The design collaborator as *the other*: investigating the intersubjective in communication design practice

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Abstract

My doctoral research investigated the intersubjective aspects of communication design practice through a focus on the other, and the roles that the other takes in practice. It did so in order to better understand the practice of communication design as practiced on a day-to-day basis.

Communication design, as a practice, and a field, extends out of graphic design. This extension is due to a change in priorities; from privileging the graphic and artefactual aspects of practice, to prioritising consideration for the broader agency of design within a specific context.

This research was accomplished through a practice-led methodology. Communication design projects formed the methods of, and the foundation for, the investigation. Seven individual research projects were designed and carried out. Each project incorporated different participants of communication design practice; new and existing clients, student designers and established practicing designers. This allowed the research to investigate its concerns from a range of roles and viewpoints, incorporating different perspectives into its observations and understandings.

The research extends the work of Donald Schön and his investigation into The Reflective Practitioner (1983). It achieved this through a consideration for the roles of the other in professional practice. In order to reflect upon and articulate the results of this shift in focus to the other extensive reference has been made to the thinking of the twentieth century philosophers Martin Heidegger (2008 [1927-1964]) and Emmanuel Levinas (1990 [1963]).

The research concluded that the other takes a critical role within the practice of communication of providing 'provocative disjunction'. This provocative disjunction, as understood by this research, directly contributes to the generative shifts which communication design enables for all the participants involved in the design action; artefacts, clients and designers.

The observations and understandings produced during this practice-led research enabled extensive insights into the practice of communication design, which contribute significantly to the broader communication design discourse in professional practice, education and research.

This paper presents a project from the author's practice-led PhD in order to discuss 'the design collaborator as other'. Seen in this light it is the design collaborator who provides the source of 'disjunctive provocation' and consequently has the potential to enable both epistemological and ontological change.

Introduction

The design research project that I discuss in this paper was based around a relatively day-to-day visual identity project. My client in this case was starting a new practice as a Lacanian

psychoanalyst and asked me to design a business card, a website and some other applications. I realised that this visual identity project would provide me with the opportunity to complete a design research project and participate in my investigation of the concerns of my doctoral research.

Many of the observations I made during this project reflect those made by Donald Schön in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*:

> *Both client and professional bring to their encounter a body of understanding which they can only very partially communicate to one another and much of which they cannot describe to themselves. (1983, p. 296).*

Schön makes the point that the start of a design process—a process that aims to lead to a fuller grasp of meaning—begins with a tenuous grasp of that meaning. While Schön does not explicitly discuss the collaborative aspects of design work with a client, the aim of my research *was* to better understand those collaborative, and intersubjective, aspects of communication design practice*.*

Practice-led research

I used a practice-led methodology to explore the intersubjective aspects of communication design practice. 'Practice-led research' uses the researcher's own work as a practitioner as the method for the research. As 'practice-led' this research was conducted 'through' the practise of design, rather than 'for the purposes of design' or 'about design'. Practice-led research has allowed me to research into the potentially abstract concept of *the other* and still remain grounded in, and relevant to, practice.

Practice-led research is, necessarily, subjective and situation-specific. The researcher is understood to be a significant actor in the situation being researched and therefore, unlike traditional scientific research, the research does not aim to produce objective, independently verifiable research results. However, practice-led research does allow insights into practice that might otherwise not be possible to obtain through traditional research. Additionally, it allows practitioner/researchers, like myself, to use their practitioner expertise as the key method for research and therefore as a means to participate in, and contribute to, scholarly design research.

'Reflective practice' is a method of research and practice, that enables the subjective understandings of the practitioner/researcher to be reflected upon, analysed, synthesised and communicated. During this project I kept a detailed reflective journal, recording my observations, impressions and emotions while working through each stage. Towards the end of the project I interviewed my client about her experience of the design process. In this paper I base my critical reflections on the contents of my reflective journal and the transcription of the interview.

