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## Exploring Artifacts and Documents in Collective Creativity Workshops Applied to Future Studies

Mathilde Sarré-Charrier  
*Dicen-IdF, CNAM and Orange SENSE*, mathilde.sarrecharrier@orange.com

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## Introduction

Several crises have increased the need for methodological answers to orient organizations' crucial decisions that might affect their activity in the future in a very different society. Especially when orienting their decisions and actions, organizations consider several potential breakthroughs and a diversity of trends. In this context of uncertainty, a variety of dimensions might affect their activities, and they monitor economic, political, technological, and environmental long-term trends. Decisions made in the present will have a long-term impact, when on the one hand great opportunities might have emerged in other industries or sectors, and on the other hand some disruptions might completely change the environment.

The origin of crises that may create dangers varies (Dewey, 1930), and they are consequently difficult to identify before they occur. In this context, mega trends (the aging of the population, for example) are interfering with unexpected ones. Some breakthroughs like the pandemic in 2019 or the economic crisis in 2008 were not anticipated using classical mathematical forecasting methods. These unpredictable events that have a huge impact are called black swans (Taleb, 2007). Their eventuality is considered by organizations anticipating discontinuities in their long-term activities, considering that the future is going to be different (Berger, 1964) in a different society.

To be better prepared for future changes in this context, creativity appears as a methodological answer to anticipate uncertainties. Therefore, creativity methods are a pillar of foresight (Popper, 2008) to explore various plausible futures to better guide significant decisions in the present.

Uncertainty contributes to the 'creadox', where the originality fostered during the creative process may not fully materialize in the deliverable (Sarré-Charrier, 2023). In the context of a call for creativity (Andonova, 2019) and a need to incorporate new elements to bring along different approaches, it presents a paradox.

Creativity methods consist in bringing together people with complementary points of view to multiply the diversity of ideas. In these approaches, the quantity of ideas is a criterion based on the principle that "quantity brings quality" (Osborn, 1953), especially during the upstream stages.

In contrast, there is a selection and transformation of ideas in the downstream stages. Very different and original ideas will not persist all along the process that involves many artifacts and documents. In a transactional perspective, the diversity of mediating artifact resources shapes the co-production of intermediary mediating artifacts by enabling mediating artifacts following an actualization process (Zacklad, 2020).

In this paper we aim to understand how the artifacts and documents involved in the creative process influence the enduring presence of originality until the end of the approach by means of the “Semiotics of Cooperative Transactions” theory (Zacklad, 2020). We use the concept of cooperative transactions developed by M. Zacklad to analyze creativity methods involved in foresight or future workshops, and we focus our analysis at the level of the sub-transactions.

### **The Semiotics of Cooperative Transactions**

The Semiotics of Cooperative Transactions theoretical framework is based on the central concepts of experience and transaction by Dewey (Zacklad, 2020). We use the concept of cooperative transactions to analyze how ideas are grounded in the documents produced at the key moments of the creative process from the perspective of the facilitators and the participants. A transaction is an abstract structure that manifests itself through a series of conversations and interactions that facilitate cooperation (Zacklad, 2020).

According to M. Zacklad’s approach, in a cooperative transaction agents involve personal and collective resources to realize a performance, leading to the production of a valuable artifact corresponding to a creation (Zacklad, 2020). Applied to our research on collective creativity related to foresight studies, the main transaction leads to the main deliverable corresponding to the valuable artifact of the approach.

We are interested in the process of transformation and selection of ideas and artifacts from a collective perspective, bringing together people with complementary points of view. In these processes, capacitive artifacts that have an instrumental function (Zacklad, 2020) occupy a central place and can be of several kinds, for example rules relating to creativity in groups. In creative activities there can be several subtransactions that can be independent with the main transaction (Zacklad, 2020).

The transactional performance has three components: subjectivation, creation, and territorialization. In this article we will focus on the creation and territorialization dimensions. Creation corresponds to the development of the valuable artifact (or main deliverable) along the process that includes intermediary artifacts in intermediary steps. Territorialization aims to establish a sustainable and enjoyable environment. Applied to creativity, territorialization includes the documentation of the ideas, concepts, and artifacts along the creative process and in the end the final deliverable.

## **Experience at the core of the methodology**

This research paper emanates from a doctoral thesis. We have built a methodology that articulates on the one hand observant participation during workshops based on collective creativity methods applied to strategic foresight including societal questions and on the other hand interviews conducted after the workshops with participants and facilitators.

