Beyond Impact: Understanding and Communicating the Value of Collaborative Design Research

Keywords: impact, benefit, collaboration, research management

1. Catalyst Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalyst Name</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon Bowen (Lead and Contact)</td>
<td><a href="mailto:simon.bowen@newcastle.ac.uk">simon.bowen@newcastle.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>The Creative Exchange (Newcastle University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger Whitham</td>
<td><a href="mailto:r.whitham@lancaster.ac.uk">r.whitham@lancaster.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>The Creative Exchange (Lancaster University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Speed</td>
<td><a href="mailto:c.speed@ed.ac.uk">c.speed@ed.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Design in Action (Edinburgh University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Moreton</td>
<td><a href="mailto:simon.moreton@uwe.ac.uk">simon.moreton@uwe.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>REACT (UWE Bristol)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariza Dima</td>
<td><a href="mailto:m.dima@qmul.ac.uk">m.dima@qmul.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Creativeworks London (Queen Mary University)</td>
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2. Conversation Description

How can the value of design research programmes (Binder & Redström, 2006) be understood and communicated beyond the immediate economic measures of impact often requested by funders? This has been a central concern for the four AHRC Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy¹, and representatives from each Hub will illustrate how their research programmes have approached this challenge to open a discussion and elicit the experiences of others.

Research evaluations typically focus on ‘impact’ framed in economic terms that is measurable within, or soon after, the funding period. Upton, Vallance, & Goddard (2014)


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conclude that such measures are neither an adequate incentive for academics nor an adequate means of evaluating academic-industry collaborations, noting that much impact outside academia is difficult to trace due to its ‘secondary’ rather than direct relationship to research and that “certain outcomes lend themselves to measurement or assessment more readily than others” (p8). Upton et al. suggest a shift from the outcomes of collaboration to its process, where evidence of systematic and active engagement is an indicator of likely impact.

The challenge of demonstrating design research value ‘beyond impact’ has been a common concern discussed between the four Hubs. Through ~200 design collaborations between creative and cultural industries, and arts and humanities academics, the Hubs have prototyped new products, services, and media, and enabled industry and academic partners to learn from and with each other. The Hubs have also explored how to document and communicate this work in ways that communicate the networks or ecologies they have developed and from which further value can develop. Through a dialogue between catalyst speakers’ and participants’ perspectives, the conversation will explore and propose complementary descriptions of design research value (‘beyond impact’) and practical considerations for its demonstration.

3. Organizing research question

How can we capture, understand, and demonstrate the value of collaborative design research (beyond economic impact)?

- How can we conceptualise this value?
- How can this value be expressed effectively for funders and researchers? And,
- What are the practical implications for managing collaborative design research?

4. Set-up of your session

Format

This conversation will be an open discussion between conference delegates as others already involved in design research with their own valuable experiences. The perspectives of the four Hubs will be used to draw out the perspectives of others in the room and to encourage critique and debate. Following a brief explanation of the session format, discussion will be focused around four ‘stalls’ that participants will move between where each catalyst will illustrate how their research programme has approached the challenge of demonstrating value to prompt a discussion in respect of the organizing research questions, followed by a summative discussion around a central workspace.
Introduction to Conversation topic, format and documentation tool. 10 minutes

Conversation around four stalls, in turn. 60 minutes
(15 mins/stall)

Groups/pairs reflection via documentation tool. 5 minutes

Summative conversation (in plenary). 15 minutes

**Documentation**

Following discussions around the stalls, responses to the organizing research question will be captured using a smart phone/tablet-based interface and made visible in the central workspace. During a summative discussion, all participants will gather around the workspace to collate and develop responses and, through them, propose answers and provocations that could usefully inform other research programmes and research funders (i.e. in considering and implementing alternative demonstrations of value).

**Roles**

In this session, catalyst speakers become ‘stall-holders’ offering the perspective of their research programmes (KE Hub) via the artefacts and material on their table. The lead organiser will guide participants between stalls, monitor timings, and return conversation to the organizing research questions as required. Below is a summary of each research programme’s stall:

**The Creative Exchange**

The CX catalyst will explore tensions between capturing explicit, quantifiable value with approaches for exposing tacit, localised value in small networks or specific collaborative interactions. We present existing and prospective work on the practicalities of capturing impact at the micro and macro levels using a mixture of data visualisation, reusable tools, conventional research methods and instigated reflective moments. We consider the challenge and value of capturing informal, tacit connections and the potential for visualisation as a means to engage stakeholders in this process. Dynamic visualisations from a live database will be used to illustrate how CX has captured value, and participants will be invited to contribute their own experiences capturing tacit impact and making it meaningful outside of its specific context.

