Exploring where Designers and Non-Designers meet within the Service Organisation: Considering the value designers bring to the service design process

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Abstract

Service design is sometimes thought of as the interface between the customer and the service provider, a design process that exists between design thinking and business practices. Service design consultancies working with service organisations are increasingly attempting to develop design thinking alongside business processes within the organisation, but if everyone becomes a 'designer' what value is placed on the design-trained service designer? What qualities, knowledge and skills does a designer offer that identifies them as a valuable business asset who has an integral place within the business process, rather than as someone brought in when the organisation wants to be seen to be 'creative' or 'innovative.' The process of design for services is well documented, however there is not much debate around whether the service designer needs to be design-trained, or of what benefits they would offer if they were. It is assumed that design tools and methods can be introduced and disseminated to non-designers, but if tools and methods are all it took to design services, what is the future for the 'designer?' From observations of students studying service design at postgraduate level and a comparative study with design and non-design staff within a service organisation, this paper aims to uncover the value and 'craft' of the designer within the context of the service design process.

KEYWORDS: Service design, design training, embedding design thinking, design craft

Introduction

Within service design, design thinking might be considered the great leveller between designers and non-designers. It is commonly considered that most people *design*, but not all people are *designers* (Simon, 1969; Terrey, 2010; Tonkinwise, 2012). Within services it is *design thinking* with its associated methods and tools that has become the common language enabling multi-disciplinary teams, user groups and customers to work together to design services (Brown, 2008). But, what of the *designer* - that person who has studied and trained in design at design school or university? Can we recognise differences in what the trained designer brings to the service design process versus the non-design-trained service designer? If there are differences, what values can be credited to the designer?

Design is not craft and designers are not traditional craftsmen. However, in the sense that designers imagine, improvise, iterate, test and improve; and developing a consciousness of the (socio-cultural) materials they engage with, they might be considered 'craftsmen' within their field (Sennet, 2008). Design differs from craft in a number of ways, not least in the manner that designers use drawing and visualisation to plan and organise ideas and people (Tonkinwise, 2012). In keeping with the theme of this conference, the *craft* of the designer in this paper will refer to the learned skills and knowledge base applied by a designer to the design of services.

Observations of students studying service design at postgraduate level raised the question: why do some have difficulty developing research observations and insights into opportunities? Was it fundamental to their particular design training, or lack of design training? To investigate this question further, a comparative study was carried out with design and non-design staff within a service organisation to explore whether similar characteristics were evident between design and non-design staff involved in the design of services. This paper aims to uncover the value and 'craft' of the designer within the context of the service design process and proposes that by considering the point where research is converted into design propositions we can shed some light on the 'design-craft' trained designers might bring to the service design process that others may not.

From Design Thinking to Design Practice

Looking to understand the behaviours observed in students of service design, and to give meaning to the findings from this study, a literature review led to discussions on sociology, psychology, design thinking and innovation. Insights into the designers' *craft* that supported much of the research observations were found amongst the discourses on design-led, or design-driven, innovation (Brown, 2008; Utterback et al, 2006; Verganti, 2009) and within discussions around design thinking and practice (Kimbell, 2011, 2012; Tonkinwise, 2010). In these discussions

Verganti and Tonkinwise, in particular, explore how designers handle meaning, aesthetics, style and taste, creating a language for interactions with and experiences of products and services. While in Rethinking Design Thinking: Part 1 (2011) and Part 2 (2012) Lucy Kimbell presents two excellent essays on design thinking and practice theory that introduces a new pair of concepts *design-as-practice* and *designs-in-practice* to "describe and analyse design activity that acknowledges the work done by many actors in constituting designs relationally in practice."(Kimbell, 2012, p. 144). Thus providing tools that help researchers to recognise the activities and knowledge base of professional designers and other stakeholders involved in designs, the materials and objects that are part of these activities, as well as the discursive processes that select particular ways of doing, knowing and saying. This builds, in part, on the social construction of artefacts (and in this case the design of services) proposed by Pinch and Bijker (1989). Here, Pinch and Bijker suggest that designers are not the sole creators or interpreters of aesthetics and meaning, but rather that the social groups (or stakeholders) involved in the designs are co-creators of meaning in the artefact.

