

Children deconstructing the adult mastery; story-making and design as tools for life

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This paper examines a partnership between adult designers and ten-year-old children working together on a future-orientated design brief called the 'Future Design Board'. The study was part of the author's Ph.D. thesis and used a fusion of design and story-making processes as tools for critical thinking and everyday exploration. During the study, the children were positioned in the role of the imagination expert while the adults were positioned in the role of the learner. This paper focuses on the impact that the partnership had on the adult participants; in particular, it reviews how the workshops allowed them to experience the power of children's imagination and recognise what elements of this may have been lost in the process of growing up. At the same time, the paper reviews the different qualities that the adults began to reconsider; these include the value of sharing and allowing time to have fun, using all their senses to experience the world, taking risks and making mistakes. The paper also analyses how the methods of the workshop had impacted on the adults' identities as designers and researchers. However, most importantly the paper discusses the importance of experiencing what children are capable of and the adults' commitment to valuing their ideas.

Story-making, design, collaboration, child, adult, power dynamics, play, methods, future

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper commences with a story from Rudyard Kipling that had been used as an example in Warner's (2013) chapter called 'Contradictory Curiosity'. It is a "story of a child – "an elephant's child" – who was full of satiable curiosity" and an inquisitive nature towards all he sees, hears, touches and smells. However, the adult elephants became annoyed by his endless questions and begin to punish the curious elephant child. This story is an analogy of how growing into an adult often means being pushed into a place that differs from the curious, magic place of the childhood.

In the context of exploring if parts of the magical 'child-expertise' can be restored in adulthood, this paper examines a child-adult partnership that questions how far it is possible for adults to be "carried away" by children's fantasies and to challenge their established adult thinking structures. This paper builds on a previous paper (Antonopoulou, 2011), which positioned and analysed "the Future Design Board" child-adult workshop series that took place between January

and June 2011¹. This child-adult partnership model had evolved after observing that despite the theoretical discourses that envision design, play and story-making as an integrated creation tool (Warner, 2011; Brake, 2008; Baynes, 1992) there is an apparent lack of practical examples that combine them into a "hands-on" method for all. Potential parameters that were identified as causes for this were the ways that child-play is generally devalued and obscured in adult life, in addition to how design is mainly considered as a professional designers' activity.

2. TASK AND METHOD

The workshops consisted of three six-hour sessions that involved several teams of two 10-years-old children and one adult. The adult participants were really diverse in terms of age, nationality and skills, however, they all viewed themselves as designers. Nevertheless, with the belief that everyone is a designer in their everyday capacity to problem-solve and create, the

¹ these comprised the final case study of my Ph.D. research at Goldsmiths – University of London.

workshops also included participants that did not come from a professional design background. During the study, the children were positioned in the role of the imagination expert while the adults were positioned in the role of the learner. Pre-sessional training was devised in order to facilitate the adult and children participants to be able to work in these terms (Antonopoulou, 2012).



Figure 1: Adults and children working together

The overarching task of the partnership was to design objects for the future and as part of this, an imaginary “Future Design Board” (FDB) sent a fictional brief to the child-adult groups. This concept and its tasks directly immersed the participants in story-making. The workshop started with a warm-up activity asking the teams to think about how they imagine the designers of the future, design their accessories-technologies and dress up with these. In the role of the future designer, the participants would then talk about how they envisage design and its role. The children immediately immersed in making without giving any explanation of what they were planning to do. “Not knowing what children were doing made me feel scared”, said Jill, one of the adult participants. Adults reacted in different ways to the loss of their power. This ranged from Jill’s passive attitude which led to her being initially ignored by the children she was working with to Lena’s “teacherly” approach stemming from a fear of losing control, which resulted in attempts to discipline children’s actions and behaviour). By and large, however, the adults at this stage were mostly helpers in the making process as many found it difficult to follow the fast pace of children fast pace of fiction-making.



Figure 2: Jill trying to figure out what children were doing during the first stage of the workshop

During the main activity, later on, the teams were asked to design future objects and help the “Future Design Board” committee that had run out of ideas. As part of this, they used the “story-making tool for design”; a tool I had created in 2009 that helps participants develop new objects while imagining them as personified living characters (Antonopoulou, 2009). The participants used the tool to write and illustrate the objects’ life adventures and used these stories as an inspiration to model their objects. Once more, the children were faster in story-making. Jill referred to this as a phase during which the adult participants were “pushed on roller skates” into the children’s world of play and not knowing how to balance they were “trying not to fall”. By the end of the day, some of the adults have started to add their own fictions and they were even attempting to “compete” the children’s fantasies, by expressing what they thought as being “crazy ideas”. Nevertheless, the children would, in turn, propose something more “extreme”, and often reject the adult ideas.



