

Quality of Dialogue:

The Evolution of Collaborative Creativity

Naomi Gornick, I/IDSA, University of Dundee

Introduction

We know that we are now living in a time of profound unpredictability. As a result of the degree of uncertainty and change in global economics and society, design practice in many areas is undergoing considerable transformation. Many designers are making a more profound contribution to a larger range of company decision-making embracing user, market, and global issues. Design thinking is now a familiar aspect of company life with new career paths for design managers and organization leaders. Key issues have emerged that increasingly affect design activity: a marked concern with the environment, demographic change and user collaboration, business ethics, and sustainability.

Paradoxically, at the same time that new design structures and strategies are being put in place, it would appear that the design community in 2008 is in reflective rather than experimental mode. This could be a very human reaction to massive change. Maybe as the world gets more complex, people shy away from the big decisions? At a recent design management conference, participants were asked to suggest the primary characteristics designers would need in the future. "Designers must be brave" was first on the list. Of course, there is evidence of progress, but there needs to be a more sustained dialogue between business and design that connects with society as a whole. This will lead to more investigation and development in both design practice and education. It will also lead to new forms of leadership and team activity as well as significant new directions for design. In a research group at Goldsmiths College, University of London, we are calling one of these directions *metadesign*.

First of all, we have to be aware of these transformations that are taking place, some of them very subtle. Many leading design consultancies have responded to these contextual factors by acquiring new knowledge either internally with an enlarged discipline base or externally through alliances with experts in other fields. This paper is concerned with the emergence of enhanced creativity and innovation through these new collaborations. It is particularly focused on diverse knowledge transfer possibilities and the way everyday conversation plays a major part in creative development. Collaborative systems and techniques in design have been studied and recorded, notably since the 1990s. What we are seeing now is a reappraisal of these techniques and a more confirmed connection to organizational psychology in the light of global changes.

Essentials of Collaboration

Expectations of designers' contribution to client decision making has never been higher than today. Richard Buchanan (2007) suggests a "four orders" framework for mapping the development of design in business, moving beyond "posters and toasters into the new challenges of social interaction, information, service design, and managing as designing." How to keep the organization functioning well and to the satisfaction of an increasingly aware public and traditional shareholders is a problem for most company decision makers. A common factor in these new challenges is the need for collaboration between designers and diverse partners. An innovative breakthrough is seldom the work of the lone inventor or designer.

Studies investigating collaborative teams and organizations, the structures and techniques of collaboration, make familiar reading. It could be argued that our uncertain climate has created an even greater need for human discourse and reaffirmation. Esther Dyson (1997) said before the e-learning boom that we should think of published material—books, course notes, Web sites, as a means to begin a relationship with a learner. "What people really value is attention, interaction, and the opportunity thereby to discover new insights, to make new connections between ideas."

John Thackara (2003) believes that, in a learning society, what people want is the presence, time, and attention of wise or interesting people. If intellectual value is the presence of other people, often specific ones, interacting formally or casually or both, new business models need to be based not on the sale of

content, but on personalized services—such as hosting online forums, custom programming, and consulting. Designer/client workshops are a familiar tool, the value of which cannot be overestimated

Thackara continues, “Design does not take place in a situation; it *is* the situation. Learning relies on human interaction and, in particular, on a range of peripheral, but nonetheless embodied, forms of communication. Technology obscures these kinds of liminal communication more than it enhances them. Understanding, relationships, and trust are time based, not tech based. I cannot recall ever having an intelligent conversation in a smart room.”

Defining Design in the 21st Century

Designers are continually affected by the economic climate. Discussion abounds now on the future of design practice and education. There is an acceleration of design and design management conferences—is there now more need to discuss the status of design and its future realms of activity? The point is this: When a group of designers or design-related individuals sit down to start an earnest exchange of ideas, the first prerogative is to begin with a set of new definitions and a determination of categories. On one hand we can see that this is useful—times are changing so rapidly, our fields of endeavor are mutating and new activities require positioning. Designers are themselves great proponents of vogue words so anyone unfamiliar with the lexicon will need explanation. On the other hand, defining is a Sisyphean task, time consuming, never ending, and possibly self-defeating. Should we spend so much time defining when our complex environment demands constant flexibility?

