

Public Collaboration Lab

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ABSTRACT

This exhibition introduces the Public Collaboration Lab (PCL), a one-year research project that explores the potential for, and value of, strategic collaboration between design education and local government to better engage council staff and the citizens they serve, in the development and application of design-led approaches to social challenges and to inform policy. It displays a selection of practice-based PCL collaborative design engagement tools that provide a site for argument, debate and exchange between participants in the process of creative engagement. Taking these tools as a starting point, the mini-workshop explores the various definitions of such tools (thing, boundary object, cultural probe, etc.), discussing their role in participatory design research.

Keywords

Collaboration; local government; higher education institute; probes; things; objects.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Public Collaboration Lab (PCL) is a one-year, AHRC-funded research project exploring the potential for, and the value of, design-led research to address societal challenges and to inform policy. The PCL is a strategic research collaboration between local government (London Borough of Camden, LBC), the citizens they serve, and a Higher Education Institute (University of the Arts London, UAL) to explore and experiment in the co-creation of services that may improve outcomes for citizens while reducing public spending.

2. PCL EXHIBITION

The exhibition displays a selection of the practice-based PCL collaborative design explorations, including the Future Libraries Project undertaken by MA Industrial Design students working

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with Camden library service. The Future Libraries Project delivered creative consultations examining what Camden citizens value about libraries now, and what they hope for the libraries of the future. The project's findings contributed to the LBC's proposals for statutory consultation around the future of Camden's libraries. The students designed and produced creative engagement artifacts, co-design workshop methods and tools, as well as a digital publication of the project findings.

The Public Collaboration Lab exhibition takes the form of a presentation of four of the PCL projects; the Future Libraries project, reframing the home libraries service, reimagining Camden's youth hubs and redesigning social housing waste separation and recycling. It comprises two PD engagement tools (namely *The Future Libraries Bureau* and *Library Expedition*), alongside a video contextualising the Future Libraries project and showing the tools in use. It includes several Home and Communities Library publications detailing the students' design outcomes, alongside a photo slideshow and six information panels describing all four projects.

The PCL engagement tools are tangible objects that provide a site for argument, debate and exchange between participants in the process of creative enquiry into what people value about libraries. We have described these 'tools' as 'things' defined by Ehn et al. as "socio-material assemblies designed by designers" (Ehn 2008; Björqvinnsson, Ehn & Hillgren 2010; 2012). However, what is the role of these 'things'? Are they 'cultural probes' in that they are "evocative tasks meant to elicit inspirational responses from people"? (Gaver et al. 2004). Or can they be more accurately described as 'boundary objects' which although appearing different to different worlds, their structure is common enough to make them recognizable to both, providing a means of translation? As Star and Griesemer expand "both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them" (1989).

In setting out a framework for understanding the role of objects in collaboration, Nicolini et al. identified that ‘people participated more when they were exposed to objects that presented a puzzle, required investigation and visibly posed a challenge’ (2012). The Future Libraries engagement tools appear to support this:

“I thought it was a very clever idea, that they [the tools] made it much more fun and because I had to find my way on the board, it made me think a little bit more” (Future Libraries participant, Camden 2015).

While the approach of collaboration facilitated between university design students, local government and other multiple actors is not a new one, it has not been widely documented within PD. At a time when there is a proliferation of ‘labs’, particularly within the context of local government, and when design higher education institutes are developing new ways to educate design students about social design issues (Transition Design¹ at Carnegie Mellon University is a notable example) this exhibition presentation is a timely one.

3. PROBES, THINGS & OBJECTS (30-MINUTE WORKSHOP)

The *Future Libraries Bureau*, displayed in the PCL exhibition, is an engagement tool based on the board game *Cluedo*². It follows the fictional narrative of the board game’s format –

“There has been a murder in the old library and the killer has burnt it down to hide all the evidence. While the police are hunting the murderer, a detective from the *Future Libraries Bureau* is trying to reshape the future of the new library with input from the general public, ensuring the new library works for the users better than before”.

We are interested in the role of the Future Library creative engagement tools and their relationship to existing definitions such as ‘things’, ‘boundary objects’ and ‘cultural probes’. The terminology to describe the application of different PD practices has come from many areas and is sometimes inconsistent (Sanders et al. 2010).

We propose, through this mini-workshop, to take a moment to experience the tools and reflect on their role and the need for specificity in their definition.

The mini-workshop takes the form of two activities, which are the starting points for a group discussion. The workshop participants are:

1. Invited to interact with the Future Libraries tools displayed in the PCL exhibition, reflecting on their functionality, characteristics, etc.
2. Asked to bring an object of their choice which they interpret to be a ‘probe, object’ and/or ‘thing’ and share the reasons why their object has this role.

These activities will inform a wider roundtable discussion on the various definitions of these objects, identifying which are the most useful and/or relevant in the context of PD research.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks to the Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London MA Industrial Design students who designed and made the two engagement tools displayed in this exhibition; Andreas Nicolas De Montis (Future Library Bureau) and Bronka De Sage (Library Expedition).

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¹ ‘A new area of design research, practice and study that proposes design-led societal transition toward more sustainable futures.’ (<www.design.cmu.edu>)

² A murder mystery board game for three to six players (known as *Clue* in North America) with the objective to determine who murdered the game’s victim.

