Letting Go: Working with the Rhythm of Participants

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Abstract

The focus of this study is a community of families separated by prison. Some parts of this community do not engage with the support offered to it, regardless of delivery mechanism. In this study, we used a participatory design approach to community informatics to explore why some do not engage with the support offered and the potential for service design to increase engagement. This is a community where on-line service delivery is a method used to deliver information and support and so taking a community informatics lens helps to inform both on and off-line service design. This paper explores the use of four participatory design principles selected to improve the extent and quality of participation: ceding control, segmentation, situation and envisioning control. In this first phase of the study we discovered how the principle of feedback between segmented participant groups helps to develop an understanding of the service design needs for the whole community and is a potential technique for community informatics and service design in general to improve the quality of input to community service design.

Author Keywords

Participatory design; co-design; prison; families

ACM Classification Keywords

D.2.10 Design; methodologies

Introduction

The aim of the first phase of this study was to work with the community of families separated by prison using a participatory design process in order to identify why some families do not engage with the support offered and to envision how support might be re-designed to encourage wider engagement. The response to widening participation is often to deliver support services on-line as well as face-to-face but this is also not successful for parts of the community. In order to design on-line services that do widen participation, requirements need to be understood. The techniques presented in this contribute to techniques used in community informatics.

As the quotes in the sidebar illustrate, families in this community experience many pressures, and therefore have many needs for support, when a family member being imprisoned, which need to be reflected in the technology and services designed to support the families.

It is rarely the case that communities that do not take part in research do not do so because they are simply not asked. Typically there are strong reasons for not choosing to engage and the quality of the informatics engagement suffers as a result. In the case of this particular community, lack of engagement is often the result of a reticence to talk to people outside the community about prison and its impact as well as a low expectation of getting anything in return for the engagement. Therefore, the researchers designed the participatory approach with care, selecting a participatory approach that included engagement principles to help overcome these barriers.

Background

The literature on families in this situation robustly articulates the diversity of identities that families need to assume and the pressures they are under, so it is perhaps not surprising that these families often need a wide range of support, making any type of service design complex. The community has broadly three sources of support available, through on and off-line service delivery:

- Communication between family members separated by prison [6. pp.23-26 and p.146]

- Third sector voluntary support groups and self-help groups [7. pp.154-179, Codd 2008, pp.142-145]

- Formal (government services or prison) support [6. p.159-160, 5. pp.133-136, 7]

Practitioners and helping agencies in this community feel that face-to-face delivery is very important but can supplemented by on-line delivery. So the question is whether re-designing or adding support services would bring wider support service use within the community.

The approach to explore this space was firmly rooted in community informatics and participatory design principles [1,2, 3]. The process engaged with two communities of families separated by prison: one community, who called themselves Hidden Families, was more likely to engage with support services and the other, who called themselves LONELINESS, less likely. The Hidden Families community was more likely to use the Internet as a means of gaining access to support. LONELINESS participants were less likely.

Approach - Two Narratives

Both groups articulated their narratives in a wall of comments. Hidden Families further developed a wall collage that then became a portable textile collage.

Figure 1: Initial Hidden Families wall collage at the visitors centre and in the sidebar examples of data collection.

Hidden Families is a group composed of visitors to a Category A prison in the North East. Participants were recruited through NEPACS (a third sector agency providing support services for families separated by prison) and were primarily members of the Visitors' Voice group. Approximately[1] 20 participants aged between 18 and 65 engaged. LONELINESS is a group composed of people who predominantly have experience of visiting lower category prisons. Four participants were recruited through a community group in the North East and were aged between 18 and 43. The method used with both groups was one of participatory engagement [1,2]. Whilst the age range, socio-economic and educational background was largely

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[1] The participatory nature of the process meant that some participants posted to the collage independently of the researchers.

comparable for both groups, other factors contributed to a very different group identity. The primary difference in identity is that Hidden Families assume an identity as people who engage with support services, whereas the membership of the LONELINESS group, regardless of gender, does not assume this identity.

LONELINESS
The main narrative of the LONELINESS group is a general mistrust of institutions and their systems and this included the helping agencies. There was also a sense of low expectation that the situation would change or improve and thus the incentive for engaging with support services was small and using the Internet for support regarded as "useless".
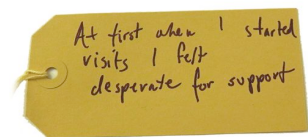

Figure 2: Comment wall developed on an A0 sheet that starts with boxes for problem identification on the left hand side and progresses to problem solving on the right hand side. Sheet designed by Proboscis.

Low expectations of change are reflected in the basic format that the group selected for articulating their narrative (shown in Figure 2)

Illustrations by Alice
Angus

Hidden Families

In the narrative from Hidden Families, identities of carer, hidden families and stigmatised families were all articulated in the wall collage and with each persona, a diverse range of support needs could be found in the collage (shown below and in the sidebar). Any service delivery needs to clearly support the different personas and promote engagement for each persona.

