

Design Jams in iSchools: Approaches, Challenges and Examples

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Abstract

Through a live demonstration, we will showcase a group of focused design techniques known collectively as a Design Jam. Design jams are about looking at a particular design challenge and thinking-by doing. Although they often have a component of brainstorming, they involve additional activities, including paper prototyping, and storytelling with personas and scenarios. After the design jam, we will share experiences of teaching design techniques in ischools.

Keywords: design thinking, teaching design, and paper prototyping

Alternative Event Description

Through a live demonstration, we will showcase a group of focused design techniques known collectively as a Design Jam. Activities that fit this broad definition are sometimes also called charettes, sprints, hackfests and barcamps. Design jams are about looking at a particular design challenge and thinking-by-doing. Although they often have a component of brainstorming, they involve additional activities, including paper prototyping, and storytelling with personas and scenarios.

We want to show the power of thinking-by-doing-design as a technique, one that has great potential in an iSchool setting even with people who are unfamiliar with it. This event will build on the success of the Design Jam alternative event offered at the 2012 iConference, updated based on the comments and reactions of last year's participants.

Intended Audience

There are two kinds of participant who will benefit from this event:

- Those who teach or plan to teach design in iSchools.
- Those who are unfamiliar with the approach and curious, but perhaps find it to be an alien way of thinking, or are skeptical of what its proponents claim for it and want to see it working in action.

Proposed Activities

Invitation to Participate

Prior to the event, we will create and publicize an invitation to participate. This will be a website (<https://sites.google.com/site/iconf13design/>) describing the idea of the session, some design challenges, and giving an opportunity for people to indicate their intention to participate. Our design challenges are meant to give a foundation for thinking of the design jam as a method in the context of actual problems. One theme this year is designing for privacy management: ways to make it easier for people to understand what they are sharing, with whom and what the consequences are.

Explanation for Observers

We will create a flyer to hand out to people arriving to the event after it has begun so they can understand what the design teams are doing, and encouraging them to observe the process.

Design Jam as Public Spectacle

For the first hour of the event, participants will be in teams working on one of a number of different design challenges. The aim is not to have a competition, but to playfully explore design spaces and see how far an idea can get in a short period of time. Other attendees will be welcome to come and watch the design activities as they unfold. A number of interpreters (see below) will be on hand to explain the process to those unfamiliar with the idea of a design jam.

Presentation of Results

Teams will show what they produced; briefly noting what was unexpectedly easy and fast, or slow and difficult.

Discussion

The rest of the event will be a plenary discussion of Design Jams and similar approaches in iSchool settings, with a focus on teaching design skills and design thinking. Possible topics are:

- How to get started with design jams?
- Variants to the design jam idea?
- What makes a good design challenge?
- How can design jams go wrong and how can you address that?
- How to nurture a maker culture in an iSchool?
- How to fold iterative prototyping into community informatics / bioinformatics / IR?
- How iterated design jam experiences can build up both skills and concepts.

We invite participants to share their experiences (positive and negative) of using various design activities in teaching. We find that having had an experience of participating in a design jam prior to a discussion, all participants have a ready to hand set of examples to explore issues of pedagogy, approach, relevance and concern. It means that those who are unfamiliar with the idea of design jams can participate actively, by sharing their first impressions.

Follow-through

We will add to the pre-conference website to share readings, design challenges, pedagogies and resources.

Facilitation and Interpretation

We have a number of co-organizers and colleagues who plan to attend and will serve as facilitators to design teams. The organizer will explain what is going on to observers, people arriving late and those unused to design jams, design thinking or design at all.

Relevance to the Conference/Significance to the Field

We believe that user-centred design involving different kinds of participatory inclusion has a natural home in iSchools, in research, teaching, and service.

Although there is already design work based in iSchools, we believe that there is a potential for much more. The multidisciplinary ethos of iSchools and the focus on the interactions between people, information, and technology create a great opportunity to design better, more effective applications and indeed socio-technical systems. Drawing on the described purpose of the iConference on its website, we think that this is a classic case of an opportunity to advance the boundaries of information studies.

Design Jams also have the potential to help multidisciplinary teams to share ideas and insights. A technological focus on using computational tools can limit the comfort of those who do not think of themselves as 'techy', while a more analytic conceptual analysis of a problem can alienate those who lack familiarity with the frameworks and terminology deployed. Both of these approaches can lose people through the various layers of abstraction they necessarily deploy. However, many people feel comfortable grabbing a crayon and drawing ideas of what they would like the application to do, and then iterating on that with others.