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The potential of a Design for Service approach to transform Voluntary Community Sector organisations

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a case study where a designer worked within three Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organisations using a Design for Service (DfS) approach. The authors identify four organisational features that enable transformational change in this setting: understanding the role and remit of DfS; being receptive to change; valuing both process and outcomes; and the affinity between the existing organisational culture and DfS approach. These findings are discussed as a precursor to establishing the capacity of a DfS approach to effect transformational change in the development of public services in the VCS. It is hoped that this will help to influence the development and design of public services in the VCS in the future, whilst also informing the future practice of service design practitioners operating in this sector.

KEYWORDS: design for service, transformation, charity, public services

Introduction

The Government defines the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) or Third Sector as “non-governmental organisations which are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives” (HM Treasury, 2007, p. 5). This sector has been increasingly involved in the delivery of public services on behalf of statutory organisations; a significant proportion of the sector’s growth over the past decade has been the result of this increase in state funding and contracts (NCVO, 2012). However, following the UK Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010, the VCS has suffered a significant contraction in statutory funding leaving the sector in a fragile state (New Philanthropy Capital, 2010). The volatile fiscal climate has had a considerable impact on VCS organisations’ capacity, yet the community is also trying to respond to a sizeable increase in service demand (VONNE, 2011). Coupled with this, the UK Government’s Putting People First policy (2007) signaled a complete revision of the existing adult social care model, asking service deliverers to place more emphasis on ‘relational’ rather than ‘transactional’ approaches to delivery (Needham & Carr, 2009, p. 3). The VCS is therefore faced with the challenge of meeting these altered expectations of the services they deliver, and how they are offered, in dynamic conditions. However, with no prescribed model for organisational change, it remains unclear if the sector has the capacity or capability to innovate at pace to accurately respond to the demands of their various stakeholders (New Philanthropy Capital, 2010).

Modern design discourse has started to recognise the transformative powers of service design, with texts exploring design's role in inciting change in both organisations (Burns et al., 2006; Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009) and communities (Manzini, 2011; Design Commission, 2013). Recent design programmes such as Dott 07 (Tan, 2012) and Public Services by Design (Design Council, 2010) have demonstrated that design can have a transformational outcome; acting as a catalyst for change (Tan, 2012) on a personal, organisational and societal level. These transformational powers of design are also being utilised at national and international levels in the development of policies to “address societal challenges and as a catalyst of societal and economic change” (European Commission, 2009, p. 70). Kimbell (2011, p. 49) therefore proposes that professionals talk about “designing for service”, as the term recognises that what is being designed is not an end result, but rather a platform for action with which diverse actors will engage over time. In this approach, designers draw on an arsenal of dedicated tools to act as facilitator and provoker (Tan, 2012, p. 167), to both enable actors to co-create, and support the visioning process by prompting more radical thought (Manzini, 2011). It is therefore of significant value to understand the extent to which Design for Service (DfS) could help the VCS community to transform their traditional approaches and deliver better public services.

Despite this growing recognition of the role of DfS in enacting meaningful transformation, the relative youth of this area of practice means that there is little theory on how designers can affect change on an organisational or societal level (Pacenti & Sangiorgi, 2010; Sangiorgi, 2011). It is therefore vital to understand the factors that can impact on achieving transformational change in a sector such as VCS. Although literature does still debate what constitutes a ‘transformational outcome’ (Sangiorgi, 2011; Wetter-Edman, 2011, p. 69), for the purposes of this research, the authors have used Warwick, et al.’s (2012) four criteria; awareness, community, capacity and new organisational standards, as indications of a transformational outcome to a DfS engagement.

This paper presents the findings from a cross-case study undertaken as part of a Doctoral inquiry, where a designer worked within three VCS organisations using a DfS approach, each over a 2 month period. In each organisation, the principal author acted as reflective researcher-practitioner, henceforth referred to as the Designer, supported by the other authors as research supervisors. These findings are discussed as a first step in understanding how a DfS approach can effect transformational change in the VCS. It is hoped that this will help to influence the development and design of public services in the VCS in the future, whilst also informing the future practice of service designers operating in this area.

Methodology

Action Research (Lewin, 1946) conducted through a case study (Yin, 2003) was chosen as the predominant methodology, in order to produce context-specific data that could also result in the development of practice and theory (Kellock Hay et al., 2001). Action-reflection cycles (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) were used in three project settings; each forming part of a single exploratory case study (Robson, 2002, p. 181) where common features were studied and compared within and across settings to provide a more general overview.