Richard Buchanan said this at a service design conference in 2007:

“I don’t worry about the categories or confusions of graphic design and industrial design and... service design. I think we read too much about the categories and not (enough) about the places where the work is being done and what we’re trying to accomplish. So I say, be real careful about feeling a need to define this area.”

Buchanan understands service design to be an aspect of a broader area of human interaction. “And how we treat each other, taking good care of ourselves.” George Nelson said all design is a kind of service. “When we surface this word, it brings us to think about some things that maybe we’ve forgotten, just as management forgot about some things. And also to look at an area where designers have neglected their responsibilities (or their capabilities). Namely these core services. Maybe companies (and design consultancies) ought to articulate their values and not always try to accommodate and manipulate an audience. Sometimes we have to say that these are the values of our company. And this is how we’re going to do our work. Judge us, as you will, by the consistency. Values are central.”

Management Theory on Collaboration

Why is collaborative creativity more important right now? There is an understandable tension in both design and business life when the economic environment demands a need to be competitive and at the same time individuals and organizations know that for innovation to thrive, collaboration is essential. Management literature is increasingly concerned with creativity and innovation citing “design thinking” as the most valuable pathway. Articles and journal papers emphasize individual and group behavioral aspects. It is useful to compare management and design authors with respect to collaborative processes and outcomes. Management articles, typically in *Harvard Business Review*, tend to be formal case studies side by side with prescriptive tools. Design studies, on the other hand, reveal a more experiential view of the collaborative process. Consider these examples:

A new approach to the evolution of collaborative creativity is adopted by psychologist Keith Sawyer (2008). He describes an “interaction analysis” research tool that when applied to everyday conversations, business meetings, and brainstorming sessions indicates how collaboration drives innovation. He cites the comparison of his techniques with the now familiar research tools used by IDEO, acknowledging the value of their approach but not necessarily agreeing with all aspects of the research processes.

Sawyer finds that the emergence of significant innovations—both historical, like the airplane and the telegraph, and contemporary, like email and the mountain bike—followed the same process as an

improvised conversation, with small sparks gathering together over time, multiple dead ends, and the reinterpretation of previous ideas. He says, "When we collaborate, creativity unfolds across people; the sparks fly faster, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Collaboration drives creativity because innovation always emerges from a series of sparks - never a single flash of insight. The lone genius is a myth."

Sawyer completely acknowledges his mentor, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, with his idea of the concept of Flow (1992), and has expanded the classic flow conditions for nurturing creativity to a list of ten directives:

1. The goal should be clear: establish a goal that provides a focus for the team that is open-ended enough for problem-finding creativity to emerge
2. Close listening by all: group members engage in "deep listening," their statements are genuinely unplanned responses to what they hear
3. Complete concentration: group flow is more likely when a group can draw a boundary, however temporary or virtual, between the group's activity and everything else
4. Being in control: group flow increases when people feel autonomy, competence, and relatedness and always defer to the emergent flow of the group
5. Blending egos: each person's idea builds on those just contributed by his or her colleagues—small ideas build and an innovation emerges
6. Equal participation: group flow is more likely to occur when all participants play an equal role in the collective creation of the final performance
7. Familiarity: when members of a group have been together for a while, they share a common language and a common set of unspoken understandings—tacit knowledge
8. Communication: group flow requires constant communication which is more likely to happen in freewheeling, spontaneous conversations
9. Moving it forward: significant innovations can occur when group members keep moving the conversation forward
10. Potential for failure: for group members every activity is a rehearsal. The key question facing groups that have to innovate is finding just the right amount of structure to support improvisation, but not so much structure that it smothers creativity

Sawyer's findings cover collaboration from the point of view of the individual, the team, and the organization. The last part in particular, "The Collaborative Organization," covers relationships with customers, web-based collaboration, and, finally, his ideas for creating a collaborative economy.