We selected the “explicitation” interview technique elaborated by Pierre Vermersch. The purpose of this interview method is the verbalization of the activity to provide a detailed retrospective description of an action. To accomplish this, interviewees are encouraged to enter a state of evocation (Vermersch, 2019), so that they are re-living a specific singular moment of the creativity workshop. The benefit is to foster the interviewee to give details about the experience. Our purpose in this research is to obtain data related to the subtransactions that structure the creative process, in detail, including aspects that would have been too difficult to identify otherwise. For example, an action that is important but not visible such as a moment of idea selection done individually in silence.

This interview technique is not inductive at the level of the content and focuses on the experience of the interviewee especially in the selection of the key moment of the creative process that emerges from the experience of the interviewee. Another interest of this technique is to go into the detail of moments that were important and that could have been left out once the session is over, including moments that were not documented or expected at all.

We adopted this interview technique for two reasons. The first one is to favor evocation versus rationalization from the interviewee. The second objective is because the chronology of the action is being re-lived, to avoid the a posteriori rationalization and maintain the focus on the action itself.

Our objective is to have access to the creativity in action instead of having an opinion about an experience of a creativity workshop that might include a rationalization bias. To illustrate this interview technique, the interviewer never asks the question “Why?” to avoid justification and a posteriori reconstruction of the experience. Instead, the interviewer asks questions that follow the description of the ongoing action, for example, “Can you describe precisely what you are doing at this particular moment?”

The purpose of the design of our methodology is to give primacy to experience. Data collection is situated at the level of the transactional situation, including participant observation in plenary foresight workshops, “explicitation” interviews and data collection of artifacts and documents.

### **The unprecedented context of the pandemic**

We conducted our research about the process of transformation and selection of ideas and artifacts from a collective perspective in the unprecedented circumstances that occurred during the pandemic. Collective creativity workshops had to be organized and held entirely remotely leading to unparalleled situations from the perspective of both participants and facilitators involved in these approaches.

We prepared our fieldwork access in 2019 and started with our first field in December 2019. When the lockdown occurred most of the fieldworks were cancelled by organizers due to the impossibility of maintaining the workshops that were to take place in face-to-face sessions. Only the one that had already started continued, with an instant adaptation of the sessions. Therefore, in parallel we watched the emergence of new projects designed during the pandemic and prepared to be held remotely in virtual sessions, to include a variety of contexts. Fieldwork selections were based on specific a priori criteria, which included a long-term time horizon (5–20 years), a focus on societal aspects, and the explicit use of collective creativity and foresight studies.

### **A variety of fieldworks**

Ultimately, our research on creativity workshops applied to future studies is based on a diverse range of fieldwork. We distinguish three types of projects corresponding to specific organizational contexts in which specific documents were expected as final deliverable of the global approach:

- 1- Bottom-up foresight initiated by individuals.  
In this category projects are initiated by individuals in response to a long-term challenge, without being part of a specific organization. A specific person is the initiator of the approach that will contribute to the realization of a book publicly distributed.
- 2- Open foresight (Wiener et al., 2020) involving multiple organizations.  
Several organizations collaboratively engage in a partnership to conduct a foresight approach aimed at exploring future scenarios, sharing insights, and addressing challenges. A final report publicly accessible is produced by a specific partner who coordinates the overall approach.
- 3- Foresight conducted internally within a large organization.  
These projects are driven internally by a single large organization, to anticipate and prepare for future challenges in specific domains. A core-

team project produces a written synthesis for an internal circulation within the organization, targeting the audience of decision makers.

### **Existing common characteristics across all fieldworks**

Collective creativity, in these foresight studies workshops, is structured by a tailor-made methodology based on existing methods that are combined in a dedicated manner to address the needs of the organization that conducts the project. At the end of the approach a final deliverable is produced. This document is aimed at orienting action toward a desirable future. We identify as final deliverable the following types of documents: a book, a text of short presentations of possible future worlds, contrasted world scenarios, or a report.

The characteristics of the document, considered as the final deliverable, are known by the facilitators at the beginning and are stable all along the approach. By characteristics we encompass the length of the document, the type of the document and the targeted audience. These characteristics are known in advance and are pre-established before the course of the approach including several workshops.

### **Artifacts and documents**

Along with the several workshops, many documents and artifacts are also involved. Some artifacts are specific documents that are collected before the approach to provide information on the ongoing evolutions such as mega trends and future changes that are already anticipated such as: sociological studies, technological forecasts, climate change reports, weak signals. Some artifacts are designed by the facilitators to expand the collective creativity, like structured online boards, adaptations of an online game, sets of cards, creativity process and assignments. And we noticed the importance of some intermediary artifacts including results of intermediary steps, board of note, oral presentations, collective and personal notes, intermediate and final versions of text produced to stimulate the group and intermediate versions of the final deliverable.