By contrast, the majority of design thinking discourses focus on the design process as applied to management and business innovation where the mention of aesthetics, style, taste and meaning as key qualities of the designer are noticeably absent from the debate. In his draft treatise, 'The Grammar of Design Thinking' (2012), Cameron Tonkinwise delivers a sound argument for why these aspects of design should be given attention within the design-thinking research community and why, as designers, we should not downplay aesthetics or style in design to make it 'more appropriable to managers' (Tonkinwise, 2010) even if this omission has been calculated to move designers up the consultancy food-chain and avoid being considered simply as *stylists*.

Secomandi and Snelders, in their paper 'The Object of Service Design' (2011) similarly propose a network of exchange and social construction. In this paper, they explore three key areas: the *exchange relationships* intertwining stakeholders involved in service co-production; the *interface* between the exchanges between provider and client and the infrastructure that supports that exchange; and the *materiality* of the service interface where the intangible resources are perceived by the customer or client. Their argument is that the intangibility of a service is brought into being, or provided meaning, at the client-provider interface (or touchpoints) and that at this interface the service exists without necessarily equating to goods or processes. They propose that "the neglect of the interface coincides with the embedding of design discussions primarily in service management and engineering discourses" and claim "the service interface *materialises* an exchange relation between providers and clients, and that the design of the service interface, perhaps more than anything else, is the design of the service *itself*." (Secomandi, 2011, p. 33). Secomandi and Snelders make the case that by paying closer attention to the interface the design disciplines might find new grounds in service research and further define their role within service design.

The design of the user-service interface is perhaps an obvious area to explore the craft of the designer, but it does not approach the question posed earlier in this paper. However, it is interesting that Secomandi and Snelders also recognise the social construction of designs and the involvement of a network of stakeholders in the process. It is perhaps within this interpretation

of the co-production process as discussed by the various authors above that the differences between designers and non-designers may be found.

From the investigations outlined above and discussed further in this paper, the author plans to identify those attributes, practiced by a designer, that distinguishes them from non-designers within a design thinking, service design context. Building upon these findings, this paper goes on to discuss how designers might apply their knowledge and handling of *aesthetics* within a service design context to give meaning to the customer experience.

Designers and meaning

In his paper 'A Taste for Practices: Unrepressing style in design thinking' Cameron Tonkinwise (2010) makes a case for the particular skills of the designer relating to *aesthetics* and *style*. While Roberto Verganti (2009) in 'Design-Driven Innovation' refers to designers bringing *meaning* to and *making sense of things*. In other cases, authors such as James Utterback et al (2006) and Tim Brown (2008) have explored and discussed design thinking in terms of a management process for innovation within business, or services, rather than relating specifically to the specific skills and knowledge of the designer. In her keynote paper 'Service Design at the Crossroads,' presented at the Service Design Network conference in Berlin, Lucy Kimbell proposes a future version of service design that in some way celebrates the differences brought to service design by the various disciplines and also argues "the case for aesthetics mattering" and that we should "revisit one of the core things that distinguishes [designers] work from other professions" (Kimbell, 2010). As many of these authors have suggested, design thinking is "design by non-designers" (Tonkinwise, 2012), so to make the distinction clear, for the remainder of this paper the term 'designer' will refer specifically to the design school/university or professionally trained designer, while 'service designer' refers to those practitioners from the various disciplines involved in service design.

As Tonkinwise (2010) and Kimbell (2010) recognise, for design to become palatable to managers all reference to 'aesthetics' has been removed. However, it is this particular area that defines how a designer brings meaning to user research, unlocking the insights into what has been observed and the ability to turn them into visualised opportunities and future scenarios. In turn it is this ability that enables designers to give meaning to the designed customer experiences delivered by the service. Verganti (2009) argues that it is by interpreting meaning within socio-cultural contexts that designers are able to propose innovative products that reflect, sometimes unknown by the customer, their cultural model and provides them with meaning with which to understand the product or interaction.

I would suggest that this sense of *aesthetics* and the ability to sense and manipulate socially constructed meaning is the difference between the designer and the non-designer and it is the lack, or presence, of this sense of aesthetics that produced the observations in the two study cases discussed in this paper. "Designing involves interpreting a target group's aesthetic choices

for insights into that group's capacities for different kinds of interactions with the world; and vice versa ..." (Tonkinwise, 2010, p. 381). The training and experiences of a designer develop a sensitivity for how people respond to products, interactions and experiences and to recognise these 'aesthetic choices' to unlock insights from the user research. And, to then apply this same sense of aesthetics to propose new experiences that is meaningful to the user or customer. As well as being evidenced in understanding and empathising with users, this sense of aesthetics extends to the visualisation and prototyping of future scenarios or service propositions. Kimbell (2012, pp 138-140) also describes having observed similar qualities when investigating design practices amongst service design professionals generating design proposals.

