METAPHORS AS A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR EMPATHIC CONVERSATIONS IN COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

Authors: Heather L. Daam, Maartje van Gestel, Bas Raijmakers
Design Academy Eindhoven

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade there has been an evolving field of co-design with the aim to facilitate an exchange between design teams, and those for whom they are designing. With an aim of facilitation there are explorations into how these conversations can occur, as well as a growing numbers of tools which value people as the experts of their own experiences. Grey but Mobile is a project that explores such exchanges. This collaborative research offers the opportunity to explore how co-design tools can encourage elderly people to express their expertise, and furthermore how such empathic knowledge can be used as a shared reference for collaboration and creating new things together.

Based on extensive experience with collaborative workshops in the Grey But Mobile project, this paper explores how metaphors can play a role to gather empathic knowledge, and suggests a workshop programme to prototype such use of metaphors. This joint experience offers the opportunity for participants to experience a metaphorical mapping and explore together the value it brings to knowledge exchange activities between academia and (creative) industry partners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been an evolving co-design field; "co-design is about the facilitation of exchange between people who experience products, interfaces, systems and spaces and people who design for experiences." (Sanders and Dandavate, 1999). This field has seen the development of countless tools for and exchange between designer/design researcher and people. This can specifically be seen in areas such as Knowledge Exchange that put focus on "collaborative activities and the tools, which can be used to to design them". (Cruikshank and Whiltham et al., 2012) as well as generative design research that seek to offer a platform for people served through design to explore their ideas, dreams, and insights. (Sanders and Stappers, 2012). In this research it is important to emphasize that co-design is about facilitating both the exchange with people for whom we design, as well as the exchange with those who design for those experiences. In this paper, we refer to these two parties as 'people' or 'elderly', and 'stakeholders' or 'partners'.

The Grey but Mobile project is a typical complex co-design project with many stockholders involved, including partners from knowledge institutions, public sector, private sector including creative industry and of course societal representatives (elderly people). This research exists within CRISP, a national research programme looking at the strategic role for design, with a focus on Product Service Systems (PSS) where networks are working together to create solutions. Grey and Mobile has a focus on PSS design for elderly and mobility.

The authors come from the Design Academy Eindhoven, which is considered a knowledge institute on Figure 1. However, the DAE positions itself in a space between academia and creative industries where people and organisations, such as the authors themselves, combine the two positions. This helps to build bridges within the network, supports an exchange between academia and creative industries, as well as positions this research between the two fields.
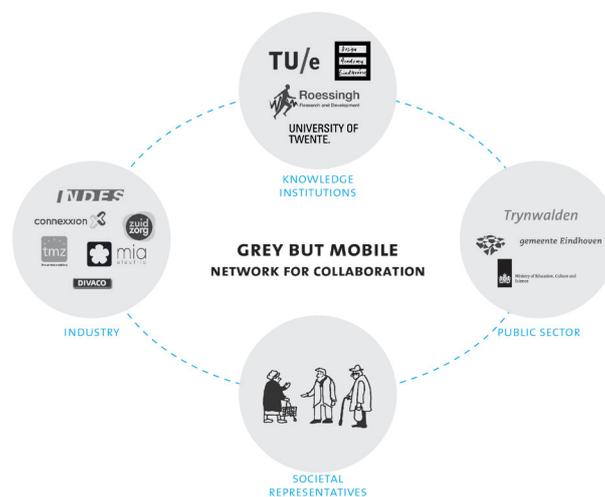

FIGURE 1: *Project partners within Grey but Mobile*

In the design of Product Service Systems (PSS), there is a heavy importance on diverse stakeholders to work together, and design can play a role in this exchange. A common issue these types of collaboration face is different disciplines speaking different languages, they "all have their own requirements, organization culture, industry background, power, relations, and attitude towards knowledge while represented by individuals who on their own all have a different motivation, priorities, and rank." Therefore communication and finding a common language for collaboration is difficult for stakeholders.(Tomico and Lu et al., 2011)