Figure 3: Children being really fast in co-creating stories during the first day

The teams’ proposals were posted to the imaginary Future Design Board and a week later they received responses that helped them discuss, progress and finalize their ideas. During the second day, the adults were clumsily rolling holding hands with the children admiring the “places” that children took them. The children’s leadership gradually diminished as adults were becoming more ready to immerse themselves in fictional thinking and the children were engaging in design thinking. During the third day, the teams had to create their final models. By that time adults and children were confidently rolling together in playfulness, while the nature of the activities allowed the adults to share secrets from their design world.



Figure 4: Adults and children working together during the third day

However, the aim of the workshop was not the development of new products but the use the creative process as a way to test personal ideas and ideals. In this context, the process triggered discussions on the ethics and the rhetoric of public voice, the limits of the designers' power and responsibility, discourses on sustainability, wellbeing, empathy and friendship as well as highly philosophical issues such as ethics of punishment, freedom of choice and the elusive idea of perfection.



Figure 5: Discussing ideas and ideals

The data collection process was part of the main "Future Design Board" fictional scenario and involved a personified PDA device² called the "little computer" and personified "Dictaphones assistants" that the groups have to dress up and name. All these were acting as agents transferring information (videos, pictures, conversations, writings) between the participants and the imaginary "Future Design Board". The participants responded via imaginary finger personas that they had drawn in their fingers. The data that were analysed with NVivo included final objects, recordings (audio, video, photographs) of the process, questionnaires and interviews with the participants. The task of the data collection process was essentially in the hands of the participants.

² a compact mobile devise that you can use to write, take photos, videos and voice recordings



Figure 6: Data recording: The little computers and the finger characters

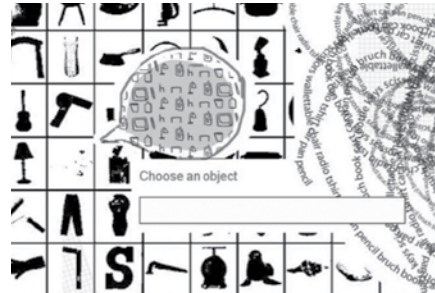


Figure 7: Screens from the "story-making tool for design"



Figure 8: Dressing up and personifying a Dictaphone



Figure 9: Child participant collecting research data



Figure 10: The tasks and stages of the workshop

3. THE IMAGINATION OF THE CHILD: RECOGNISING WHAT WE HAVE LOST AND EXPANDING ADULT CAPACITY TO IMAGINE

To start with, adults were fascinated to experience that in the child's world everything is possible. As Zahret, one of the adult participants, put it, "with adults you can say that is wrong but with a kid, you cannot say "no we can't do it"; everything is logical; magic makes sense". And, indeed, the children considered a living sweet as something normal. "He is just a normal sweet, that he is alive... he is a living sweet that's all he is," they said. Magic, is as simple as that for children. According to Harry, it is this "alternative possible" that adults were not able to consider themselves one of the major learning.

It is important to observe that all the adults recognised that their interaction with the children generated new ideas that would not have occurred without them. While many of the adults expressed a sense of shock at having lost this type of unadulterated playfulness, nonetheless, after the workshops they also expressed pleasure and exhilaration. As Jill put it, it was as if the children had entered into a "Peter Pan" role, putting them back in touch with their childhoods.

Adults came to the conclusion that becoming an adult meant to forget how to see things anew. They realised that they had been somehow educated out of their creative capability "to continue to be" or constantly "become" (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. xi). As Zahret said "I was interrogating myself. Everybody needs that shock, why did I stop learning?" Horton has also talked about the danger of this process suggesting that "one of the most tragic illnesses of our societies is the bureaucratization of the mind" (Horton and Freire, 1990, p.37); and it is actually one that is very difficult to diagnose ourselves. The children seemed to be the catalysts in making adults diagnose themselves and become motivated.

It was clear that adults also valued the power of story-making as an ideation process and in particular the method of the personifying objects. Even if the adult participants had clearly suggested that the "story-making tool for design" was way more than a professional practice tool, most of them considered ways of using it professionally in the future. As adults said: "Even though story-making felt to be a hard task at first, the impulse questions, the atmosphere of the workshop and openness of interpretation of stories became a medium to have fun, unwind and let it go". However, everyone suggested that an integral part of the tool's success is that is used in collaboration with the children. Jill outlined that "the disagreements", meaning the times that children rejected her ideas, were the moments that made

her think differently, cultivate and develop new ideas. Harry said that while he is able to make the best of the world around him, he found complimentary that the children could help him create something out of nothing; a new world to escape to. Lena also felt that the collaboration allowed her to become more playful.