Design Collaboration Theory

Design writers on the subject of team collaboration for innovation base their considerations very much on their own known experience rather than that of other organizations. Unlike management writers using traditional scientific research methods, you have the impression that the work emanating from design sources is by people who have "been through it" and understand the process. IDEO's Tom Kelley (2006), says that he's a "firm believer in the galvanizing power of personas ... But the real payoff comes when you gather several roles together and blend them into a multidisciplinary team. Innovation is ultimately a team sport", Get all the roles performing at the top of their game and you'll generate a positive force for innovation.

Cagan and Vogel (2002) talk pragmatically about what they call "A New Way of Thinking" in describing the ramifications of their integrated new product development (iNPD) process. They maintain that it is a way of thinking that combines three key elements:

1. A truly horizontal and interdisciplinary structure
2. A commitment to maintain a focus on what customers and other stakeholders value
3. A system that begins with an emphasis on qualitative methods of discovery and development and evolves towards quantitative methods of refinement and manufacture

They recommend that the team that is brought together for this process must contain representatives of

the three core competencies needed to deliver products: marketing research, engineering, and design. They then go on to describe a behavioral condition, well known to designers, but also acknowledged in management writing on the barriers to successful team activity. "It is often the case," Cagan and Vogel write, "that each discipline involved in the program sees its own area of expertise as the most important and that the methods of their discipline are superior to methods used in other areas."

"Team members must trust each other, have mutual respect for the value of all fields involved, and learn to appreciate the value in having a variety of methods to bring to the table. The most important attribute they must (all) have is to learn to place their expertise at the service of the customer."

Since conflict within teams exists, it must be managed, the authors state, bringing to mind the management theory—"creative abrasion." Their view is that task conflict can often be beneficial to the design process. "The goal of iNPD is not to remove conflict but to make it productive and focused on the job at hand. The goal is to minimize nontask conflict and manage it outside the project environment." The authors are implying that what is essential to the team binding process is an understanding that a single discipline cannot, in today's complex environment, possibly achieve best results working without the other two disciplines. This factor in itself should help create the beneficial attitudes required for strategic success.

The Management of Knowledge

There is an abundance of information—the Internet is mainstream in our cultural and working lives. We now know that all organizations, client companies, and design consultancies alike must structure themselves to manage knowledge effectively. Drucker (1988) wrote "to remain competitive—maybe even to survive—businesses will have to convert themselves into organizations of knowledgeable specialists." That our pervasive electronic communication so often reduces us to a sound-bite mode of expression is a sign that we are now comfortable with the cleverest minimum. But how, in electronic groups, do we dynamically reflect and discuss issues of problem finding, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation? The most obvious dilemma is the response time frame, the variation of which could limit knowledge exchange motivation. Face to face conversation flows and is normally contained in a formal or informal time frame. In this part of the discussion on the creative aspects of collaboration I suggest we move away from the screen—not discarding it, but since even vibrant networks are based around individual manipulation, let's step aside and see ourselves as part of the group meeting. I want to talk about the phenomenon that Ralph Stacey describes as "the significance of conversation."

Stacey argues that in order to succeed in uncertainty and continual change, organizations need to create new perspectives and learn from the chaos within which they operate. This is a radically different approach to strategic management. The central tenets of this approach have to do with unpredictability and the limitations of control and, therefore, it argues against the rational models of planning and control in traditional management theory. He suggests this is done by emphasizing the importance of narrative, conversation, and learning from one's own experience as the central means by which we can gain understanding and knowledge of strategy in organizations.

In my experience as university educator, in-house design trainer, and design symposium organizer, the more I work with groups of people, the more I am drawn to Stacey's findings. Conversation is the key to action and what I call the "quality of dialogue" leads to fully reflective and consensual action. As Handy says (2002): "Electronic communication is so advanced but people, it seems, need to meet in the flesh if they are going to have a relationship. Wisely so, if it be true that 70 percent of human communication depends on eye contact, inflection of tone and body language, leaving only 30 percent for the actual words."