Thus tools that can support and facilitate this collaboration are important elements in the Grey but Mobile project. The context in which the project exists has a focus on elderly and mobility, as well as how offering new mobility PSS that address elderly needs will contribute positively to the physical and social-wellbeing of our ageing society. Mobility experiences that enable people the feeling of being independent is seen by the authors to be defined beyond moving from point A to B; instead having multiple factors; Past experiences, motility and health, social context and relationships, and financial situation.
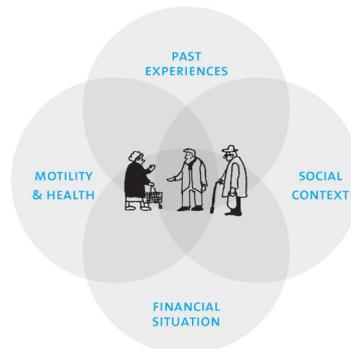

FIGURE 2: *Factors within the mobility of elderly people*

There have been efforts within Grey but Mobile to do empathic research with elderly, but when industry partners were brought together in workshops this empathic knowledge was not brought forward as part of the exchange. This means that the deep understanding of the elderly's needs, wishes and dreams were never a substantial part of the knowledge exchange between academia, design and industry in the workshops.

Raijmakers et al (2009) see 'empathic conversations' as a way to involve the people you design for in workshops in creative ways, building on their stories (that might have been collected earlier). With this view they build on what Thackara (2005) calls 'meaningful dialogues' as a means for building relationships between the people who makes things and people who use them. The work of Raijmakers et al (2009) highlights the possibility for these conversations to not only be simple, but allow people to use their ability to rely on more means than words alone to express themselves. Building upon this research and exploring ways to create these empathic conversations, our challenge is twofold. We are asking how empathic research conversations can be extended into partner knowledge exchange activities as the starting point to creating something together; and how can we design this empathic research in such a way that it can become an empathic shared reference, or common language, within those knowledge exchange efforts.

2. STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION WORKSHOPS

Since 2012, the GbM project team at the Eindhoven University of Technology has hosted a series of workshops that focused on involving project partners in the development of PSS concepts together. These began by establishing a collaboration between industry partners, then creating PSS concepts together. Parallel to this they hosted a course that saw a collaboration with students and industry partners to design PSS concepts. In total six concepts were developped. The workshop that followed on February 1, 2013 aimed for different industry partners to adopt one of the six concepts and begin to shape it into a potential pilot project together.

The authors contributed to the workshop by asking the participating industry partners (both private and public sector) to collaborate based on why they do their work. The intention was for the partners to connect through their shared focus on elderly people, as well as for the concepts to take shape based on those for whom we are designing.

The workshop was successful in the partners identifying where they must work together in order to bring the concept to life, and to identify where they still needed to improve it. We observed that the partners all believe that it is important to connect their decisions and designing efforts to the elderly people we are designing for. However it became apparent that each organisation has accumulated differing types of knowledge about elderly people, making a conversation on this level difficult. The workshop as it was designed didn't accommodate for bringing the stakeholders existing knowledge forward and aligning them in such a way they could collaborate on an empathic level in the development process.

As Raijmakers et. al (2012) explain, it is our role as designers "to [also] be storytellers, because we must bring the everyday experiences of people into the design and strategy teams that imagine and then help create services." When working with diverse stakeholders of PSS development, a shared reference is needed to act as

a common language in order to support an empathic conversation within knowledge exchange activities. In this way empathic knowledge gathered from elderly people can inform and inspire stakeholders within the development process. (Sanders and Stappers, 2012)

3. METAPHORS AS A TOOL FOR EXCHANGE

Creating this shared reference needs to begin while researching the everyday experiences of elderly people. This means gathering empathic knowledge about elderly's mobility needs, wishes, and dreams. Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (2009) explain that empathy in design is most often "related to [gaining] a deep understanding of the user's circumstances and experiences, which involves relating to, more than just knowing about the user". Applying this mindset, an empathic exchange during generative research workshops offers a dynamic dialogue to help relate to the elderly person. However this dialogue needs to be supported, and we need to have a common language or understanding in order for the message/expertise to be truly understood. Here using a metaphorical mapping (Ortony, 1979) could be useful.

To support a dynamic dialogue, metaphors will be used within generative research activities where a chosen metaphor is mapped onto the domain of people's personal mobility experience(s). Generative research tools as explained by Sanders and Stappers (2012) is, on one level, a "platform for the creative expression of individuals." In this way we can trigger them to share their experiences. This experience is understood on a deeper level by exploring stories from within the diverse mobility factors explained in figure 2.

