In this document: proposal and documentation.

Keywords: experience of design, storytelling, personal experience, sharing

Catalysts

<table>
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<tbody>
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<td>Tasman Munro</td>
<td>Tasman Munro Design &amp; University of Technology Sydney</td>
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<td>(Live illustrator)</td>
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Introduction

“The air is heavy with a strong scent, which is not of any one thing, more a combination of food, people and of electricity. It is somehow unquestionably a damp and ‘inside smell’ – the intimate kind of smell that you might recognise a close friend or family member by. This seems to embody what we’re doing – stepping into a private domain to hear very personal stories.”

In This Time It’s Personal, we’re inviting people to share stories about the experience of designing.
We designers often use storytelling to put ourselves “in another person’s shoes”, to try and see the world from a user’s perspective. The process helps us to understand both the user and the context in a new way and therefore design a better product or service for them (Erickson, 1996, Beckman & Barry, 2009).

So what could we learn about design by turning the lens back on ourselves? This is the focus of our session, as we share stories about the confronting, challenging, pleasurable or distressing situations we find ourselves in, as designers, and how we have navigated through each one – often relying on intuition to do so. Each of the four catalysts will share a story and participants are invited to share stories of their own.

As a group we will then discuss the higher level research questions on the format of storytelling for sharing personal experiences of design, how stories contribute to reflective practice, and how such stories contribute to the academic design research field. All participants will also be part of the “story” of this session, as an onsite illustrator makes a visual record of our conversation.

Organizing research question

Our main organising research question is: how can storytelling shed new light on the designers’ experiences of designing and what can we learn from this? More specifically:

• How does creating and sharing personal experiences of designing contribute to reflective practice? (What can individual designers learn from sharing their own experiences?)
• How do insights into designers’ personal experiences of designing and design researching contribute to the advancement of the design and design research fields?

Set-up

We designed a session in which three or four catalysts will write a story about a personal experience within a design process. We are most interested in those experiences that have led to high levels of emotional arousal and through that have had an impact on the designer’s practice, for example peak moments of stress, frustration, excitement, etc. We have identified a number of possible themes, including client pitches, challenging user interviews in unknown environments, social aspects of teamwork, getting stuck when facilitating a stakeholder group session, the thrill of seeing your first design in the market etc. Each catalyst will be asked to reflect on the story and how it has impacted his or her design practice, and each catalyst will be asked to reflect on the process of storytelling. In the appendix we have included two examples of such stories, written by two of the catalysts.

In the conversation session at DRS each of the catalysts will be asked to read out their story to the audience. After each story we will reflect on the designer’s experience through questions such as: What can we learn from this specific experience? Does it trigger any
related experiences of people in the audience? Does this discussion lead to any insights that would be worthwhile sharing with the broader design and research community, or that should be explored further within a research project?

After we’ve shared the stories in this way we will then facilitate a discussion around the higher level research questions on the format of storytelling for sharing personal experiences of designing, how stories contribute to reflective practice, and how such stories contribute to the academic design research field.

To optimise the experience of *This Time It’s Personal* and to facilitate a more natural discussion between audience and presenters, participants would all be on the same level (rather than a tiered lecture theatre), with the audience seated in comfortable chairs. Catalysts will require the aid of supporting visual or audio materials and/or props, and so access to a screen or projector is required. We also require the use of either a large blank wall, or ‘flip chart wall’ for the session’s illustrator to work.

*This Time It’s Personal* will be recorded in live illustration, video and audio. An illustrator will be onsite to create a visual “story” of the session. The illustrator will be filmed while he works, to record the progression of the conversation. In addition, we will make an audio recording. These elements will be brought together in a video that will then be posted online on a blog established specifically for this purpose. It is important that aural and visual means of recording and sharing are used for this session, to demonstrate the power of using alternative modes of communication in the design field and to create the desired impact on the audience.

The blog created will become a storytelling platform for other designers to contribute to. We hope to build a new community focussed on the personal side of design, and that the outcomes can contribute to new ways of thinking about and sharing the experience of design.

**The DRS2016 session**

Late at the end of the first day of the DRS2016 Conference, a small group of people gathered in a room of the grand Brighton Dome for the ambivalently titled *‘This Time It’s Personal’* – a Conversations session about storytelling. There was a trace of uncertainty in the air as participants wondered what they were in for, while catalysts hoped the impending conversation wouldn’t be one-sided.

Happily, any concerns were allayed as soon as the session was underway.

We had invited people to share warts-and-all stories about their experiences of design, as we were interested to know what we could learn about design by looking behind the scenes. Designers often draw on storytelling techniques to understand or communicate other people’s perspectives, but what happens when we turn the lens back on ourselves? What could we learn from each other about the design process through storytelling as opposed to academic research? These were the thoughts and questions behind this session.
As is fitting in a session about storytelling, we began by telling stories. Told first by the catalysts, these stories described particular moments in a design project and revealed a range of thoughts, emotions and sensations the designers experienced in these moments.

Because the session opened with the catalysts speaking about personal experiences, participants felt comfortable sharing their own stories with the rest of the group. People talked about how they had been personally affected by a design project – for example, occasions in which they were confronted with a challenge or roadblock, or by intimate situations they encounter, or even confronted by expectations (their own or other peoples’). As people began to recount their experiences, different memories were triggered for others in the group and the stories continued to flow.

Together, the group’s stories created a rich and unseen picture of the experience of design. The conversation was also recorded via live illustration by one of the catalysts, Tasman Munro, so we had a visual “story” of the session that mapped the ground we had covered as a group (in collaboration with Lucy Klippan, Figure 1).

Dubbed ‘Designaholics Anonymous’ by a participant, this was an engaging session for all involved. The small, intimate nature of the conversation meant that everyone was able to speak honestly about experiences that are not often shared at the conclusion of a design project.

Beyond just being ‘nice stories’, however, the session threw open a number of questions for further exploration, including:

- How could forms of research other than academic, contribute to our understanding of design?
- The designer’s balancing act: how do we maintain objectivity/neutrality while also empathising with and relating to users?
- Being caught out – what is it like to be challenged or confronted on a design project (sometimes by our own expectations or assumptions)?
- Design research as a “selfish” act – how might other people’s preconceptions alter the course of a design project?
- Designers’ personal investment in their ideas: what happens to an idea when it is shared with others?
- What can we promise as designers? We can spend a lot of time building trust and rapport with users in order to understand what they really need or want, but in the end we can’t always deliver that.
- How could this storytelling format be scaled in a way that helps designers connect with others and learn from each other’s experiences?
In short, it’s clear that designers’ storytelling offers a unique and valuable way of exploring the territory of design that deserves further experimentation. As one participant later remarked – “why shouldn’t research be beautiful?”

Figure 1  Live illustration by Tasman Munro and Lucy Klippan. A larger version is at the end of this document.
References


About the Catalysts:

Lucy Klippan is a visual designer with the Designing Out Crime Research Centre at the University of Technology Sydney. Lucy is interested in how connections between people, place and identity form, and the role of art and design in this domain.

Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer is Senior Lecturer at the Design Innovation Research Centre at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research spans the fields of human-centred design methodology and innovation in the public and social sector.

Marcus Willcocks is a designer and research fellow at Socially Responsive Design and Design Against Crime at Central Saint Martins. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Product Design, and a Master of Arts in Design and Public Space.

Tasman Munro is a social designer and a PhD candidate in Social Design at the University of Technology Sydney. He has worked in a diverse range of fields, including designing education facilities in prisons and woodworking with refugee communities.