No More Design Experts? 

Simone Taffe and Carolyn Barnes

Meeting the Challenges of the Emerging Role of the Design-er-Facilitator in Graphic Design

Abstract

The reorganisation of societies around diversification, di-vergent thinking, interactive design, user experiences, and human dimensions in design projects, the era of standard-ised communications having passed. Some design debate holds that audience participation in the design process better aligns designs with audience's needs and perspectives, challenging the graphic designer's established role as a creative and communication expert. Arguments for the ethical and pragmatic benefits of participatory design can seem compelling, but the task of including audience members in the design process is not straightforward. This paper responds to Jorge Fras-cara (2004, p. 54) depicting graphic design as an opportu-nistic design process that helps users to understand and use information materials, both print and digital, develop-ing and critical thinking, information management, and critical revision of design ideas; and the benefits of tightly-structured, small-group activities over loose activities and the scope for designers and other project stakeholders to come together to draw on each other's knowledge.

2. Method

The participatory workshops produced valuable insight into how the staff of the Foundation use designed commu-nications to deliver information on asthma risk and management to the public, providing a basis of knowl-edge for the revision of the Foundation's communica-tion strategy and materials. This included the identifi-cation of key audience segments, detailed information on audience characteristics and behaviors, perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of existing information materials, and many creative ideas for new communica-tions. The workshops also highlighted the obstacles to building participative relationships in co-design. Three key findings about effective methods for participatory design emerged from the study: the advan-tage of tightly-scripted, small-group activities over loose-ly-framed, whole-group activities; the resistance to rank-ing and critical revision of design ideas, and the benefits of verbal-visual games in relationship building and knowledge transfer. Our study also showed that cycles of progress and regress distinguish participatory design, pitching activities between work and fun being impor-tant to sustaining the participation process until the way forward for design becomes clear. In the discussion sec-tion, we build on our findings and the arguments of oth-ers to address the challenges of participation and ways to resolve them.

3.1 Tightly scripted activities

Our study found that tightly-scripted, small-group ac-tivities were better at uncovering critical participant knowledge than the open-ended, whole group activities used among design peers. One activity involved an au-dit of the Foundation's information and promotion ma-terials in which participants selected their favourite and least favourite items. Participants then added post-it notes to the items to comment on their strengths and weaknesses. In a whole-group discussion in Workshop One, there was great reluctance to criticise the Foundation's informa-tion materials. However, when working in small, self-selec-ted groups the participants became highly engaged in sitting through the different pieces of information to find and comment on especially liked or disliked items. Some participants voiced strong opinions during this ac-tivity, making comments loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, such as 'People really like this.' and 'It's a useful resource, but it's a matter of storage and re-membering if it's there.'

The information audit established a key issue for a new communications strategy for the Foundation, workers' comments and annotations identifying confusion over whether their Foundation was raising money, raising the organisation's profile, raising public awareness of asthma or helping individuals and their carers manage asthma. The hands-on nature and intimate setting of the small-group activity seemingly made participants less self-conscious about expressing frank opinions. The information audit also highlighted the duplication of information and the negative effect of staff turnover and changing information needs on the Foundation's provision of information to the public. The workers' guarded responses to the presen-tation of each negative finding of the information audit demonstrated the importance, but also the sensitivity of these issues.

3.2 Positive feedback

For the Fraser (2004, p. 54) depicts graphic design as an op-portunistic and synthetic activity, designers quickly frame and rank a variety of design propositions to iden-tify the most promising directions, rapid conceptualisa-tion and problem-solving has a product of designers' role in developing a saleable culture in a commercial world, on time and on budget. Arguably designers can rapid-ly propose and sift potential ideas because they do not have an emotional attachment to the context for de-sign. The Asthma Foundation study revealed that the
The card then passed to a third person, who we asked to participants will arrive at good ideas in good time.

'tenancy', a second person drew three equal-sized squares.

on a card. Each person then passed the card to the person to building participative relationships in design.

tasks can be major. In an activity aimed at dividing the participant's great experience of work.

as and feelings that are often so difficult to express in

Segmentation of asthma sufferers according to age, gender and asthma triggers were less important

rations strategy to be further investigated through participatory workshops with members of the Foundations' audience for information.

The 'Dear Designer Booklet' activity had staff cut images from magazines to represent a day in the life of a specific asthma sufferer they selected, using speech bubbles to describe a common situation in which that person might find themselves in respect of their disease. The resultant A4 booklets represented an important design resource, each persona and scenario a distillation of the participants' great experience of working with people with asthma. These included the embarrased teenager who no longer wants to discuss or proudly manage their asthma using a nebuliser, elderly

 arguments that success in design depends on the

many small organisations today, the Asthma Foundation provides a dynamic and testing work environment in which individuals and teams share communication, creativity and innovation, and are jointly responsible for communal outcomes (Kozlowski

&S, 2003). When confronted with the diverse practical

clerk and the designers into the one group, asking everyone to write a word related to the idea of information on a card. Each person then passed the card to the person on their right, whose task was to draw an image of the word. For example, in response to the word ‘consistency’, a second person drew three equal-sized squares.