When considering a service design process across the continuum:

Research <> Insights <> Opportunities <> Development <> Delivery

Design thinking and practice is evident at each point. The designer's ability to externalise socio-cultural meaning from user research and having an understanding of interactions and touchpoints enables the designer to visualise future scenarios by "being attuned to these action-promises" (Tonkinwise, 2012). "Designers are concerned with style, because style is a translator of people's structured choices into action propensities" Tonkinwise (2010). By understanding these actions, designers are better equipped to design appropriate user interactions with, and experiences of, the service offering.

Visualising future possibilities

How a designer converts research into opportunities and future scenarios tends to differ from that of the non-designer. There are numerous tools and methods available to generate, record and visualise customer research and they are not unique to the domain of designers. True, they may have been designed initially by designers, but with some introduction most people can adopt and use them to good effect. From the research undertaken, comparing design students and designers with business professionals, the key difference observed in this study appears to be in how insights are gleaned from the research and how the findings are converted into design opportunities.

This study observed a total of eleven students from different design disciplines involved in service design at post-graduate level across two academic sessions and three business professionals taking service design training as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). Interviews were also carried out with two service designer professionals and three key business staff within a service organisation to investigate how design was applied and perceived within a business context and questionnaires sent out to thirty-four members of staff within the service organisation.

The service design students' perspective:

It was observed that design students who are new to service design struggle initially with the application of the methods and tools commonly used within service design, and especially if they come from a design discipline that has not previously introduced them to user engagement and research. As a result, their research data can be quite thin at the beginning and requires some practice by the students in handling the methods and tools and can involve revisiting the user context to develop the research. By contrast, business professionals on CPD can be quite capable of engaging users and user groups due to practised people-handling skills and having experience of other types of business research and processes. Like the design students they can also take a little time to adapt to the new service design methods and tools, however the quality of the research initially tends to be richer and more engaged.

The main differences were observed in how the design students generated design propositions compared with the non-designer professional. It appeared that the students, with their design training, were more confident in their ability to generate what-if scenarios with minimal censorship of their ideas. In some cases, these propositions were based on insights that had limited or no value, lacking a keen understanding of the intended user group. By contrast, the non-designers would have a strong handle on the problem and would know that something needed to be done to address the problem, but often they would hesitate to visualise or propose a potential solution. What was going on in these two cases became the initial area of interest in this study. By investigating this further within a service organisation, it was hoped that some insights might be gained into how the designer worked compared to the non-designer, and that this might help develop ways to deliver service design training to both.

The service organisation perspective:

Was this observation of students of service design unique to a teaching environment, or could similar behaviours be seen within an organisation? The organisation selected to carry out further study is involved in delivering services to the public and has the advantage of having an in-house service design team. By engaging with personnel within this organisation, it was possible to compare service designers with non-design personnel. Discussions and informal interviews were carried out in addition to circulating questionnaires amongst service design and non-design staff.

The questionnaires were, unfortunately, not returned in sufficient number to be quantitatively significant, however it was possible to compare the comments from the limited number of respondents with the responses from participants in the interviews to draw some qualitative conclusions. The results of the interviews were more fruitful and delivered some valuable insights.

The in-house service designers had experience of training non-design staff in design thinking and design processes, service design methods and tools. As a result, they were in a position to provide insights that could be compared with the findings from the student study. From the responses of

both the service designers and the non-design staff within the organisation, it was hoped to be able to discern how design might be valued and applied within the organisation.

The results showed that there were similar behaviours exhibited by the in-house staff to those of the student group. Evidence was provided in the interviews of a similar reluctance to propose future scenarios as that seen in the student study. However, there were also some valuable insights provided by the respondents as to why these behaviours were observed. A resistance to visualisation of future opportunities was observed when participants of service design workshops could not see the benefit of starting afresh, looking at a problem as if for the first time. There was a tendency towards preconceived solutions and reluctance to spend time on user research, relying more on market research techniques to source customer information. Where staff held a sense of ownership over past service products that were being challenged, they felt protective and resistant to change – especially when it was perceived that they had been down this path before, and that new ideas had rarely been implemented beyond the visualisation stage. Iterative development, central to the design process, developed insecurity and frustration and a feeling of 'we've been here before.' In-house service designers found that they had to build confidence in the value of the service design process amongst their colleagues by working with them, and sharing the application of tools and methods in an attempt to deliver a positive experience of the process. Where necessary, finding a common ground between the application of the design process and management processes was necessary for a design approach to be accepted and valued. Developing a common vocabulary and language was found to be important in developing the acceptance of design thinking and processes. The value of a common vocabulary and the use of tools to help make the service design 'process explicit to non-designers,' are echoed in the work by Álvarez (2012) with multi-disciplinary students from design and management. Similarly, in their investigation of problem definition, Pinch and Bijker (1989, p. 30) found that the meaning social groups (stakeholders) gave to the design was dependant on the stakeholders sharing the same set of meanings attached to that design.

