



# The zine method as a form of qualitative analysis

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FIGURE 9.1: *Photograph and edit: Raquel Benmergui.*

*Introduction*

This chapter brings forward the possibility of capturing creativity and human experience through a visual ethnography approach, applying the use of ‘zines’ as a means of capturing individual engagement with a process. Zines (small (maga) zines) have roots in the do-it-yourself movement. The idea and use of the zine has emerged over time, from the early leaflets and pamphlets produced by independent publishers in the late eighteenth century, to the amateur press movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the subculture of fandom that emerged in the 1930s in science fiction, to spread later to the punk and riot grrrl movements. Zines operate at the intersection of art and activism, spanning the spectrum of social justice issues such as ecology, tenant’s rights, disability and political activism. This continues in current times in which they have also become tools for expression by individuals whose voices might otherwise remain silent such as adolescent girls writing against gender, race and class stereotypes. Whilst acknowledging the lineage of zines as a form of social action, in this chapter we focus on ‘the zine method’ for use within the research process in the data collection and analysis stage. By zine method we mean the design response of the ‘zine’ as a means for self-reflection and to improve communication.

Zines are presented in this chapter as a method of collecting and analysing data within a framework of qualitative analysis that retains more of the shape of the complete experience (Dewey 1934). This is done so as to maintain a more overall sense of what the experience was for an individual participating in an activity within an organizational context.

Underlying this approach is a questioning of the breaking down of experiences into data sets that can be measured and therefore compared. It is not that this approach to the collection and analysis of qualitative forms is seen as invalid. Rather, the case is being made that retaining more of a holistic sense of an experience is also crucial at the analysis stage, whilst recognizing that this type of approach faces challenges of validity. This is due in large part to the current bias for evidence-based decision-making requiring measurable components that can be compared against each other and across data sets (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Accounting for experience only through evidence, this chapter argues, loses many important elements of experience, such as tacit engagement, experiential knowledge, collective reflection and individual judgement. What is being lost is the human creative input and engagement with experiences in the organizational and workplace context.

There are methods for quantifying creativity at key junctures in problem-solving or consensus gathering, for example through qualitative analysis of idea generation

sessions, interviews/testimonials and case studies. For the most part, these qualitative methods are textual. These can inform decisions by gathering supporting evidence for a decision taken or a direction pursued in solving a problem. The approach is most often to break the tracts into coded components that can be compared and measured against one another. Quantifying the findings is the overriding consideration in decision-making as they can be compared against one another and can fit into existing modes of analysis that involve, in a greater and greater part, the use of computer-aided data gathering and analysis. What this approach leaves out are the more holistic expressions of an experience that can inform a study about the effects of a certain process or environment or grouping on the human beings involved. For example, how changes to a system will affect the individuals using those systems and how to gather the individual creative approaches to problem-solving that emerge from the individual's experience and knowledge shaped from a holistic view of the situation. Capturing subjective experience and allowing for that expression to play a role in decision-making has been more difficult to argue at a time when evidence in the form of data is a requirement for decision-making.

When we tested the method for the first time at the 11th International Forum on Knowledge Asset Dynamics (Dresden 2016), the conference convenors statement read, 'creativity is one of the remaining human faculties that cannot be replaced by computers for now' (Holtham 2016). The conference addressed three key topics identified as leading towards a new architecture of knowledge: big data, culture and creativity. The rationale for the conference focus was that:

*In view of radically changing demands on knowledge work as an eminent factor for personal, organizational, and societal success its patterns have to be rethought. New ways of creating, processing, and sharing knowledge must be discovered beyond the classic paths of established disciplines.*

It seemed to us that it was highly relevant to begin to properly account for the contributions of creativity in the workflow so that work environments and procedures could capture and benefit from human creativity in the process of innovation. This is an area that requires particular care and attention, as so much emphasis is currently placed on that which can be quantified.

Zines are applied as a qualitative method of collection and analysis. They are visual, tactile, three-dimensional forms of accounting for experience through artistic responses, design propositions and textual notations to provide a tangible and holistic modelling of an experience or a problem and how to move forward from it.

## *Practice*

The zine method utilizes a multi-page technique from the graphic arts for use by non-specialists. The zine is a space where elements of a problem area or a solution can be mapped via the visual plane. Going beyond the single page format, the zine allows for multi-page and multi-dimensional expressions to come into contact with each other; for example, visual notions that have not been connected in the mind of the participant can be juxtaposed via this approach while still retaining their individual integrity in the single page.

