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Art and storytelling as an empowering tool for service design: South Australian case study

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Introduction

In October 2016, the Margin to Margin research group carried out two art and storytelling workshops with the Anangu Aboriginal communities of South and Western Australia and the Fibrespace Incorporated textile artist group of South Australia. Women artists and craft-makers from the various communities predominantly participated in two intensive art-making and data collection workshops of less than one week each with an emphasis on narrative processes as service design tools.

Challenging roles, such as being single mothers, primary household income generators and family caregivers, became apparent in both groups, whether they were remote or regionally based. The women resorted to art and craft-making as a means to cope with hardship, gain empowerment and improve self-realization. The remotely based Anangu Aboriginal communities face additional challenges as a legacy of Australia’s colonial past, resulting in complex political entanglements. The workshops aimed to build empathy with the participants by presenting a platform for dialogue to render audible the stories and artistic processes from outback Australia.

“Empathy refers to the capacity of understanding the situation of another person – that is, understanding his or her definition of the situation and the symbolic universe in which elements of the situation become meaningful and shape actions” (Rughiniş & Humă, 2014). The capacity for empathy can be cultivated through daily social and educational interactions (ibid), and as a key concept in the workshops’ methodology. Thus, empathy is associated with understanding and contextualizing the user’s needs and experiences in service design.
Empathic design recognizes users as a rich design resource, while encouraging designers to immerse themselves and appreciate the user’s experience, perspectives and emotional responses to products and services (McDonagh et al., 2002). Several design tools have been developed to create empathy and user insight. Gaver (1999) employed cultural probes that create empathy and help to contextualize the user experience. Mattelmäki et al. (2014) revisited the concept of empathy that was deployed in design research during the 1990s. Experiences, emotions and meaningful everyday practices were studied to stimulate innovation and human-centered solutions. Empathic design is based on design practice because it is an interpretative approach to creating new solutions in users’ lives.

This paper explores the front-end, or the initial stage, of service design processes that use artistic and narrative tools to build empathy, capture participants’ experiences and create understanding of the local context of the workshop participants: the Anangu Aboriginal women in Fowlers Bay on the Far West Coast of South Australia, and the Fibrespace artists in Port Augusta, South Australia. Three different methodological approaches were utilized to create understanding and empathy:

1) Life story mandalas, which are a collaborative artistic process that enables women to share their life stories with participants using textile art as an enabling medium;

2) Participant interviews to learn, document and analyze the marginalities and experiences of participants from these diverse communities;

3) Video and audio documentation to share and digitally document participants’ life stories.

Meeting women from the edges of the world was an empowering process for the group of researchers. After one year of intense planning sessions facilitated through Skype meetings over several continents, the anticipation came to an end when the researchers met the remote and regional communities in South Australia. A commonality that was soon revealed was that hands-on art and craft-making connected these women from diverse backgrounds and locations. Working together and using the artistic tools for sharing life stories was an empowering narrative mechanism because it incorporated the empathic design approach that the researchers had adopted.

**Life story mandalas as a tool for self-reflection and sharing of life histories**

In the preparatory phase, discussions centered on the importance of cultural exchange with the local Australian groups. Thus, the concept of life story mandalas emerged as a means to share life histories and meaningful experiences. This tool was previously employed in a workshop context in Inari, Finnish Lapland, with a local women’s group that included indigenous representatives. The use of this tool proved successful in that situation because it enabled the group to share their life stories and histories in a meaningful and effective way. This was the rationale in employing this artistic method in South Australia.

The women’s life stories were captured by visualizing important periods in their lives using different colors, symbols, drawings and text on cotton textile circles with acrylic paint (Picture 1). The visualizations signified important periods or single years in the women’s lives. Most of the visualizations started in the middle of the cotton circle, typically from birth to the present moment, not dissimilar to the rings visible in a cut tree trunk. Each participant’s life mandala was stitched together in a continuous line. The line of mandalas was then installed in a three-dimensional spiral that represented the women’s life stories, creating an interconnected web of narratives (Picture 2).
The mandala making enabled the women to process their life stories in two significant phases. The first was to use the visual tool of painting while conceptualizing and representing significant events in their life stories. The second phase included verbal sharing and storytelling. Some groups painted their mandalas while listening to others’ stories, while some participants worked more individually and shared their stories either with the facilitating researcher or with the videographer-researcher in the group. This enabled two processes: 1) the painting and sharing in a group facilitated peer-to-peer learning environment, and 2) individual self-reflective work enabling the processing of personal stories. The video or audio recording of the individual mandala stories shared with others was an important tool for rendering audible the voices of individuals.