Figure 11: A robot as part of the group

4. SHARING, COLLABORATING AND VALUING TOGETHERNESS

In addition to the uses of story-making the adults realised that play, fun and thinking is best when shared with others. The workshops not only motivated adults to value collaboration but also cultivated the importance of friendship and togetherness within a community. The concept of love, friendship and companionship were evident in many of the personified objects and stories produced and allowed adult participants to reflect on it. For example, Betty thought that their "dream for a wish" hat could be worn if you have a bad dream and one may wish to instantly have someone next to you to console you. With this enhanced value of co-existence, the adults were enabled to respect and consider the full value that makes us humans. Zarhet, for example, said that their "incredible robot" has taught them that "it wouldn't be very nice to change people" and she elaborated on how we should respect and accept others, "just how they are".

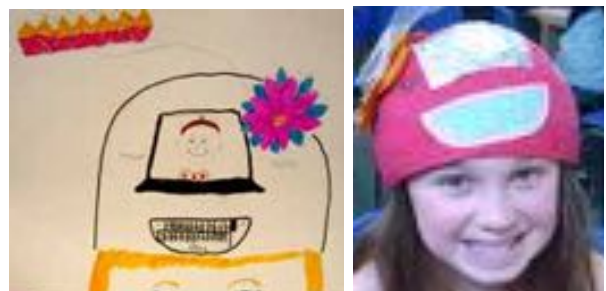


Figure 12: Hat that consoles you after having a bad dream

5. “JUST IS”: DISMISSING THE CONSTANT SEARCH FOR UNDERLYING MEANING

Another important finding was that the adults were moved by the unpretentious simplicity of the children's perspective. Lena pointed out that while adults search for meaning in the moral or the purpose of a story for the children a story is just a story. Jill had also observed that the children, “just do something”, “just make something because it is just play for them”, they don't need to think about it beforehand; they don't like to overanalyse their thoughts. This is also evidenced in their dialogues with the adults.

P (child): He does not have eyes, no!
J (adult): Why?
P (child): Because he is a Dictaphone...
J (adult): What about ears?
P (child): He doesn't have ears either
J (adult): Why not?
P (child): Because he doesn't

Adults were able to reflect on this stance of unpretentiousness to critique professional Art and Design discourses. They talked about how the “trend” to justify actions by intellectualising and academically legitimizing them often leaves no space for the honest, “just because...why not”.

Adults understood the value of these “just is” moments when pleasure comes out of the practice of doing; and indeed, according to Dijksterhuis, and Van Olden (2006), it is these unconscious moments that people do not have time to analyse what they do, that they are actually more able to be happy with the outcome. It is this “just is” approach that underpins doing things just because they are fun.

6. CHOOSING FUN OVER PROFIT

Harry suggested that he had learned that fun is not “a waste of time” but it should be an important objective. As he said, even if it would not make sense to a client to charge per hour just to have fun, it is crucial to be able to afford the time to explore and “just do” for the pleasure of doing. When I met him for the interview sometime after the workshop he had transferred this experience into his practice and he was creating journals just for “his own fun”. “I am going to hang it on the wall” he continued, “the whole idea is letting go of what this would be (...) I am not doing it because [it] is going to be a masterpiece; it might be, but I didn't care at that time”. This realization is important as it shifts the perception of what is valuable. Value is not dependent on acknowledgment but on enjoyment and self-expression.

The adults came to the conclusion that it is also the professional ways that we have learned to operate that refrain us from being able to obtain a fresh view where everything can go. For example, Zahret said that it would be boring without children since the adults would follow the familiar to them methods (research, discussions, brainstorming, creating a long story, and ending up with a product), but they would never be able to have a robot amongst them to tell them what to do.

Harry also suggested that Arts and Design, in their attempt to seem “serious” and worth investing, often compromise their innate creative nature and adopt business processes. However, adults realised that play and fun involves passion and emotion, and they were hopefully inspired to be what Jenkinson calls “free-range players” and grow into “free-range thinkers” (2001, p.51).



Figure 13: Group photo; the team is just having fun

7. OVERCOMING SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, TAKING RISKS, MAKING MISTAKES

Being with the children and evidencing how they express whatever comes to their mind without filtering it, the adults realised that another barrier is their self-consciousness. As the adult participants said, our ego controls and filters a lot of what we say, fearing not to be perceived as silly or not “normal”. For example, in contrast to children's spontaneity “we might think of something, but then immediately our subconscious says, ‘oh, no, no, that is a silly idea’, and then you wait until you get something better”. Harry outlined that even in cases that adults try to be childish, they are still self-aware: “even if you pretend to be a child you pretend to be a smart child, you never pretend to be a stupid child”.