The in-house service designers experienced *visualisation,* as a powerful tool for communicating user scenarios and encouraging participation in the design discussion. As a process, visualisation was seen to help people work things out for themselves and created a sense of ownership in the ideas generated and of the design process. The value of visualisation over words, something that is perhaps understood intuitively by designers, was inferred by psychologists Schooler, Ohlsson and Brooks (1993) and is referred to by Utterback et al (2006, Ch.8). Schooler et al (1993) proposed that verbalising the process of insight gathering interferes with the generation of insights and problem-solving abilities. Visualisation of research and insights enabled the design team and other stakeholders to communicate their insights without being overly influenced by language and enabled them to 'see' further insights within the information. By engaging in the insight generation and identification of opportunities in a visual way, participants developed and communicated ideas more effectively. Visualisation allowed stakeholders to empathise with the scenarios presented and, through their involvement, to develop a sense of ownership over the ideas generated and design direction proposed.

Designers and non-designers within the service organisation

If, as discussed in this paper, subtle differences have been observed in the approach between the designer and the non-designer engaged in service design, how might organisations value and celebrate these differences rather than homogenise service designers under design thinking? By recognising the differences, training programmes can be tailored to reflect the needs of the disciplines represented and facilitate integration and collaboration within service design project teams within the organisation. Team members might better understand and value the contributions brought by each discipline and through understanding reduce frustration and resistance to the design process. From the research gathered from design and non-design personnel within the service organisation, a lack of understanding of the value of a design process rather than a project management or marketing approach led to frustration and to a breakdown in the application of a customer-focused design process. As a result, it is difficult to embed design thinking and a design process within the management culture of an organisation.

Can these design skills be passed onto and developed by non-designers? No doubt, but it will take an investment of time, just as the designers invested time in gaining and developing their skills and knowledge. Do we want to? Probably not, the value of multi- and cross-disciplines that make up a service design team can be observed in case studies and examples across the service industry. However, we do not want to devalue, or underplay, the qualities that a designer brings to the service design process. Creating a culture of 'taste' (as discussed by Tonkinwise, 2010) within an organisation to develop aesthetic sensibilities and to embed design practice within the organisation. Project management methods such as Agile (Tomasini & Kearns, 2012) promote the concept of 'scrums' – cross-disciplinary project teams – formed to develop and deliver specific projects. In some ways, these scrums are like the studio environment where, through critique, debate and sharing work, designers develop and constantly share and refine their knowledge and sense of 'taste' or 'style.' No matter how familiar project management processes such as Agile are to the design process, a design culture needs to be developed within the organisation, if non-designers are to develop design skills and attributes. Kimbell cautions that

> *the adoption of design thinking into design management, for example, in the form of tools and methods separated from the culture of design, may not have the desired results. (Kimbell, 2012, p. 143).*

As, in her words,

> *practices associated with professional designers that involve visual and performative methods and attend to the aesthetic dimensions of organisation life, for example, are part of an educational tradition in which challenging established categories is institutionally rewarded. (Kimbell, 2012, p. 143).*

Non-designers within an organisation, when given the role and responsibilities of 'designer', can exhibit the skills and strategies of a designer (Terrey, 2010) such as visualisation, prototyping, engaging others in collaborative dialogue and displaying the ability to work with complexity. However, Terrey also found that it was difficult to determine how many hours of experiential

learning or training were required to attain these attributes, whether the non-designers could be considered novice or expert, who may have played a role in this learning or whether tools or materials were required to mediate learning. From the observations made during this study, I would argue that designers themselves play a role in disseminating design practices and that by working with designers, non-designers develop the skills and strategies of a designer much in the same way as design students cultivate a sense of style within the socialisation of a studio culture (Kimbell, 2012; Tonkinwise, 2010).

