use? How can we sustain momentum over long-lasting design processes? What can we design, and what is emergent?

The last question merits closer scrutiny. Emergence, as a phenomenon, is present in most systems, be they biological, social, or technological. Simply put, emergence is higher-order novelty that results from interacting, lower-order parts.⁹ Consider the synchronized flocking of birds: the interaction between the birds in motion creates emergent compositions, and no single bird orchestrates the flock’s movements independently. In social systems, “large social networks display emergent qualities that cannot be designed or planned in the absence of large numbers of active participants.”¹⁰ When a large number of people with varying responsibilities and concerns gather, the designer/facilitator becomes one more flocking bird. However, designers fly in complex patterns – they act as both participants and facilitators. In the latter role, they must foster participant interactions that generate emergent material. Such emergence is “brought into existence by the way a whole [event] is bound together by substance and order through relationships and connections.”¹¹ The focus of this study is design practice wherein the designer performs as a participant-facilitator. In this context, how can designers facilitate participatory, multi-stakeholder sessions in ways that foster co-creative emergence among fellow participants? In this article, we will explore the practice of design facilitation through two research-by-design case studies, and propose an analytical model to assess the facilitation tools designers develop across six dimensions.

Methods

Research by Design

Research by design is the foundation of our methodological approach. According to Birger Sevaldson, research by design is “a special research mode where the explorative, generative and innovative aspects of design are engaged and aligned in a systematic research inquiry.”¹² An inquiry is reflexive – it takes a first-person viewpoint – and is usually supported by a blend of methods for systematic data collection, synthesis, and analysis that builds new and robust knowledge.¹³ We three co-authors all acted as co-designers, co-facilitators, and co-participants, and

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