In addition to decreasing their self-awareness and learning through fun, adults stated that the children have taught them how one should not take themselves too seriously and take risks. While the children agreed that there is no recipe for “perfect” life, the adults were inspired to see that life is liquid

and hunting perfectionism does not guarantee control; instead, a culture of experimentation, no matter the outcome, and continual readjustment to new experiences was needed.

Inspired by the children the adult participants were prepared to take any chance and try out things that they did not know how to deal with. It became apparent to them that “the bigger the risk the bigger the value” (Warner, 2013, p.34). In accordance to Becket’s (1983;1999) “fail better” philosophy, Harry outlined the importance of failure as valuable as part of life learning. In his words, “you make mistakes and eventually one mistake you would like”.

8. USING ALL THE SENSES

The adults at the same time observed how the children were able to recognise, understand and articulate the most complex issues in a very truthful and precise manner without sugar-coating them. “If they thought something is ugly, if they don’t like something, if they feel moody, they would say it with a sharp honesty”, said Lena.

Jill illustrated the deep and truthful connection between the children and their environment by saying that children were more sensitive about things. Sensitive according to her means, “to be able to use all your senses to observe and absorb things”. They are according to Jenkinson “in tune maintaining a connection with the invisible, with unseen forces behind nature, and the metaphysical world” (2004, p.67). Not only did Jill notice how children managed to be more sensitive but she believes that by observing them she learned how to follow the same process and look at things from a different perspective. As Jill said, when they had designed the living sweet that saved Japan from starvation, she felt confused and thought “what on earth?”. Despite that the children were rejecting her ideas, she was amazed to observe how they combined and interwove their ideas without having a plan. During the group presentations, she further absorbed how one would say something and the other would continue even if they had never talked about it before. They would say “oh yeah and (...) they would carry that on, they would pass it to each other and continue back and forth, in a malleable and flowing in a way,” Jill said. Zahret also found that this process of interchanging fictions and inhabiting fictional worlds made her more open-minded and able to look at things from a different perspective than the singular reality of your own world.

9. AGENCY AS DESIGNERS AND RESEARCHERS

With this new perception of what it means to be creative, that resulted from the collaborative story and physical making, the group discussions and the meta-reflections helped the adults reconsider what it means to be a designer and a researcher, and feel more confident about their “designer” identities. While Harry had talked about design as a “creative and as fun as possible process”, Zahret had come to consider design as a personal experience through which the designer constantly seeks inspiration for their own personal growth and satisfaction. And like many of the adult participants, she had come to consider design capability as a life skill and as a mode through which one could develop and express their knowledge, values and opinions: “If you are a real designer you have to create for yourself, for your beliefs”, “you need to have your own projects”, the “designer’s job does not end at 5 pm”, it is “your life long decision”.

Zahret, also came to think that design is not fragmented in different disciplines; it is a skill-set logic. However, according to Zahret If someone is “just hungry and eats” it does not mean that they design their food, they just consume”, Zarhet said that a designer is someone who “wants to make the best rice” and “tries to get the best olive oil from the city market”. Everyone phrased their views about design in different ways but they all outlined that design is about commitment, idealism, passion and inspiration.

10. ADULTS RECOGNISING WHAT CHILDREN CAN OFFER THEM AND BECOMING MORE RESPONSIVE TO CHILDREN

The partnership allowed adults to value children as coherent-self entities, with advanced capabilities, interests and unique voices. Jill suggested that the conversations changed the grown-ups preconception of children as less critical and knowledgeable compared to adults. Moreover, the adults realised that children can hold these complex “pragmatic” concepts in parallel with their “beyond-adult” capability to inhabit fiction.

Adults may not able to permanently return to this “child” state, however understanding the ways that children use the world held adults in awe and motivated them to respect “childhood in its own right as a place to be and become a human” (Drummond, 2004, p.xi). The messages that the adults left for the children was a massive thanks for what they had learned from them and wished for the best in their lives. It is hoped that these adults will remember that what is “best” is something that the children should choose.

11. THE ADULTS’ LIVES AFTER THE WORKSHOP



Figure 14: Adults, during the interviews, talking about their lives after the workshops

It is interesting to recount the impact that the partnerships had on the adults' lives sometime after the end of the workshops. Jill was the first to contact me a few months later asking eagerly to meet me, tell me that she had found her place as a designer and that her MA project has been highly influenced by the workshops. She enthusiastically said that story-making had become her tool to engage people with "obscure" issues. Betty also had a professional revelation; she said that she had finally found the confidence to draw and feel that she is a designer.