**Creativeworks London (CWL)**

The Creativeworks London catalyst will explore the design challenges and opportunities of building a community of interest through Knowledge Exchange. Creativeworks London has created a series of mechanisms to engage a wide spectrum of participants and enable cross-disciplinary collaborations in a very wide range of Arts and Humanities and the Creative
Industries. We have been constantly investigating successful ways for creating and widening network collaborations, supporting inventions in multiple directions, grow connections in an affective manner. We provided agile and responsive funding process, followed brokerages all the way with several methods designed to empower those involved – signature events such as Ideas Pools and Research Labs. These have helped projects move from fuzzy inception to a more structured collaboration with recorded innovations. Reflecting on the process we have included all our tools and observations into a toolkit/guideline to help future projects. In this session we invite participants to discuss issues and opportunities for creating a community of interest, and ways to help sustain and evaluate the value of such communities.

**Design in Action**

Design in Action will explore how the digital economy is enabling design to shift from making small contributions in value chains to playing a more sustained roll in the management of value constellations. Through a narrative supported by case studies the team will address how different projects across the Design in Action portfolio reveal the widening role of design as it is employed not to simply design artefacts within a linear value chain, but to mediate value across a constellation of stakeholders. We project a future in which design could be tasked with considering how ecologies of actions, behaviour and incentives could create virtuous markets of interaction, and unpack the implications for education and industry. Supported by service and product design examples, as well as a demonstrator using Bitcoins, participants will be able to take part in smart contracting to better understand the implications for emerging economic models in the digital economy.

**REACT**

In this part of the session, we explore what happens when you try to visualise an emergent network.

Between 2012 and 2016, REACT funded 53 collaborative projects which explored themes from interactive documentary, heritage and the future of books and print, to products for children and Internet-connected objects. These collaborations led to over £5 million in further investment and new research bids.

The REACT team sought to provide the right kinds of structure, levels of care, and interventions, necessary to see projects grow. The approach that underpinned this activity understood the network of people, places and things that made up REACT and its projects as part of an ecosystem, with interdependencies, unexpected outcomes, and emergent opportunities. By setting the right conditions for growth, amazing things can happen.

But how do you show that this approach works? How do you demonstrate the step from abstract values to meaningful outcomes? How do you visualise a cultural ecology?
5. Type of space and equipment required
A large seminar room, four tables (‘stalls’) at each corner and a central ‘workspace’ with data projector/screen (see 6. Below) with chairs arranged in small groups.

Each ‘stall’ table will require:

- Power
- A video monitor/screen

We will also bring several iPads to use in connection with the documentation tool, and will require several power sockets for charging and sufficient space to store their accompanying flight case.

6. Dissemination strategy
The conversation will be disseminated in two forms: an online resource summarising key insights from the discussion (and inviting further debate); and one or more academic publications unpacking the concepts discussed in greater depth. In this way, dissemination will focus on both practical and scholarly value.
The online resource will include the examples provided by catalysts and participants, along with the responses to the organizing research questions developed in the conversation to suggest practical strategies for moving beyond impact.

This resource will also enable the discussion to continue following the conference, and will be used as a springboard for a related academic publication.

7. References


About the Catalysts:

**Simon Bowen** is KE Associate at Open Lab, Newcastle University where he is investigating the value of design-led academic-industrial collaborations, having previously worked in health service design and media technology.

**Roger Whitham** is a Lecturer within ImaginationLancaster at Lancaster University. His research focuses on collaborative interactions, tools, structures and practices, exploring the role that technology and design can play in this space.

**Chris Speed** is Co-Director of the Design Informatics Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh that is home to a combination of researchers working across the fields of interaction design, temporal design, anthropology, software engineering and distributed ledgers.

**Simon Moreton** is Impact Research Fellow at UWE Bristol and was Research Fellow for REACT. He is interested in the politics and practices of collaboration between HEIs and the creative economy. He is also a practicing artist.

**Mariza Dima** is a Human-Computer Interaction designer, researcher and design strategist. Her work focuses on interaction design in socio-cultural contexts, prominently in performance art, theatre, cultural heritage and in design for societal transformation.