Project settings were selected using theoretical sampling to “replicate previous cases or extend emergent theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 533). Selection criteria required the host organisation to be a registered charity or other formally constituted VCS organisation with an income from charitable activities between £200,000 and £500,000 per year; an indicator

that an organisation will be at risk as statutory support diminishes (Community Foundation, 2011). Project settings had to be currently offering public services and looking to evaluate, change or expand these in some way in the future. They also had to have differing charitable aims and customer bases, in order that the Designer's practice was not guided by previous engagements (Lewin, 1946). In each case, an initial meeting between the Designer and CEO explained the research aims and introduced the DfS approach in more detail using past projects as illustrative examples, before both parties made a final decision to progress.

In each of the three charities engaged in this study, the Designer worked with a variety of stakeholders; staff and volunteers who administer services directly to clients, middle management, and executive leadership. The design activity was tailored to the organisation's particular area of expertise, and used appropriate design methods and tools to address the specific issues that arose in each context. A brief summary of each charity, the design activity undertaken, and the resulting impact is described below:

Charity A is part of a UK federation; providing mental health and wellbeing services across three boroughs in North East (NE) England, many of which are on behalf of a local council. Here, the Designer was asked to help the organisation consider what services they should provide in a new geographical area. Tools, i.e. personas, idea generation, service blueprints and touchpoint prototyping, were used to co-design a new recovery-focused service that engaged service users differently. Following the Designer's contribution, Charity A successfully applied for a grant of £425,000 from BIG Lottery Reaching Communities, to roll this service out across the region. Charity A's national federation commissioned a service design pilot with three other federation members following the successful use of the practice.

Charity B is also registered with a national federation. Operating in one borough in NE England, they provide community education services to all ages. Here, the Designer was engaged to help improve earned income, particularly how the charity could improve its membership system, which offered discounts on fitness, arts and children's services to the local community. Tools, i.e. visual customer journeys, staff surveys and co-design workshops, were used to co-design a new membership system that simplified the cost structure and reduced the price for those in receipt of benefits. Furthermore, the Designer helped to undertake engaging user research that formed an application to BIG Lottery, and they were awarded £190,000 as a result. Charity B has since contracted continuing service design support after the project to support their customer communication.

Charity C is a national charity based in NE England that aims to engage children in reading, both directly through various public services, and through educational institutions. Here, the Designer considered how the customer experience provided by the charity's public services could be improved. Tools, i.e. observation, reframing the problem area and idea generation, were used to co-design and prototype nine concepts to improve the customer's experience. As a direct result, Charity C saw a 300% rise in their annual pass upgrade rate, which equates to an extra £52,500 a year for the organisation. Consequently, the organisation committed to using the DfS process again, enlisting service designers to support an upcoming project around the user experience they provide for people with cognitive and sensory impairments.

Data Collection

Data collected was predominantly qualitative for two reasons: it aims to "understand why things are happening", in keeping with the action research methodology (Easterby-Smith et

al., 2002, p.3); and it helps to elicit “well-grounded, rich descriptions of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.3).

The qualitative methods collected data from project stakeholders, who held the knowledge of the projects’ inherent values. These methods were used consistently across the case-study to capture the design object, the Designer’s activity and the project stakeholders’ responses and opinions in each setting. The data collection methods were broadly split into three sections: action research design activity, semi-structured interviews, and reflection-on-action. The plan for data collection in each project can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Data Collection Plan (*CDG = Co-Design Group)

Action Research Design Activity can act as a probe and a way of capturing rich data (Zimmerman et al., 2010). Accordingly, outcomes from the Designer’s activity were captured to provide an insight into the potential outputs of the design process in context, and also, the possible responses to them. Thus, project meetings held to capture and improve the emerging design activity were audio recorded and proved useful to capture how the Designer described themselves, the activity, and the responses of project stakeholders over time. The Designer’s photographs, sketches, visuals and models from each collaboration were also retained and aided the coding of the unstructured interview data. It is advocated that a designer should gain feedback about the tools, methods and practices they employ in a timely manner (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), therefore, both formal and informal feedback was captured to add to the richness of the data available for analysis.

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted by the Designer at the commencement of the project to gauge perceptions and expectations of the design process. At the end, key members of staff (the CEO, and a maximum cross-section of four project stakeholders) were interviewed by an independent expert to: capture and probe insights made by stakeholders; gain an understanding of if and where, a design approach has made a difference; and gather unbiased responses to the Designer’s engagement. This independent review ensured critical feedback was obtained from participants and provided data for triangulation.