The role of the artefact

It is important to point out that the concerns of this research do not lie with communication design artefacts themselves but with the practice of communication design. Although this research is practice-led the artefacts designed during this research project do not embody all the design research knowledge that has been produced. Instead these design artefacts *materialise* and *instantiate* propositional design knowledge. They enable the investigation, but are not be seen as the outcome of the research; they are the means rather than the ends.
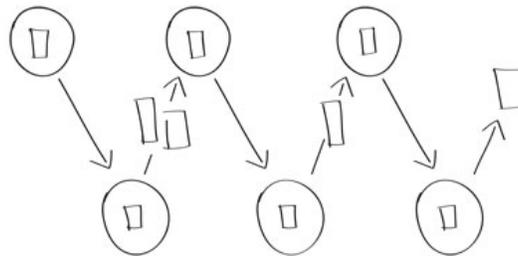
I can visualise the intersubjective space formed between my client and myself in this way:

As a communication design activity, this can further be visualised in the following way:
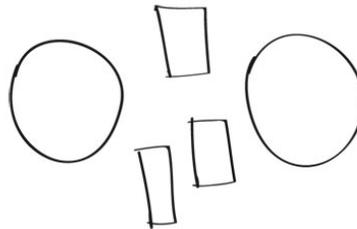
My client and myself in an intersubjective—collaborative—relationship, with and through artefacts.

Over time, during the design activity, these artefacts, as 'propositional artefacts', allow my client and I to, collaboratively, develop her visual identity.

A critical relationship

During our first meeting I asked my client whether she would agree to me incorporating her project as part of my research. Even though she did agree it was difficult asking the question, I felt that I was transgressing unwritten rules of our relationship. My difficulty asking the question helped to reveal the delicate nature of the relationship my client and I were attempting to form in that first meeting.

Why was our working relationship delicate? I would argue that it was because I was charged with helping to create my client's future practice's identity. There are clear risks that come with revealing and defining a nascent 'identity'. Reflective practice—and extensive reflective journaling—allowed me to become aware of the critical nature of the relationship between my client and I.

Design anxiety

When I interviewed my client she talked about the anxiety she felt embarking on this project:

> *For me it's been an anxious making thing to do ... How can you reduce Lacanian analysis to five pages on a web wall?*

She also commented that we were designing artefacts for which she had no precedent:

> *On the one hand I've thought [commissioning design work] is a way to start a practice ... on the other hand ... it has to look like that* **place that hasn't been made before** *is being made properly... [emphasis added]*

Communication design's ability to generate a 'place that hasn't been made before' necessarily incorporates the anxieties of working without established precedents; through design we imagine and materialise that which does not yet exist. Designing my client's visual identity required us to define and 'concretise' her future practice. My client's comments demonstrate the real risks taken when one materialises one's personal aims for the first time.

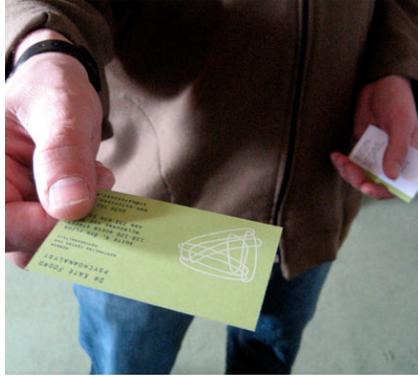**Propositional provocational artefacts**

My client was a Lacanian analyst, following Jacques Lacan's (2006 [1966]) psychoanalytic understandings in her practice. Early in the design process we made the decision that her identity would include a logomark based on one of Lacan's diagrams:
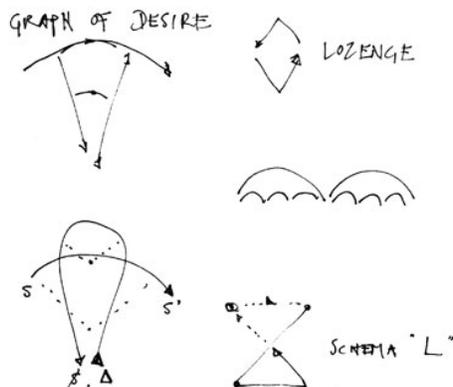
Which one of Lacan's diagrams we chose to reference and what form that reference took formed the large part of the work of our identity design process. Initially the 'knot' design was chosen:

However, after a number of different iterations a version of the 'lozenge' device became the preference.

I produced mocked-up business cards to use as 'propositional artefacts' during the collaborative design process. Importantly these mockups could be handled, enabling their 'use' as a physical artefact to be trialed, and the propositional identity they made manifest, assessed.