Furthermore, clients have engaged designers to provide an undertaking intrinsic to graphic designers' work.

simply doubted the worth of the codesign process, by the

some participants teased others that the quality of their drawings made guessing the original word impossible. The activity built familiarity between the designers and Foundation staff and made the serious work of the workshop seem less confronting. It also highlighted the challenge of conceptualisation through text and image, an undertaking intrinsically to graphic designers' work.

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suggestions argue that everyday people have much knowledge to contribute to the design process. Sui (2003, p. 64) highlights the issue of ‘user-unfit designs’, suggesting that future designers need to become less dominant in the design process so that audiences’ requirements drive designed responses. Yet there are obstacles to building participative relationships in design. Initially in our study, both the staff of the Foundation and the designers were ambivalent about each other's role and skills. The young designers expressed reservations about participatory processes, one commenting 'in the end it's our role to design the outcomes'. Some Foundation staff commented positively on the creativity and fresh insights of graphic designers they had worked with in developing information materials, but criticised the tendency of some designers to ignore crucial advice or aspects of a design brief to pursue an individual creative agenda. Staff gave examples of designers' creative latitude leading to seriously flawed

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tion and the development of new information and communication technologies have seen everyday people become active selectors of designed messages and, increasingly, cultural producers in their own right. How visual designers can work together with clients to better understand the ‘conditions of use’ for design, not just produce ‘effective or aesthetic displays of useful information’ (pp. 337–338). Traditionally, however, clients have engaged designers to provide professionals services based on their creative expertise and technical knowledge (Reich, Konda, Levy, Monarch, & Subrahmanian, 1996, p. 179). Conversely, many graphic designers argue that everyday people have much knowledge to contribute to the design process. Sui (2003, p. 64) highlights the issue of ‘user-unfit designs’, suggesting that future designers need to become less dominant in the design process so that audiences’ requirements drive designed responses. Yet there are obstacles to building participative relationships in design. Initially in our study, both the staff of the Foundation and the designers were ambivalent about each other's role and skills. The young designers expressed reservations about participatory processes, one commenting ‘in the end it’s our role to design the outcomes’. Some Foundation staff commented positively on the creativity and fresh insights of graphic designers they had worked with in developing information materials, but criticised the tendency of some designers to ignore crucial advice or aspects of a design brief to pursue an individual creative agenda. Staff gave examples of designers’ creative latitude leading to seriously flawed results, such as a fridge magnet describing the key steps in asthma first aid having unreadable type.

2.4.3. Verbal-Visual games

Our study showed that dedicated strategies can disrupt the traditional roles and self-perception of the designer and dissolve the distance between expert and lay participants in the design process. Tightly scripted activities allowed the workshop to move forward until a level of trust and mutual respect developed between participants. Where the design team initially doubted the worth of the codesign process, by the third and final workshop they had become aware of the possibilities of the facilitation role and the scope to understand the real context for design. One designer admitted that without this engagement, any designs produced, no matter how aesthetically and conceptually innovative, would have been irrelevant. The complementary benefit of participatory design is that knowledge of design spreads throughout societies, de-mystifying the design process and making it accessible for the work of the designer (Prasaca, 2004, p. 58).

In the Asthma Foundation study, the early use of verbal-visual games identified concepts and issues that guided participants to build meaning, which strated the bridge-building potential of design tools
when something substantive is created between end-users and designers (Kensing & Munk-Madsen, 1993, p. 79). Creativity theory also stresses the value of turning the mind to other things to allow new creative ideas to emerge, while de Bono (1977, p. 11) highlighting how activities such as daydreaming, walking or driving allow the mind to freely wander. For de Bono, gaining insight is more effective where available information is creatively restructured through activities such as lateral thinking, it being difficult to transcend a typical way of seeing unless one can escape the restrictions of pattern thinking. In the Asthma Foundation study the information audit exercise appeared to move participants beyond their usual, uncritical approach to the Foundation’s information materials, releasing their opinions and triggering insight. The combination of designers and staff members working in small groups worked to unlock ideas by giving participants confidence to speak out (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003, p. 96).

5. Conclusions

Published studies (Dagron, 2003, Valente, 2002) show that designed communications are ineffective where audiences are not included. Certainly in today’s crowd-ed communication sphere selling a message requires more than the combination of traditional graphic design and market research techniques. Audiences increasingly demand a stake in the creative process, challenging the idea that designer’s creativity and intuition are not the only experts in respect of the communication task, each of which may conflict with general principles. Even so, the shift to participatory practices is likely a force that designers cannot resist. If designers accept they are not the only experts in respect of the communication task, they may find that embracing a facilitation role introduces a new dimension of creativity into design, the development of effective and empathetic design tools empowering audience members to unleash their own creativity and problem solving capacity.

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