The empowering effect of sharing life histories and events rendered audible the stories of the participating women. Sharing stories facilitated learning from one another, while visualizing a life story is a self-reflective tool for understanding personal histories and circumstances. As an example, one of the Aboriginal artists discussed her personal growth since the birth of her child, which transformed her life from long-term drug addiction towards becoming a successful artist and a responsible mother. Another artist discussed the tragedy of the Maralinga nuclear testing that harshly affected the lives of many Anangu Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal communities living in and around the Maralinga area in the 1950s were displaced from their Country to facilitate British nuclear testing. Listening to these stories created both empathy and understanding of the marginalized position of these communities. The mandalas were a medium to share difficult life histories and the shared empathetic responses from the workshop participants facilitated the creation of a safe environment for the women who shared, listened and empathized with these life stories.

Life story mandalas are a participatory and expressive
artistic tool used for creating empathy and understanding the historical, political and geographical context of individual participants. The Fibrespace artists and the researcher-artist group from Finland created a life circle mandala installation in Port Augusta at the Platform Gallery, which also helped to build empathetic understanding amongst the participants.

**Participant interviews, storytelling and digital documentation as a point of connection**

A problem commonly encountered when stepping into communities is how to understand them and their activities in the field. By adopting an ethnographic methodology angle, the behavior of individuals can be observed within their own environments. This is achieved through maintaining diaries, understanding relationships, and recording narratives, among other activities. In this case study, the activities of art, craft and making practices, and the textiles themselves, such as raffia, cotton, wool fibers, yarns and textiles, created a familiar environment that stimulated shared participation.

The ethnographic approach focuses on studying the real-life settings of participants in personalized, inductive, dialogic and holistic ways. Following the ethnographic methodology, the researchers aimed to learn from the participants with the objective of understanding their cultural and contextual environments through mapping frameworks, while bringing their own personal cultural backgrounds, life experiences and narratives to the research and art activities. The ethnographic practice is essential to service design processes because it enables a holistic understanding of the research contexts.

By giving the participants an opportunity to share in the art making processes, both the participants and the researchers were empowered to share on equal footing through narratives. Connectedness was enabled through equal participation in art making and shared storytelling. In Picture 2. Installation of the three-dimensional spiral made from the life mandalas stitched together.
this way, the participants had the power to shape ongoing mapping processes through their narratives, which were captured during the interviews conducted in familiar physical work environments.

Sixteen women were interviewed during two South Australian workshops. All interviewed participants were makers. Some of the women identified as artists, while others identified as craftspeople or makers. The duration of the interviews, between ten and thirty-seven minutes, depended on the individual’s narratives and their activities. Some participants found it easier to share their narratives while the making processes continued, drawing on these processes to instigate storytelling. Many participants were confident in their art making environments, which allowed storytelling to occur effortlessly. Additionally, the research team envisaged accomplishing empathic design processes and connectedness amongst participants through the textile and tactile environments that were familiar to the participants.

In addition to the above-mentioned interviews, video and audio documentation supported all of the processes of making and storytelling throughout the two workshops. The importance of documenting personal stories is manifold. On the one hand, it allows for the expansion of time, space and audience of each individual story, that is, for its preservation in time, ability to travel and reach out through space and to wider audiences, with the help of digital technology. The idea of having a conversation with other makers living on other edges of the world empowered a lot of the participants to share their stories and messages. The moment of capturing a story enables meaningful sharing, as it draws on the intimacy of the small camera and one person crew (Kalow, 2011). And, finally, the mere action of dedicating a certain time and space for documenting the story contributes greatly to the creation of a platform for empathy.