Reflection-on-Action documentation was made to allow the Designer to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schön, 1983). Participants produced daily diaries of the actions and observations made during the action research cycle. These served to capture unseen and

unrecorded conversations with the project stakeholders, as well as note the Designer's activities, process, personal thoughts and feelings. Evernote¹ software recorded and securely stored the diaries, enabling data input in mixed media from various devices (see Figure 2).

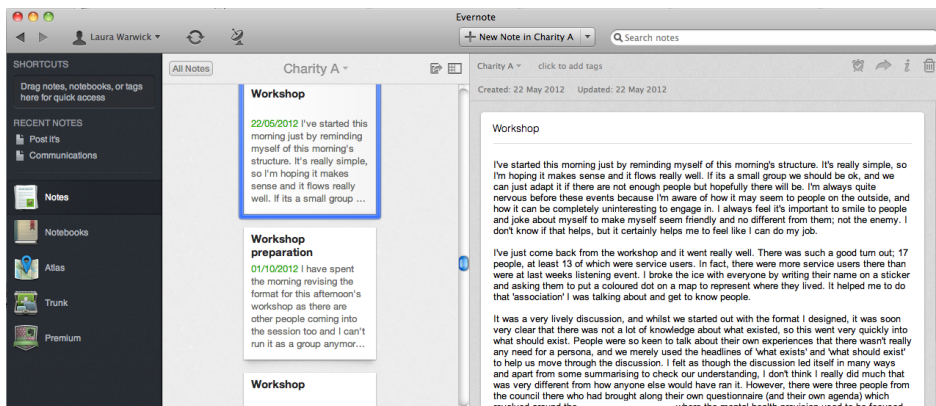


Figure 2: Screenshot of reflection-on-action logs for Charity A

The reflection documentation helped to evidence the Designer's influence on the study, systematically alternating between performing 'on stage' and reflecting critically 'back stage', which are key tenets of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Analysis

A general inductive analysis process was used to note the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, independent of guidance or structure from the researchers, in order to derive theory (Patton, 2002, p. 55). The designer's engagement at all three project settings was completed before any formal analysis commenced (Robson, 2002, p. 181), ensuring that later collaborations were not influenced by analysis of earlier ones.

Each project setting was analysed in turn in a four stage process, to ensure that emergent themes were grounded in specific cases and their contexts before being compared across the case study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Firstly, during several close readings of all collated data, that which related to the question '*how the DfS approach has an impact on organisational activity in the VCS context?*' was isolated and encoded accordingly. Secondly, these isolated quotes or sections of text were copied onto Post-It notes, which were then organised in a matrix that placed time (project set-up, project activity, and post project reflection) on the horizontal axis and stakeholder (Designer, Chief Executive, Service Manager, etc.) on the vertical axis. The excerpts of data were then manually grouped by meaning, to create multiple-coding collections based on stakeholders' perspectives at specific moments in time. Thirdly, these coding collections were assigned a title summarising the category; where similarly entitled multiple-coding collections existed, this was taken as an indication of a critical detail or attribute related to the Designer's activity. Fourthly, these categories were then triangulated across the different stakeholders' perspectives and across the timeline to find the most cogent groupings and patterns (Silverman, 2006, p.290). Finally, these patterns were compared and contrasted across the project settings to help build theory.

¹ Evernote is software that is accessible on web, computer, phone or tablet that allows you to make time-coded notes. You can also attach images, web links, documents or emails to create multi-layered logs.

Findings

High value project impacts were reported by each charity - noted in the Methodology section of this paper - and the DfS approach generated several tangible service interventions and many strategic changes in each. However, the analysis found that whilst positive service innovations were observed in all three project settings, the collaboration only had a transformational impact in Charities A and C. To consider this disparity in outcomes, this section of the paper presents the findings in relation to the four key organisational features found to be required for DfS to effect transformational change.

Understanding the Design for Service approach

All three charities received the same information about DfS before the collaboration commenced and the Designer spent time initially introducing and demonstrating the different tools and methods of the approach to the various stakeholders. Despite this consistency, analysis shows that the understanding of the DfS approach was different in each setting, which influenced the trajectory of the project.

In Charity B, the CEO stated in their pre-collaboration interview that they saw the DfS approach relating to the marketing of services. Stakeholders' close association of DfS with marketing was evident throughout the project, with the Executive Management Team (EMT) consistently linking the two approaches in project meetings. Although stakeholders' lack of knowledge about DfS was expected, their preconception became a barrier to the design activity when the outcomes being generated were seen to extend beyond traditional 'marketing communications'. The initial interviews with the EMT suggested that all anticipated outcomes were related to effective *communication* of services. When the Design work also challenged fundamental policies and structures in the organisation, for example interrogating the way that prices were set, EMT responded by reinforcing the need to focus on communication of services rather than question the practice of how they were delivered.