Heuristic collaboration

Later my client stated:

> [it's] interesting that what we ended up with was something that I didn't expect us to come up with, and I don't think you expected either …

I agreed with my client, our final visual identity was not what either one of us initially imagined or proposed. Instead, we discovered that final outcome through the 'collaborative' process of design. This is an heuristic process; the discoveries are made together *through* the activity of design. Rather than the common perception that I, as designer, would come to know my client and apply my knowledge of her to help me design a visual identity, this research indicated a different process. In this process my client and I accessed *new knowledge—knowledge about her and her new identity–through* a collaborative process of design. It is this collaborative process of new knowledge generation—my research suggests—that requires the generative action (and provocative dysjunction) of *the other*.

Project Reflection: More than an instrumentalist activity

The aim of this research was to better understand the intersubjective aspects of design practice. These aspects of practice are often left unexamined (or implicit) within the current dominant discourse. Although Jorge Frascara's rather instrumentalist definition of communication design as 'broadcasting specific messages to specific sectors of the public' (Frascara 2004, p. 2) describes some of the aspects of the work my client and I accomplished together, it does not include the collaborative intersubjective aspects of design practice that I wished to better understand.

When my client's and my own subjective appraisals of the world come together and interact an intersubjective interaction occurs. It is important to note that this is as much a space of mutual misunderstanding and misapprehension as it is one of mutual understanding: I am not my client. I do not inhabit the world as she does. I can never be her; I can never fully understand her, nor fully empathise with her. For me she is *the other*, as I am *the other* to her.

When my client and I develop Frascara's 'specific message', through a series of propositional artefacts, we undertake a collaborative process of 'new knowledge generation' through those propositional artefacts. This 'knowing through making' is a process of making knowing *through* design; the propositional artefacts enable communication, both *between* my client and I, and *within*

our own selves. Each artefactual iteration–or new design–embodies a new propositional provocation and stimulates intersubjective communication and negotiation.

Disjunctive communication: a practice with, and through, *the other*

Although one of the perceived aims of communication design is that of clear communication, I saw through this research that miscommunication and misinterpretation also played important parts. I describe these aspects as 'disjunctive communication' and suggest that disjunctive communication, as much as clear communication, is an important and active aspect of collaborative communication design action, generatively problematising the design act.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher well known for his work in the area of philosophical hermeneutics, provides insight into *the other* and communication:

> *To allow the Other to be valid against oneself ... allows one to go beyond one's own possibilities, precisely in a dialogical, communicative, hermeneutic process (Gadamer 2000, p. 285).*

It is this aspect that Gadamer refers to as 'going beyond one's own possibilities' that is initiated by the collaborative intersubjective act of communication design with *the other*, and the generative disjunction that this entails.

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist, also refers to this ability for *the other* to reveal aspects of ourselves that without *the other* remain hidden:

> *In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others (1986 [1979], p. 6).*

As this suggests, making with *the other* is of a different order–in its capacity for generating new knowledge–to making without *the other*. This is due to the intersubjective aspects that are encountered in a collaborative process of making with *the other*.

Thus collaboration with *the other* allows for insights and new knowledge that are not available without *the other*. This suggests a different understanding to the more commonly perceived nature of collaboration—rather than a seamless and harmonious 'working together' towards a shared goal, this research suggests an action of collaboration that is, while still *generative* and still *together*, reliant on an activating presence of *otherness* to enable its generative capacity.

Communication design through communication with *the other*

Design is taken by Schön to refer to the act of a designer working, as an independent agent, in 'conversation with the materials of a situation' (Schön 1983, p. 78), using their designerly abilities, listening to the 'back-talk' from their designed artefacts to iteratively refine their design outcomes.

This research project suggests a different understanding; that of design as an act of designing *through* an intersubjective relationship with *the other*, in the process of collaborating with *the other*, activated by miscommunication as much as by communication. The attempt at intersubjective communication with *the other* brings about the disjunctive nature of the process, thus enabling the design activity to be generative for its participants. This goes beyond Schön's 'conversation with the materials of the situation' to become a conversation, a dialogue, with another subject.

Design artefacts instantiate hermeneutic/heuristic steps

Design artefacts have the capacity to change what is known. My client indicated this transformational quality:

> *It always surprises me when something happens to text and it becomes a different thing, you know, an object, that has a way of … carry[ing] me into situations which help me to 'make a practice'.*

My client's, and my own, responses to my mocked-up artefacts, and the iterative process whereby we then responsed to each other's responses, acts to reveal commonalities in the intersubjective space between us. Thus those propositional design artefacts provide artefactual instances of communication within the intersubjective space. The mock-ups are physical manifestations of the hermeneutic activity of intersubjective communication. When viewed, and handled by my client, they provide visualisations of my interpretation of how she has communicated her new business, and herself, to me.