Stacey maintains that conversations are complex responsive processes of themes, triggering themes through self-organizing association and turn taking that both reflect and create power differentials in relationships. These conversational processes are organizing the experience of the group of people conversing and the very minds of the individual participants at the same time as group phenomena of culture and ideology are emerging. He says "Individual and group phenomena emerge together in the same process, cocreating each other. This is a very radical view of the nature of the relationship between

the individual and the group. It is saying that change in the behavior of the group and change in the behavior of the individual members is exactly the same phenomenon.”

Characteristics of Collaborative Creativity

In education, training sessions, and one-off symposia that I have experienced, several key findings have emerged that demonstrate the working processes of collaborative groups and the group members' success in bringing forward new creative ideas. In this part of the study dealing with recommendations, I am dealing with an initial investigation into empirical material and have not differentiated between groups meeting once or in a series of meetings or the constitution of teams.

Agree on goals, agree on roles Management theorists (Gratton & Erickson, 2007) argue that although the tendency in collaborative team formation is to agree primarily on the goals, it is the roles that need to be determined specifically or the purpose for which the individual group members have been called together. This is so that members of the group can dispense with jockeying for position or wondering where they stand and can concentrate on the task at hand as a group rather than as a set of individuals. The great benefit of this type of activity is both learning as an individual and learning as a member of a group. To be part of a group conversation streaming towards creative solutions is rewarding in the extreme.

End the hierarchies There is enormous value for all in the group space to be involved in general discussions. Leaders and key speakers have earned their status but should take part in discussions with participants—all at the same tables. This is a physical phenomenon. Lead from the front, speak on the podium, then, at discussion time, as much as possible, join everyone on the floor. The floor then becomes the main focus space, the “thinking” ground. The “everyone” is key to all involved with an understanding that their own individual contribution is vital to the whole.

Diversity is key Management theorists have advised diversity for constituting teams. There will be discord but “creative abrasion” has proved to be invaluable in creating an environment for new ideas to flourish. In discussions on the future of design, it is valuable to get people together whose paths do not normally cross. Make sure the goal is made clear and that the participants know why you have got them together. There will be huge differences of opinion. Deliberately change roles at the same collaborative event. In formal discussions, conferences or seminars where leaders or facilitators are appointed, create a session where leaders become team members and new leaders appointed.

Every person speaks In whichever way the discussion space is defined, make sure everyone can see and hear everyone else. Roundtable format is best. People take different pathways to warm up to conversation. There's no question that some people naturally dominate groups. They may be egotistical characters, but very often their dominance is a form of leadership where they sense that a halting start to conversation is prohibiting the flow of proceedings. Against this, there are some who have difficulty composing and contributing their thoughts. Patience is needed; everyone's point of view is needed. Stacey believes that the capacity for emergent new ways of talking is fundamental to organizational creativity. If this is so, then it is a matter of considerable strategic importance to pay attention to the dynamics of ordinary conversation, particularly those in the shadow (informal conversation). The purpose of this attention is not to control the conversation or somehow produce efficient forms of it, but to understand it and particularly to understand what blocks it.

Zeldin (1998) has his own way of expressing the same idea. The kind of conversation he's interested in is one where people start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. “It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter. This is the aspect of conversation that particularly excites me,” he says, “how conversation changes the way you see the world, and even changes the world.”

Develop new idea gathering techniques Stop the discussion deliberately and ask group members to describe what direction or directions the discussion is taking. Ask why and how the directions are valuable before continuing with the same or new directions. Stacey is cautious about directives but says “If there is a prescription, it is that of paying more attention to the quality of your own experience of

relating and managing in relationship with others. Examples of the necessary skills are the capacity for self-reflection and owning one's part in what is happening, skill in facilitating free-flowing conversation, ability to articulate what is emerging in conversations, and sensitivity to group dynamics."

Record, record, record Record verbally and visually. It is especially useful to photograph groups as they work together. Revisiting these images evokes an immediate sense of the conversation that was taking place. Place value on informal dialogue just as much as set formal discussions. If it is an ongoing group, the more they meet, the more commonality they will find in their conversation, the more the discussions will transcend design towards metadesign. That is, the issues will become more connected to current global imperatives in society and economic life.

