

# Can you see the commons? The Sense Weaver: visually-driven sense-making

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## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Cultural characteristics.**

## KEYWORDS

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## 1 WORKSHOP AIMS AND GOALS

In this workshop, we propose the Sense Weaver, a workshop format that engages participation by means of visualization and storytelling. The Sense Weaver aims at weaving together the different perspectives of the participants, to reflect on concepts in a non-academic way, with a citizen audience. Given the current emergency we are facing with the spread of the Covid-19 virus, which makes it difficult to travel and structure face-to-face activities, we will experiment with the participants the translation of the Sense Weaver into an online, mainly asynchronous, workshop.

In the first part of the workshop, we will practice the Sense Weaver for conceptualizing and envisioning the Commons. In the second part, we will involve the participants in revising and adapting the Sense Weaver after the online experiment, also considering the various context of use. The last part of the workshop, will aim at establishing a community of practitioners interested in using the Sense Weaver, supported by an online repository with the visual material (images) collected at each Sense Weaver edition.

We welcome academic scholars, students, practitioners, and activists. We will accommodate as many languages as possible, starting with English, Spanish, and Portuguese. We welcome online participants from all over the world and will try to accommodate different time zones.

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## 2 WORKSHOP FORMAT, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Under normal circumstances the workshop takes place as follows. However, in light of the Covid-19 emergency, the changes for the PDC2020 workshop edition will require the definition of an online version of the Sense Weaver.

The workshop is divided into two parts. In the first part, we propose to the participants the Sense Weaver (hence: SW), as we facilitated it in the previous editions. In the second part, the participants propose “hacks” to the SW format, based on their contexts and needs, that we collectively discuss and adapt. Finally, we plan to establish a small community interested in experimenting, improving, documenting this format and eventually publishing about it.

### 2.1 First part (2 hours)

In the first part, the participants will experiment the SW. The detailed structure is following:

**Introduction (20 mins).** Welcoming participants and workshop introduction.

**Ice-breaking activity (20 mins).** The format opens with an ice-breaking activity on the question “what do you have in common?”, where we start to trigger the participants to interact with each other and to reflect on the word “common” in unusual ways. The aim of this first activity is not only to put the participants at ease, but above all to provoke them to think out-of-the-box about theoretical definitions that they could already have of the commons.

**Exploratory trip (20 mins).** We invite participants in groups of 2-3 people to leave the workshop area and to go for a short exploratory trip in the surroundings. The trip consists in finding what, in each participant’s point of view, represents a common. It can be a situation, a thing, a metaphor, a symbol, and so on. Once a participant finds a scenery meaningful for her, she takes a photo of it with her smartphone and send it to the facilitators. The photos are taken individually by the participants, yet doing the trip in groups triggers discussions in an informal setting about the choices of the images taken. As we receive the photos, we print them on a card-format (2.1x3.4” - 5.4x8.6 cm). When the participants come back to the workshop area, they find a deck of cards ready to use, with their photos printed on them (see Figure 1).

**Storytelling (40 mins).** Once the participants are back, we shuffle the photo-cards and each participant randomly picks 2 or 3 photo-cards from the deck. In pairs, participants have 5 minutes to look at the cards they picked and think about a short story, taking the photo-cards as mandatory narrative elements (characters, situations, etc.). In turn, they have 5 minutes each to share their



**Figure 1: Sample of photo-cards produced from the previous workshop editions.**

story, also explaining why these images represent commons (or a unique common) in their story. The number of cards to pick for each story may vary depending on the number of participants. The rest of the participants actively listen: each participant writes, on post-its, up to two keywords that, in her opinion, represent the key common-related aspects of the story. We collect the post-its on one poster for each story. Finally, the storyteller(s) give(s) a title to the story, that is then written on the poster. We propose storytelling as a challenge to derive a meaning of commons that has continuity in the story: this challenge is given by constrained creativity. The constraints are given by telling the story through a temporal dimension: the three photo-cards are disposed as three consequential events: antecedent, fact, consequences.