Visualisation is more than a designer's representation of meaning, style, taste or aesthetics as discussed by Verganti (2009) and by Tonkinwise (2012, & 2010 in his references to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Fernando Flores et al (1999), and Alan Warde (2004)) it is also a process for engaging with colleagues, user groups, management, etc. Visualisation enables communication at a meta-verbal level and allows participants to 'see' elements of the information, such as a user experience, that might not have been evident by describing it in words.

As mentioned previously, service design teams within organisations comprise of a variety of disciplines and often the designers are in the minority and, in some cases, a project team may consist of non-designers. Service design tools can be used to facilitate the affordance of design in non-designers, and can be used to involve as many disciplines together in the service design process. Of themselves, tools do not turn people into designers but they "can help codify, share and transfer practices" (Álvarez, 2012). However, as Álvarez mentions in her paper, we need to be mindful that the tools constantly "evolve and be adapted to specific environments." (Álvarez, 2012).

Discussion and concluding remarks

In attempting to throw some light on what was observed when students from design and non-design backgrounds take part in service design projects, a study was made into what qualities might discern the differences between a designer's and a non-designer's approach to designing a service. When observing students carry out research and develop service design propositions, it was noticed that some found it difficult to make the transition from research to proposing design opportunities. By focussing on what might be happening at this point in the design process, it was observed that the design students, to varying degrees, were more able to visualise future possibilities. The differing design disciplines also had some bearing on the observations, and it was seen to be the students from a product design background, or a design discipline where they would have engaged closely with users, were more able at decoding the insights that could lead to opportunities for a design proposition. In contrast, the students from a non-design background were well able to apply the service design tools and methods, and generated good research data. However there was a reluctance, or hesitancy, in recognising insights that could produce valid design opportunities. At this point, it was hypothesised that some method or tool might help the students clear this hurdle in their design process. To investigate further, the study looked to the

case of designers and non-designers working together in a service organisation to determine whether there were any similar behaviours exhibited at the same point in the service design process.

From interviews and responses to a questionnaire sent to a range of design and non-design staff within the service organisation, it became evident that visualisation was an important factor in their process. Both design and non-design staff realised the value of visualisation to communicate complex research data, to record observations, to identify insights and illustrate future design opportunities and directions. The use of visualisation also made the design process more accessible to colleagues and encouraged engagement.

In the students' situation, they were all engaged in visualising research and future scenarios, so visualisation wasn't the sole answer to helping non-designers be more successful at converting research into design opportunities. However, it was recognised that there was something in the nature of visualisation and what it evidenced when carried out by the designer compared to the non-designer that is worth further investigation.

This investigation has led to discussions relating to theories of design practice, meaning of things, design thinking and the primacy of aesthetics in design; how designers understand and manipulate style and taste in user research and design proposals. It was when considering the discussions on 'style' and 'taste' in the context of the observations described here that it became clear that part of the designer's 'craft' – that of being in tune with and having the ability to interpret and manipulate *style* in terms of user actions or ways in which users carry out activities (Tonkinwise, 2010) – was being downplayed at the expense of design thinking in order for design to appeal to management. However, it is precisely this ability, that designers have developed through training and experience that provides designers with the sensitivities to empathise with and understand users. To internalise the socio-cultural meanings of users actions and to then externalise them as insights or design proposals.

> *"… an expert designer is someone who can 'bracket' their own tastes, and deeply experience the taste collections of others, of clients and users, even to the extent of being able to predict new styles of things that those kinds of people would enjoy." Tonkinwise, 2012.*

Through visualisation, designers make tangible the opportunities for future scenarios and bring into view the meanings expressed by the interactions with and the experience of the proposed service. These meanings having been prospected by the designers from research and understanding of the various social groups involved as stakeholders in the design. The act of visualisation enables designers to uncover and make perceptible the aesthetics of these service experiences through prototypes and touchpoints, and visualised through user journeys, service blueprints, etc.

It is therefore difficult to conclude what tools or methods might assist service designers to overcome the hurdles that might block the transition between research and design opportunity, and requires further study. This study only scratches the surface of the scope of research required

and I therefore welcome the current turn towards design practice by researchers and sociologists. However, from the discussion on style and taste with respect to design practice it is clear that socialising and social context are important factors in informing the taste or style that defines professional styles. It follows that, by designers and non-designers working together within organisations, a design-style will develop within the organisation.

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