In contrast, stakeholders in Charities A and C who had also not previously engaged in a DfS programme, did anticipate that the approach might challenge some of their current practice. Conversely, as well as not anticipating that the DfS approach could challenge Charity B's current organisational practice, the analysis shows that the EMT did not see this as a desirable role. Although in one meeting the CEO did suggest that there is permission to challenge the organisation, the project meeting data shows that this is something that they did not encourage. This is indicative of their perception that the Designer's role was to provide capacity to help them to reach their pre-defined outcomes, rather than question any of their aims. It is clear that in Charities A and C there was both an expectation and desire that the Designer would operate across the different levels of the organisation and challenge their existing processes, which was lacking in Charity B. As such, the roles that the Designer was allowed to play in setting B were greatly restricted.

Receptivity to Change

A pre-requisite for each collaboration was that the charity should identify that they want to review or change existing or planned service offers, however analysis shows that the organisations had different levels of receptivity to change.

In Charity A, the organisation-wide appetite to try new processes and be open to the outcomes that they presented, provided an ideal environment for the design activity to progress. Likewise, Charity C's stakeholders identified that they were at an opportune moment in their development for external input, and stakeholders also reflected that they

were comfortable with the concept of transformation. In contrast, a recent period of organisational restructure in Charity B meant that front-line staff exhibited a reticence to change, which posed a significant barrier to the Designer's activity. Although stakeholders engaged in co-creation activities, the organisational fragility decelerated the project momentum, thus reducing the impact it was possible to achieve in the given period.

Similar disparities in receptiveness to change can be seen in Charity B's responses to proposals made throughout the collaboration that impacted on their current business model. Although the Designer demonstrated how improved customer-focused offers could help to increase income, their current financial difficulties limited the stakeholders' ability to see how the services could be offered differently. Although Charity A and C also highlighted the volatile fiscal climate as a driver for change, they viewed the Designer's engagement as an opportunity to explore ways of increasing or diversifying income in order to become more sustainable, and were therefore more responsive to alternative business models.

In part, this inconsistency between Charity B's feedback to proposals that impacted on their current business model, versus the positive reactions of settings A and C, can be directly correlated to the previously discussed perceptions of DfS and the function it would play in the organisation. However, analysis shows that it can also be linked to the organisation's desire for change to occur. The readiness for change observed in Charities A and C, in comparison to the apparent fragility felt by front-line staff in Charity B, had an impact on the way the Designer was able to engage with stakeholders and how their proposals were received. Moreover, the lack of appetite for change at an executive level in Charity B ultimately restricted the work of the Designer to incremental rather than strategic outcomes.

Valuing Process and Outcomes

The difference in outcomes across the case-studies can also be linked to the value that the stakeholders in each setting placed on the DfS process, in comparison to tangible outputs.

Analysis of the pre-collaboration interviews shows that Charity B's executive stakeholders were focused on the results of the project from the outset. In week two of the project the CEO remarks; "what I want are the solutions". This pattern continues throughout the project activity data as the Designer was asked, "what's the answer?" or "what's the solution to it?" on several separate occasions after presenting design research findings. This emphasis on results in the data overwhelms any discussion of the value in the process itself.

Conversely, in Charity A, analysis shows that stakeholders placed huge value on the design process. At the beginning of the collaboration, stakeholders identified that they wanted to do things differently but lacked the knowledge of how to do that. Their desire to understand how to enact transformation meant that as stakeholders recognised DfS process as a potential vehicle for change, the Designer's input was increasingly valued. Their appreciation of the approach is also evidenced by the organisation's request for a service design toolkit in order to provide a legacy to the collaboration, which demonstrated their commitment to embracing the approach long-term. Similarly, in Charity C the stakeholders recognised that their current service development processes were not effective, with the CEO stating that; "we have a process for testing ideas but not developing them". Like Charity A, stakeholders in Charity C also valued the different perspective that the DfS approach brought. In a meeting at the end of the project, the Programmes Manager said; "the process is as valuable as the results... the process is gold dust", further reinforcing the value that they placed on the approach itself. As such, the charity also pledged to continue using the DfS approach; "we're absolutely committed to using these methods again".