Apart from the sixteen above-mentioned interviews, twenty-two stories describing the life cycles depicted in the life mandalas were video and audio-recorded. Nine additional stories were documented and supported by physical artefacts as a part of a storytelling intervention carried out by one of the researchers. The number of episodes of art and craft making captured on video and audio exceeds one hundred. Part of the material was processed immediately resulting in a series of visual journal entries. The bigger part of the documentation is yet to be engaged with, both artistically and in the context of broader research.

**Framework for creating empathy**

The process of building researcher-participant empathy in the case studies are similar to the framework for empathy in design practice introduced by Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (2009) who discuss the changing relationships between designers and users in different phases. In their paper, these scholars compare empathic design practices with established psychological frameworks for empathy in four phases: discovery, immersion, connection and detachment (Kouprie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009).

This useful framework is parallel to the Margin to Margin researchers’ experiences; however, the researchers focused on the front-end of service design in which empathy and understanding assists in identifying challenges that need addressing. The first three phases of Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser’s framework are important, but in the South Australian workshops these phases were not distinct or separate, but rather overlapped and merged with one another. The group’s involvement in the ethnographic approach led to an empathetic understanding, reflection, analysis and deeper involvement with the workshop participants as opposed to a diametrical detachment, the final phase proposed by Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser.

During the discovery phase, the first encounters with the groups included informal introductions between the
facilitating researchers and the participants. In this phase, the researchers inhibited their roles as facilitators to allow the emergence of a bottom-up approach. This resulted in the Anangu Aboriginal women introducing the researchers to a significant location and a cultural ritual, while the Fibrespace artist group introduced the researchers to their annual brainstorming process. With both initial introductions, traditional food and various forms of textile art played significant roles in forging links within the groups, thus enabling the immersion phase. This phase occurred by introducing participants to cultural probes in the form of the life mandalas that facilitated learning.

Individual and collaborative art making processes – where mutual observing and sharing artistic processes and techniques enabled deeper familiarization between the researchers and the participants – were guided by the narrative function, which facilitated immersion. This took place through weaving baskets and felting. Learning these techniques enabled the group to work
together and create personal relationships with each other, while also facilitating learning from one another. The making activities stimulated discussion and the sharing of skills and knowledge. The cultural probes, craft making, storytelling processes and participant interviews, where the participants elaborated on their work and life challenges from their perspectives as both artists and women, revealed personal narratives. Clearly, the immersion and connection phases of the framework merged in this case study.

In various ways, the detachment phase in the South Australian case studies was experienced differently from the psychological framework for empathy proposed by Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser. Detachment phases are complex and require sensitive exiting strategies to promote sustainability and avoid negative impacts on the intervention. Facilitating researchers often find themselves in positions of withdrawal for the purposes of reflection, analysis and monitoring purposes. This was borne out in these case studies as the researchers distanced themselves from the intense empathic experience in order to process the body of research and artistic data and share the outcomes with broader academia and artistic communities through research papers and exhibitions. Follow-up workshops, artefact making and representation in Finnish and Russian communities will mirror and complement the data and outcomes of the South Australian interventions.

**Conclusion**

The narrative function—in meeting, introducing, explaining, sharing, exchanging of practical ideas through art making, making life story mandalas and the documenting process—spanned the entire framework of the case studies. During the processes of sharing, the researchers positioned themselves as storytellers by sharing their own experiences, thus, finding common ground with the participants. Storytelling occurred through multi-dimensional forms, such as video, audio, photo, fieldnotes and physical artefacts. The narrative function is a crucial tool that facilitates empathetic processes at the front-end phase of the service design.

In these case studies, empathy, supported by the narrative function, facilitated planning for the service design interventions. Empathic design stimulated connections and created a safe environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their stories, while enhancing the capacity to understand the participants’ situations. Empathy influenced how the facilitating researchers and participants communicated and learned about each other’s challenges, thus shaping contextual understanding and preparing the groundwork and mapping frameworks for potential service design interventions.

**References**