For Zahret and Harry, the workshops had broader life-changing effects. Zahret said that children were the "motivators to find direction in life" and she signed herself up for a life of staying fresh. She started studying new areas in her free time and she was so enthusiastic about her new life that she was getting in touch with me very often to share the new things she had learned. Harry decided to free himself too and left engineering for what he always wanted to do, enjoy art. In our first interview a couple of months later he brought me his drawing and showed it to me with pride. He had tried to paint in a very free way just for his own fun.

Almost a year later, during our second interview, we spend many hours talking about all the things he had learned about the power of collaboration and how he has applied these in his new collaborations as a photographer, filmmaker and artist. I felt very proud to see one of his photographs in Tate Britain. Lena left her job too and moved to France where shortly after met her other half, became a mum and started a career as an illustrator for children's clothes.

Someone would argue that these changes might have happened anyways in these people's lives. It is interesting however that they happened simultaneously shortly after the workshops and that every single adult thought that the workshop experiences were the catalyst for their change.

The teachers in school that I ran the "Future Design Board" were also interested to run further workshops engaging their 16-year-olds "Design and Technology" GCSE students with the 10-year-old children and possibly engage the teachers to be in partnership with the children. Subsequent to my workshops the school also continued to engage with very interesting projects along the same concept of capability being connected to a broader life skill (Stables, 2013). Even if the school has always been proactive I hope that my research somehow enforced the teachers to see the benefit of such projects for the children. Simultaneously the parents of the children in every single workshop were fascinated by their children's motivation and they emailed me back to express interest for future activities and ask me advice on how to keep their children motivated. No matter how awkward I felt with such questions that have no singular answer, it was obvious that all these adults had noticed that something has changed and were eager to follow this through.

It is hoped that at least some of these adults will form a new generation of adults that in their multiple roles as designers, researchers citizens, parents, teachers, learners will have a clarity about who they are and what they believe in; they will be prepared to think outside the social conventions, they will be open to test things otherwise and discover through the combination of their design intelligence and the power of play. Even if they will never be able to become as spontaneous as children are in every aspect of their lives, at least, they will be adults that value the child's expertise and know what children, as adults of the future, really need.

11. REFLECTIONS

During my Ph.D. research, I focused on a broader idea of learning without directly analysing how that model impacts on certain school or academic curriculum. However, one would wonder if and how such learning methods could have a place in formal education; how could we achieve such equal power dynamics in a formal education setting and whether children can be part of this. Wearing my academic hat I have evidenced that the universities I work for, identify the need to teach people how to be able to change and be capable of deconstructing their own processes. Being part of this process, three years ago I created the 'Creativity and Innovative thinking' short course, at Chelsea College of Arts –

University of the Arts London. This course aims and has indeed helped many people of really diverse professional backgrounds to reconsider their strengths and gain the confidence to change or better frame their direction.

However every single time I witness such transformation I cannot stop being self-reflective thinking whether academic knowledge and research are enough for one to teach such a course. To my mind, in order to teach such a course you have to stick to its principles and constantly challenge your own processes. I feel fearful that in all my roles as educator, designer, researcher and storyteller, I am part of a system or institution that propagates a set of principles and imposes them through its “expertise”. Nonetheless, while being self-critical, “challenging”, “political” and “experimental” might appear to offer an escape from being institutionalised, given that this is an ethos in itself (that is promoted by academia), perhaps we are inevitably bound to a system; we are perhaps part of a production line.

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- But how do we (academics and institutions) break away from our own foundations and what can we learn from children? Perhaps the least we can do is seek continuous “diffraction” in our individual approach by having a holistic polyphonic view of different systems and “immigrate” (Bezaitis and Robinson, 2011) in new disciplines. I try my best to stay as a “discipline wanderer-wonderer” or even as a stranger, who is expected to find ways to adjust, go with the flow, allow time for relationships to develop, learn the distinct languages used in other domains and in the meanwhile accept some degree of uncertainty, tension, friction and confusion. Leaving one’s comfort zone may be difficult, nevertheless, I value that I have been forced to survive the destructive but also creative chaos of becoming disorientated and required to continually problem-solve in a “messy” way. Being willing to be both wanderer and a wonderer, like a child I am richly compensated by the magic of new discoveries. I have learned that the moment that I speak the language with a perfect accent is about time to look for new wonderlands of learning. We have many homes to come back anyways.
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