Change the setting There has been an understandable move towards creating discrete "brainstorming" spaces inside organizational headquarters. For groups meeting in a continual series of discussions, experience has shown me that, if it is possible, there is value in changing the setting of a collaborative group's discussion. Indoors, out of doors, several types of location appear to enhance idea generation more in the same group. Group memory recognizes the type of conversations that take place in any specific place. Begin to recognize the dynamic of the group, where it functions best, where the best ideas emerge.

Natural time span It is said that lecturers have a solid 25 minutes to get their message across even if they are talking for one or three hours. People's attention span will vary but there are points in listening to a talk where the mind will not be paying close attention. In group discussion, there seems to be a natural time span that emerges. It's useful to notice the timing of valuable dialogue. Ideas may all come together in a very few minutes and then become repetitive or may take longer to emerge. The dynamic of any group may also require group members to "warm up," to establish positions, to begin to understand others' urgent messages or reflections.

Conclusions

The theoretical writing on team development to encourage organizational innovation and change is very often predicated on a specific model group with particular personnel characteristics. An organization may have a number of goals to achieve. The team make-up and process may vary according to the exigencies of the goal. In any organization, it may be discovered that one type of grouping works better than others. There must be flexibility in the formulation of the collaborative groups. We can be as tactfully directive as possible, but ideas will still fly off in unimagined directions. Stacey says "Conversational life cannot develop according to an overall blueprint since no one has the power to determine what others will talk about all the time. Conversation is thus a self-organizing phenomenon and this self-organization continually produces emergent patterns in itself. Strategic management is the process of actively participating in the conversations around important emerging issues. Strategic direction is not set in advance but understood in hindsight as it is emerging or after it has emerged."

Writing on collaborate groups very often turns to a sports-related analogy. In the UK, there is overwhelming media attention to soccer. Headlines will single out key players, often stars from countries overseas. Much less is written about the skilled manager who understands that some players can be more valuable if they are the best "for" the team rather than the best "in" the team.

The same goes for design teams. This is an especially difficult problem for some designers in multidisciplinary teams whose background, and training especially, encourages them to think of themselves as the only real creatives (see Cagan and Vogel above) without giving much thought to the creative processes of client personnel or other key players in the collaborative team. Part of this problem is the language of design and the language of other disciplines, part is the desire for categorization, but the main reason for this dilemma, I believe, is the need for undergraduate design curricula to include more team-based activity instead of the drive towards individual project assessment with the accompanying goal of individual stardom. We all are familiar with the number of design stars that exist as compared with the numbers of students that design institutions now are encouraged to accommodate each year. There is no question that educators want the best for their students. It seems ironic that design education processes, however, are still failing students in this respect, when it has become increasingly

apparent that this is just the type of experience students need while they are in training—not after graduation when they are seeking employment.

Much is expected of designers at the present time. The value of design as a key organizational resource is now well understood. Designers are reappraising their roles; there is a call for design heroes and heroines and for the designer as leader. Designers need more open debate to advance their position as in other professions. Difficult questions need to be discussed. Think of architecture and fine art and how great movements of thinking have progressed those fields of activity through the years. Transformation has occurred through debate—and many of these debating conversations have become legend. Designers are accustomed to peer criticism from college days but one has to question why debate in general is resisted and, in some cases, seen as disloyalty. Recently in the UK, there was huge discussion on the logo created for the 2012 Olympics to be held in London. The argument in the design press was between those who said we must band together as designers and support the design consultancy's logo (against almost unanimous public opinion) whether we think it functions well or not—and those who maintained that the design community should be grown up enough to debate the issues around this important global symbol.

This study has set out to examine collaborative creativity. These collected thoughts on organizations and the changing patterns of work are an indication of the new world of complex systems and economic change. What could not be envisaged even one or two years ago was the extent to which these changes would affect so much of human life, so adversely, in the latter half of the twenty-first century's first decade. In various aspects the crises seem insurmountable, and yet there is a strong understanding by individuals, organizations, and nations as a whole that connectedness and cooperation are the keys to creative and innovative solutions. Designers have an important part to play in the overall development of new lifestyles and new systems. Collaboration is key to their success in getting their important messages through to the wider world.

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