Although data from post-collaboration interviews suggests that all stakeholders valued the DfS process, it is clear that the desire to adopt a new approach was fundamentally lacking in Charity B. As such, Charity B placed emphasis on the tangible outcomes of the engagement, resulting in the restriction of the Designer's influence to front-line services, and preventing a transformational outcome.

Compatibility between existing organisational culture and DfS approach

Further insight can be gained into the absence of transformation in Charity B by comparing the organisation's existing approaches to service development and the DfS process.

In encouraging the use of the DfS process in each setting, the Designer advocated co-creation at every stage. However in Charity B, current service development policy dictated that ideas should go through EMT, who would then decide whether they should be implemented. It is clear that this practice did not facilitate a culture of co-creation, for example; the Memberships Coordinator was also reluctant to engage members of all departments to help co-create a new membership structure, saying; "that these structures need to be set at management level". Data collated across the collaboration timeline shows that Charity B's existing organisational policies dictated that finance was at the centre of the service development process, whereas DfS approach places the users at the centre (Burns et al., 2006). Although DfS can address income as part of the creative work, the approach focuses on understanding what will be valued by users, in order to create viable income generating opportunities. Without a strong desire to alter the existing service development practice, the conflict between user-focus and finance-focus proved to be a barrier to the project progression and the extent to which design could influence the organisation.

The findings suggest that in the case of Charities A and C, the principles of a DfS approach aligned very much with the requirements of the organisation; analysis shows that focusing on user needs to build desirable, efficient and effective offers was both an expectation of the organisations, as well as being an aim of the DfS approach. In Charity A, stakeholders were clear throughout that they wanted to design services based on customer need; "we really do need to find out what the needs are... and the gaps". In Charity C, the CEO said that their outlook aligned with the Designer's work, stating that; "the motivation and culture of the organisation were there and right for [the collaboration]". The data demonstrates that during conversations in both settings, the Designer and members of staff recognised this common perspective, which strengthened their relationship and their ability to co-create.

In both settings A and C, the symmetry between the existing organisational attitude and the DfS approach allowed the Designer to adopt the roles of facilitator and provoker much more successfully. However, in Charity B, there was a distinct disparity between the DfS approach and the incremental service development approach preferred by EMT. With such a discrepancy, the design process was not sufficiently valued to permeate the strategic levels of the organisation and create transformational outcomes as it had in the other two settings.

Conclusions

Charity A and C's willingness to fundamentally challenge the way they operated was a key factor in the resulting transformational outcomes that the stakeholders observed in both project settings, as design was allowed to permeate all aspects of the organisations, and was not limited solely to a service-interaction level, as it was in Charity B.

Findings from the case-study analysis suggest that there was a receptivity to change at the level of both policy and delivery in Charities A and C that was absent in Charity B, and thus prevented the Designer's work from pervading the systems level of the charity as it had done in the other two project settings. Charity B's reluctance to change can be linked to the EMT's strong vision for the organisation, which acted as both a barrier to the design outcomes, and created an unsuitable environment for co-creation. This was compounded by Charity B's preconceptions about DfS, and their desired outcomes from the collaboration. Without permission to co-create a new vision, it was impossible for the DfS approach to have any significant impact on the fundamental structures of the organisation in the eight-week project period.

This research provides significant learning for DfS practitioners, as it shows that an external driver for change is not enough to enact transformation in an organisation; there needs to be an internal rhetoric for engaging in significant change. Where possible, this openness to change needs to be present at all levels in order to co-create new organisational standards in a timely manner. Although it is not necessarily possible to ascertain this desire pre-collaboration, this paper has presented four organisational features that indicate if DfS could have a more transformational effect. In practice, a designer should ensure that the stakeholders have *accurate expectations of both the DfS approach and the anticipated outcomes*. Predictably, *measuring the charity's receptivity to change* prior to collaboration could help anticipate if transformational outcomes would be possible; however, the findings suggests that *looking for a new approach as well as new outcomes* would indicate a degree of openness that is necessary for radical change. Furthermore determining the charity's existing organisational culture and *assessing how well it aligns with the tenets of the DfS approach* (a focus on user value rather than cost of delivery) would also help to establish if the Designer's activity would be welcomed and embraced by the organisation.

Further Research

As this paper presents a first comparison of all project setting data, further qualifying research needs to be undertaken. It is anticipated that the completion of the Doctoral project will add detail to the features of a VCS organisation that enable DfS to have a transformational outcome. In particular, correlation with literature that focuses on DfS in private and public sectors to ascertain which of the features are peculiar to the VCS.

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