This, I suggest, is perhaps the most important action of communication design with *the other*; the ability to provide a client with access to knowledge that they would not otherwise have, and concomitantly, the client's ability to shift the designer's knowledge. The means through which this knowledge is accessed is the give and take of responses to artefactual nodes in the intersubjective space. Rather than a linear series of monologic statements our responses to the propositional artefact become an inter-connected inter-weaving of understandings, impressions and intimations. To quote from Bakhtin again (reflecting here on an encounter between two different cultures rather than two different individuals):

> *Such a dialogic encounter … does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bakhtin 1986 [1979], p. 7).*

My client and I are not 'merged' or 'mixed' in the design process; we maintain our individuality but are, to use Bakhtin's term, 'mutually enriched'. Our working relationship with design artefacts could be described as a dialogic collaborative negotiation of difference.

Another text which has helped my interpretation of my research projects is Martin Heidegger's well known essay *The Question Concerning Technology*—originally delivered as a lecture in 1954—in which he examines a silver chalice (Heidegger 2008 [1954]). Heidegger problematises the conventional view of technology as purely instrumentalist and demonstrates instead that in techn-e there is a revealing:

> *Thus what is decisive in techn-e does not lie at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of means, but rather in the revealing mentioned before. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that techn-e is a bringing-forth … Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where al-etheia, truth, happens (Heidegger 2008 [1954], p. 319).*

Beyond a materialisation of concept there is an aspect in the making of work, in the *techne*, which reveals that which was not known or available to knowledge previously. Communication designers have Heidegger's 'bringing-forth' capacity. Communication design is a way of knowing and a 'way of revealing' what Heidegger terms as *aletheuein* or truth. Thus communication design goes beyond the capacity for the *instrumental* to the capacity for bringing-forth truth. My work with my client developing her visual identity exhibits the quality Heidegger calls 'being-uncovering' (entdeckend-

sein) (Heidegger 2008 [1926], p. 261). I suggest that my client and I collaboratively materialised new knowledge, enabled changes of being and uncovered new truth.

Emmanuel Levinas' understanding however, is that Heidegger's work continues 'affirming a tradition in which the same dominates *the other*' (Levinas 1987 [1957], p. 53) thus 'subordinating the *relations between beings* to the *structures of being*' [my emphasis] (Levinas 1998 [1951], p. 5). In contrast Levinas posits that it is through *the other* that we are given access to the *self*—and the ability to bring new aspects of our self into the world. In Levinas' words 'it becomes possible to sustain a pluralism which is not reduced to a totality' (Levinas 1990 [1963], p. 295).
Thus we can start to perceive communication design, as an activity undertaken with, and through, *the other*, provides the ability to transcend the 'what is' of the present and move into the future.

Conclusion

The design work I produced for my client was not final. Rather it was a process, with the final artefact being a moment in that ongoing process.

This project provided, as research, a series of observations about communication design and *the other*. The observations suggested a range of provisional understandings:

1. That communication design is more than an instrumentalist activity
    (this only describes part of practice. The critical nature of the relationships and the ability for design to reveal new knowledge reveals a more complex and holistic view of practice).

2. Communication design is enabled through communication
    (and becomes activated through the designer and client's attempts at intersubjective collaborative communication).

3. Communication design artefacts enable intersubjective communication
    (between the individual subjects involved in the collaborative design activity).

4. Communication design artefacts instantiate hermeneutic steps
    (artefacts produced are physical instantiations of the interpretation of *the other)*.

5. Communication is enabled through communication design
    (creating connections across the intersubjective space).

6. Communication design is a generative practice with, and through, *the other*.
    (through access to *the other*, communication design has the capacity to create new knowledge and new ways of being; it is both epistemologically, and ontologically, generative. My client's 'practice which did not exist previously' is brought into existence collaboratively).

These provisional understandings indicate a role for communication design beyond that of the production of artefacts that communicate. In further projects of this research I have investigated these understandings within different contexts in communication design; with other designers, with students and with larger, more established client groups.

As a reflective practitioner I use my own practice as research method to provide access to insights that otherwise might remain inaccessible to design research. The research I have described today is an instance of practice brought within the academy. This is practice-led research, revealing new knowledge about, and insights into, the practice of collaborative communication design and, with this new knowledge, new directions for research in communication design.

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