Using a metaphor can support and enable elderly people to express the emotions and feelings of their mobility experiences. When one moves away from "concrete physical experiences and starts talking about abstractions or emotions, metaphorical understanding is the norm." (Ortony, 1979) This means that while a metaphor is used to encourage someone to share their story, a deeper understanding can be expressed. Sharing experiences through a metaphor enables people to open up and speak about their stories with ease, as they "enable the reflection and communication of complex topics." (Moser, 2000) As these experiences start to unpack, a common language between the designer and participant is created, and the designer begins to learn, understand, and related to the nuances of their feelings and expressions. (Daam, 2010)

This toolkit aims at gaining an emotional understanding of the embodied experiences of elderly's mobility situation. As a result of this, experiences will become micro-narratives that make up the empathic knowledge of users, in turn becoming a shared reference for industry partners to rely on.

4. JOINT EXPERIENCE AND EXPLORATION

As previously mentioned, this research into beginning an empathic conversation is the first part of an extended conversation with industry partners. Thus the following questions are simultaneously being explored:

- How these micro-narratives are 'packaged' or revealed in such a way they become an understandable shared reference for diverse industry partners.
- How to design the conversation between industry partners with this common language in order to have an empathic understanding of the elderly.

During the Knowledge Exchange Conference, an interactive workshop is proposed where participants will experience first-hand the metaphorical mapping while they create a story of their own mobility experience(s). We will explore together the value of this knowledge in the context of mobility related PSS development, and what form it can take in extending the empathic conversation between older people and (academic) design researchers to industrial partner Knowledge Exchange activities. During the workshop:

1. participants will be introduced to expressing themselves through the given metaphor, and
2. experience a research activity first-hand, playing both the role of researcher and user.
3. Participants will recall past experiences, share current experiences, as well as create ideal futures stories. (Sanders and Stappers, 2012)
4. they will be encouraged through a variety of levels of creativity "doing, adapting, making, and creating" (Sanders, 2005).
5. As a group we will reflect on the empathic knowledge that emerged, and finally
6. explore possible methods and forms of bringing this information to future KE activities with industry partners

5. CONCLUSION

Tools to create empathy with the people design teams design for are plentiful. However, it is not easy to set up empathic conversations between teams and the people they design for that last throughout the creative process. We propose to use metaphors as a tool to develop a common language between the different parties involved in PSS development to facilitate these conversations, and suggest to explore their potential during a workshop at the interactive Knowledge Exchange conference.

REFERENCES

Cruickshank, L. and Whitham, R., et al. (2012) "Innovation through the Design of KNowledge Exchange and The Design of Knowledge Exchange Design", paper presented at International Design Management Research Conference, Boston, MA, August 8-9 2012.

Daam, H., 2010. Melting Pot: Living quality from a child's perspective. Unpublished MDes thesis, Design Academy Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

Lakoff, G. (1979) Contemporary theory of a Metaphor. In: Ortony, A. eds. (1993) Metaphor and thought. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.202-251.

Moser, K. (2000) Metaphor Analysis in Psychology —Method, Theory, and Fields of Application. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1 (2), p.Art. 21.

Raijmakers, B. and Van Dijk, G., et al. (2012) From Field Stories to Strategic Design. Touchpoint, Iss. Vol. 4, No.3 p.46-49.

Raijmakers, B. and Van Dijk, G., et al. (2009) "Designing Empathic Conversations for Inclusive Design Facilitation", paper presented at Include09, Royal College of Art, 5-8 April. London, UK:.

Sanders, E. (2005) "Information, Inspiration and Co-creation", paper presented at 6th International Conference of the European Academy of Design, University of the Arts, Bremen, Germany.

Sanders, E.B.-N. and Dandavate, U., 1999. Design for experiencing: new tools. In: C.J. Overbeeke and P. Hekkert, eds. Proceedings of the first international conference on design and emotion, 3–5 November 1999, The Netherlands: Delft University of Technology, Delft, 87–92.

Sanders, E. and Stappers, P. (2012) Convivial design toolbox. Amsterdam: BIS.

Sleeswijk Visser, F., 2009. The everyday life of people in product design. Doctoral dissertation. Technical University of Delft.

Thackara, J. (2005). In The Bubble; designing in a complex world. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Tomico, O. and Lu, Y., et al. (2011) "Designers initiating open innovation with multi-stakeholder through co-reflection sessions", paper presented at IASDR, Delft, the Netherlands, 31 October-4 November.