**Synthesis (20 mins).** At the end of the storytelling activity, we move to the final part of the SW, developing definitions of commons. We work on a practical level, aiming at creating concrete definitions bounded to personal experience, rather than to theoretical and abstract reasoning. In this stage, participants form groups of four. Each group works on two posters and the related stories (not created by group members). The group has to agree on three concepts per poster that connect some of the keywords in the poster to their experience in relation to common (nothing magic in number three, the point is to avoid a “one concept per group member” dynamic). Inspired by the six concepts identified, the group has to complete the sentence “A common is when...” (or another similar sentence focusing on an experiential and non-theoretical usage of the term ‘common’), that they write down on a sheet of paper.

We use an overall approach of negotiation of meanings. The activities are conducted mainly in small groups, with no facilitator listening. The negotiation of meanings happens on two levels: 1) with yourself: in choosing the subjects of your photos; 2) in pairs: in making up a story giving new meanings to photos that others produced with their own meanings in mind; 3) with the group: in

telling the story, the others write down keywords based on their own understanding of your narrative, that can be different from what you mean. In this way the authorship is loose but still present, weaved with the other authorships.

## 2.2 Second part (2 hours)

The second part of the workshop consists of a meta-workshop: that is, a mini-reflection-action workshop on the SW. First the participants appropriate the format by hacking it, modifying it on the basis of their needs, experiences and speculations. The participants are free to work in groups or independently, according to the kind of twist they propose (e.g., storyboards instead of storytelling) or to application domains (e.g., schools) - for example, in one of the previous SW editions, we found that the material produced by the SW was adopted and re-used by participants of a Theater of the Oppressed session. Finally, the hacks proposed by the workshop participants are shared in a plenary session with the rest of the group.

We also aim to build an incremental continuity among the future workshop editions of the Sense Weaver. The continuity would be granted with the creation of an online repository where the visual material produced can increase the “deck” of photo-cards.

## 3 PREVIOUS EXPERTISE TO SET UP THIS WORKSHOP

Originally, we created the SW from a request of the Commonfare research group, that is accountable for the homonymous Horizon 2020 project ([1]). The request was to propose and facilitate a workshop during the annual festival of Oltreconomia (Trento, Italy), held from May 29th to 2 June in 2019 [4] Oltreconomia is a “self-organized and self-financed festival about practices and initiatives that oppose the current economic model” [3], organized by CS Bruno, a local social center based in Trento. The format we have devised (SW) is aimed at a mainly non-academic and mixed audience, such as the public that passes by and participates in local and national festivals. After the first edition of the SW we were invited by the organizers of the Serenamente Festival [5], to present it there again, on September 15, 2019. Serenamente Festival is a local festival concerned the urban regeneration of Casa Serena, a former mental health hospital, now abandoned, which started a urban regeneration participatory process, promoted by Tavi Macos (local youth group), Kaleidoscopio (social cooperative) and CSV (the Volunteering Service Center of the Province of Trento). Although we created the SW for a festival audience in an activist yet very institutionalized environment, we believe that it can help to prototype concepts shared by the participants of our and other future participatory and public design projects, either R&D or non institutional ones. In addition, the workshop proposers have several years of experience in facilitating Participatory Design workshop.

## 4 WORKSHOP RELEVANCE TO PD

Historically, Participatory Design (hence: PD) is an approach to designing systems together with the people that will use them, to involve them in the decision-making process of the system and to give them ownership of the technology designed, re-balancing power-relations in favor of those that will use the technology [15].

The last few years have been characterized by a renewed attention to the politics of design. This interest pervades several domains, from traditionally politically engaged schools such as that of Participatory Design (e.g.: [15]) to the more recent emphasis of social innovation in the field of Industrial Design (e.g.: [11]). The attention to the politics of design reflects the concern of some scholars in the field of digital technologies towards the search for new forms of social cooperation that can bring about a viable future (e.g., [8]). Politics is important in the evolving landscape of technology design as technology increasingly focuses on a variety of communal objects, leading beyond the workplace and individual experiences [7]. In this context, particular attention has been given to PD as a commoning practice, a practice that can nourish the common(s), articulated through concepts that include: publics, matters of concern, community-based PD, things, and infrastructuring [12].