It appeared during interviews that some artifacts based on individual production had a crucial impact on the collective creative process but remained invisible during the sessions. For example, it is the case of some personal notes on papers or in applications done personally and used to synthesize a group production. We noticed that some important moments described during the interviews mentioned artifacts including oral conversation and notes (virtual and sticky paper notes) that are not durable.

Some artifacts are recorded; however, the reuse of the recording of online workshops is complex and unsure. In particular, the treatment appeared long and complex and can discourage facilitators. We also gathered moments where people were reluctant to speak and preferred to have a personal mental action.

### **A lack of consistency at the level of the group of participants**

This research is based on workshops held entirely online through applications that enable the sharing of vocal conversations and documents. We noticed that it was difficult to evaluate the number of active participants. By active participant we mean participants that fully dedicate their activity to attend the workshop. Therefore, we decided to interview participants that seemed to be active participants according to the following criteria: a noticeable continuous connection. We were able to see the name of the participants that were connected, and we decided to exclude participants who had an unstable connection. It means that we do not include in this paper research participants that were partially connected. These can include participant that were connecting and disconnecting very often during the session or participants that were connected during a limited moment of the session. This lack of consistency in participation is a source of uncertainty that can undermine the continuity of original ideas from one session to another or from the beginning of a session to the end.

### **Artifacts involved in the creative process applied to future studies.**

Ideas materialize in language or tangible mediatory artifacts (Zacklad, 2020). In creativity workshops aimed at future studies speaking about ideas is a language artifact and writing them down on sticky notes is a tangible artifact.

These artifacts often follow a sequential logic or are closely linked to the approach established by the facilitators and designers. While the upstream stages, such as divergence, are aimed at collecting a large quantity of ideas, the downstream stages, such as convergence, guide the production and transformation of these ideas towards synthesis. Therefore, originality can be excluded at a fragmentary level during this approach. We can categorize the identified artifacts using the framework of cooperative semiotic transactions (Zacklad, 2020):

- Resource Mediator Artifacts: Technological forecasts, climate change reports, weak signals, sociological studies.

- Enabling Mediator Artifacts: Structured online boards, online games, cards, creative assignments, notes, and access conditions.
- Intermediate Mediator Artifacts: Results of intermediary steps, boards of notes, oral presentations, collective and personal notes, speeches, conversations, and intermediate versions of the final deliverable.
- Valuable Artifacts: Books, brief presentations of potential orientations, detailed descriptions of contrasting world scenarios, and reports.

### **Barriers to the sustainability of the originality along the creative process**

There is a transformation in terms of the characteristics of mediating artifacts (Zacklad, 2020). And the status of information can change or be blurred (original or common, true, false desirable or not), and an original artifact can be transformed into a common one following an incremental modification. Particularly notable is the discontinuity observed at the level of intermediate mediator artifacts, distinguishing between those representing an evolving version of the final deliverable and other types of intermediate artifacts exhibiting greater diversity.

On the one hand, originality can be present in some artifacts that don't have the attribute of documents and that will not last until the end of the collective creative process. Some artifacts in cooperative transactions can be considered as document if they are undergoing documentarizing (Zacklad, 2015).

On the other hand, if there is originality in artifacts and documents all along the approach, in contrast, valuable artifacts take the form of commonly accepted documents. In the end of the approach, the final deliverable document does not deviate from the standard expectations. The originality does not lie in the predetermined format known in advance to facilitators and participants which becomes a target to achieve to meet the organization's requirements.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, our research investigates the role of the artifacts and documents involved in collective creativity workshops applied to future studies. Numerous documents and artifacts are involved throughout the workshops, including specific documents providing information on ongoing trends, as well as artifacts designed by facilitators to enhance collective creativity. The final deliverables of these approaches are valuable artifacts aimed at orienting action to design a desirable future. We questioned the sustainability of the originality throughout the collective creative process. We described the typology of artifacts using the theoretical framework of Semiotics of Cooperative Transactions theoretical framework (Zacklad, 2020). Various intermediary artifacts, both visible and invisible, play a



crucial role, impacting the creative process. We identified the barriers to the sustainability of the originality along the creative process in relation to the characteristics of artifacts and documents involved in the creative process. In an era of uncertainty, individuals are expecting different responses to long-term challenges. It advocates for further research to better understand both the reuse of intermediary artifacts and the design of documents expected as the final deliverables or valuable artifacts in creativity applied to foresight studies.

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