Figure 3: Early textile collage produced from a wall collage. Examples of the comments on the collage can be seen in the sidebar. All content comes from Hidden Families and the textile collage was designed by Alice Angus.

A dissatisfaction with the current mechanisms for communicating with their family members in prison was expressed and potentially the Internet could be used to enrich methods of communication. The email a prisoner service exists but some families will require assisted use.

Narratives for Design

Both groups delivered a strong narrative about the importance of the presence of the prisoner. Currently the supporting services are typically designed for either prisoners or their families, not both. The message in the narrative of both groups however was very clear: the prisoner needs to be an active part in the design and delivery of family support services. Designing for the family in this way requires complex service design and brings the importance of security controls into the human computer interaction.

Hidden Families did not query the format of support and used communication with NEPACS as an important method of information sharing. Therefore the human computer interaction for this group should support assisted use by the helping agencies. LONELINESS, however, articulated a strong preference for alternative formats of delivery, including games and video and support delivered face-to-face and potentially using social media. For this latter group service different types of human computer interaction could be beneficial.

Principles of Engagement

This community informatics engagement used a participatory approach where participants worked side by side with the researchers to frame the research goals, set the pace and rhythm of the data collection and produce the analysis. However, securing quality engagement was challenging. Both groups had low expectations as to the value of engagement with the initial study and initially engagement was therefore minimal. The researchers adapted and extended principles used in a previous participatory project with vulnerable communities [4] to improve the quality of

engagement and therefore increase the understanding of service and technology design needs. Four key principles of participatory engagement were used in the research design:

1. Cede Control
A major barrier to engagement is the participant's feelings of disempowerment. A number of techniques were therefore used to cede control from researcher to participant. The researchers first ceded control of the title. The original title of the project was "Families disconnected by prison: a scoping study in barriers to community engagement" Neither group liked the original title of the project, pointing out that the term "Prisoners' Families" prioritised the prisoner. Each group chose their own group names: LONELINESS and Hidden Families: Hidden Families renamed the project: "Hidden Families: Story of a Journey".

Researchers ceded control of the process of data gathering. Hidden Families chose to engage with researchers on an individual basis. LONELINESS chose to engage using a more formalised consultation process.

Researchers ceded control of the content of the narrative. All notes were either made by the participants or scribed by researchers on behalf of the participants. Participants chose which of the notes were part the comments wall. In this way participants controlled what was recorded and the process was transparent.

2. Segmentation
This is a complex community and so the researchers carefully segmented it into two clear groups according to how they identify with the helping agencies and support services, i.e. those who engaged with helping agencies and support services and those who did not.

However, the research approach was designed in such a way that there were connection points between the groups so that the collective narrative of families separated by prison could be heard and views shared.

3. Situation
A major barrier to engagement is often the perception that engagement was meaningless. Rooting the objectives in situations, both physical and cultural, that participants are familiar with contributes to a sense of the engagement being meaningful.

The researchers therefore situated the narrative about support services in a context of each group's choosing. In the case of Hidden Families, the narrative was the visiting journey. In the case of LONELINESS, the narrative was about the causes of crime.

Participants also chose the physical location in which the research took place. In the case of Hidden Families, the location chosen by participants for the research engagement was the visitors' centre where engagement was interwoven as part of the visiting process. In the case of LONELINESS, the location chosen was the community centre that all attended.

4. Envisioning Change
This project is a design project at its heart. Therefore, envisioning change to existing services is critical. In the case of Hidden Families, they used their collage as a boundary object and different stakeholders explored where current support services were lacking.

Figure 4: Methods of ceding control

(Illustrations by Alice Angus)

LONELINESS worked through a problem solving process printed on an A0 sheet. The process covered problem identification, problem impact and problem solving.

Discussion and Future Work

This phase of the project started out with two segmented groups. However, in the connection points where the groups found out about each other's work, common community goals emerged. Examples are given below:

Initially, Hidden Families participated in the collage-building process because the group could see the value of producing something attractive that could be taken into the prison on family visiting days. LONELINESS could not see the value, regarding collages as "a gimmick." However, in the connection points, members of LONELINESS saw the Hidden Families' collages develop and started to see the value of a collage as a type of intervention that would help to increase participation in their own community meetings. The next stage of the project will use collage in both segments to further understand how to re-design support services and what role technology might play.

LONELINESS critiqued the form and content of current support from the outset and quickly moved to new ideas for blending methods of delivery with a view that current support services were inaccessible to parts of the community. In the connection points, Hidden Families gave input on diversifying methods of delivery. In the next stage of the project, LONELINESS will prototype puzzles and video as methods of engaging people in on and off-line support and Hidden Families will be asked for their feedback.

As these examples show, knowledge and know-how sharing at the connection points strengthened aspects of participation across the community as a whole, resulting in a meta-community narrative. Future work will further evaluate the role of these connection points.

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