Besides the traditional legal conception of commons, considered as shared natural resources [14], and the recent conception of digital commons as intangible ones [10], an activist conception of the commons considers them as a relational quality among a group of people [6] especially in contrast with the commodification of common goods. This conception intertwines with the one of common, initially promoted by Hardt and Negri [9] and, in Participatory Design and Social Informatics, by Hakken, Teli and Andrews [8]. This conception goes beyond the relational quality of the commons, considering the common (without the 's') as what makes us human. According to this view, the common connects human beings and it is originally neither private nor public property, although this large ensemble of material and immaterial elements is embodied in the economy and political regimes [9].

With the expression “nourishing the common”, or “commoning”, Teli [16] refers to the whole set of practices that have the effect of allowing a growth of possibilities for people to be connected by symbols and that preserve and nourish, literally, the material resources that allow people to be tied together in a positive and liberating way. We argue that, although the commons are bindings that tie us all as living beings in our planet’s ecosystem, regardless these ties are formal or informal, non-institutional or institutional, an important matter is becoming aware and recognizing that a ‘thing’ is a common. Quoting Bollier, “The beauty of the commons is that we can build them ourselves, right now. However, the bigger challenge is: can we learn to see the commons, and more importantly, to think like a commoner?” [6]. Triggered by Bollier’s question, we have conceptualized this workshop format.

The Sense Weaver can be acknowledged among the participatory visual methods, such as Participatory Video [13] or PhotoVoice [17]. The main difference with these methods is that in the SW the photos are important for what we build on after (storytelling and new meanings), while in Participatory Video and in the PhotoVoice, the visual artifact (video or photo) is to speak for itself.

## 5 WORKSHOP NEED AND VALUE AT PDC

The PDC community is a key reference for developing tools to engage communities, informal groups and individuals. The format is useful to facilitate the identification of commons within a community and to create collective and experiential definitions of what

a community or group intends for common goods (and what consequently makes them a community or a group). The format works well in the absence of prior knowledge of the commons, giving the possibility to the participants, regardless of their background, to contribute meaningfully.

After experimenting this format, we believe there is a lot of potential in it. The negotiation of meaning is a common practice in PD activities. In the SW, this is associated with working with images, producing artifacts, creating stories for describing one’s view, creatively mixing unexpected elements, collectively performing a sense-making activity. All these practices are at least partially known in PD: in the SW we combine them in a progression of activities that incrementally produces an outcome. We believe that during the workshop, together with the participants, we will collectively improve the Sense Weaver.

The key points are the focus on visual artifacts and on constrained creativity (stories must use the pictures), the loss of ownership (somebody’s picture is used by a different person with a different meaning), the collective sense-making process of the final part.

## 6 DRAFT SCHEDULE

The duration of the workshop will be half day (four hours), with a maximum of about 20 participants.

Sample schedule:

- 14:00 - 14:20: welcoming participants and workshop introduction
- 14:20 - 16:00: Sense Weaver facilitation
- 16:00 - 16:45: participants hacks the workshop format
- 16:45 - 17:30: hacks presentation and discussion
- 17:30 - 18:00: final remarks, workshop closing.

## 7 RECRUITMENT PROCEDURE

This workshop is mainly intended, but not exclusively, for activists, researchers, artists, and practitioners working on community-based PD projects. We will use relevant mailing-list (such as “PD world”), our network, including social networks (such as Facebook and LinkedIn). We will also rely on local organizers for distributing the workshop call to local activists and practitioners. We will ask prospective participants to submit a short statement containing their definition of Commons and their motivation to participate to the workshop. In order to attract also non-academics, the definition could be based on personal experience rather than on theoretical reflection. For instance, the request could be: “what commons do you experience in your daily life?”. We plan to have two calls: first call: March 15, 2019; second call: May 1, 2019 (one month before the conference). The material sent by participants will be shared with all of them.

## 8 EXPECTED CONCRETE OUTCOMES OF THE SESSION

The workshop format will be available on the website [senseweaver.design](http://senseweaver.design), and the material produced (pictures, photo-cards, posters) will be available for download and use. The site also becomes the repository for the produced material (photo-cards, posters, commons definitions) during the various editions of the workshops that anyone can facilitate in the world, which go to feed the package of

downloadable material. The material is released under the creative commons license Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) [2]. The workshop outcomes are the partnership for collaboration and the related web site. We expect participants to experiment the workshop format afterwards, in their working and activist practices. At a later stage, after collecting data and experiences, we envision the opportunity to build a publication together (e.g. handbook, booklet, journal article).

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