This format allows for notations to be made on the single page plane, so that focus can be applied to the singularity of that image, while at the same time allowing for an overview of the project to happen via the cuts and folds built into the construction of the zine. These allow for multiple ways of structuring and ‘reading’ the information and for various juxtapositions to be made depending on proximity of spreads. There is an element of chance built into this design that frees the participant temporarily from making causal relationships between elements, and allows those relationships to emerge depending on how the structure is presented. It is a method that encourages intentional play, much like a game or a puzzle.

Via the zine method, complex sets of elements can be represented in one package (the zine), letting ideas emerge from the active handling of the paper matter; by folding in different ways, by setting up the zine into a three-dimensional structure that refers to a larger concept taking shape in the mind of the participant. It is an emergent framework that expresses as an active process the subjective engagement with complexity and ambiguity in problem-solving.

As three collaborators from three different fields, we are interested in innovation within research methodology that benefits each of us and other participants and the ways we model learning when applying and combining methodologies. Monica Biagioli is an artist, writer and Senior Lecturer in Design Innovation in the Graphic and Media Design course at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. She is interested in the role art and design can play to help connect people to each other and to their environment and as a means of reflection in a discovery process. Anne Pässilä, Ph.D., is a senior researcher in the School of Engineering and Science LUT University, Finland. Her work focuses on sociocultural systems, mechanisms of equality, art-based social engagement in designing sustainable public and private services and sustainable innovation. Allan Owens (Ph.D.) is Professor of Drama Education and Co-Director of the Centre for Research in to Creativity, Education and the Arts through Practice (RECAP), University of Chester, UK. He specializes in learning through critical creativity and arts-based research.

As evidenced by current developments in knowledge transfer and exchange in the UK higher education sector, innovative activity does not only take place in the worlds of university education or business in isolated institutions. The relationship between formal and informal knowledge exchange is important and the ability to innovate involves interacting and translating ideas into contexts that have originated from several knowledge sources (Bodas Freitas et al. 2009).

On a pragmatic level, we three authors have come together to work on projects over the last six years. We are concerned with developing research, learning and teaching approaches that are novel in an organizational and management context, but not necessarily new elsewhere in art departments in universities and the world of professional publishing, and so we are keen to offer novel approaches to augment experiential knowledge in the workplace (Holtham et al. 2010).

Second, we seek to promote learning as an active process in which learners construct the world through dialogue, action and reflection as they interact with other people and their environment. Freire's focus on the development of critical consciousness helps define our pedagogical position in the sense that learners' concrete realities are central to the learning process, and the job of the educator is to enable learners to 'read' that reality differently. He argues that when immersed in daily life '[...] our minds do not work epistemologically', in other words we have no great need to '[...] ask ourselves anything' (Freire 1998: 81). One key role of the educator is to enable learners to step outside the experience of daily life, to 'emerge from it' in order to '[...] distance ourselves from it [...]'. The distancing ourselves from the object is epistemologically "coming closer" to it' a technique of productive 'alienation' (Willet 1964).

We engage in this process of using the zine as an affordance for conversation, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar to improve our own research practice and because it is an enjoyable approach in collaboration. Finally, we view our collaboration as part of the process of revitalizing professionalism in education and business and improving practice through artistic inquiry and action research (Holtham and Owens 2011). We are seeking to develop approaches that enable us and invite others to move beyond that experience in ways that paradoxically allow for a deeper understanding of it. This is in contrast to the competency-based models of education developed as part of the 'new managerialism' inherent in the public sector since the 1980s (Randle and Brady 1997).

### *Background*

We started to work collaboratively in a participatory innovation process in social enterprise where the focus was to capture citizens' perspectives and ideas as well

as to create a space for sharing multiple perspectives into a development process (Owens et al. 2014).

The first zine publication was self-initiated by Biagioli as a subjective reflection of her participation in the IFKAD 2015 Conference. She based the publication loosely on the form of a play score as a response to her experience of attending the conference and responding to ideas, people and situations she encountered. This included all facets of the conference, not just the paper presentations or larger sessions, but included the walks taken, conversations had and sights seen in Bari, Italy where the conference was held. The publication included photographs she took, drawings she made, notes taken, as well as various ephemera from the conference itself. She posted the physical zine, entitled 'Exit Stage Right', to the 'players' involved in 'the play' (the conference), including Pässilä and Owens, as well as to the conference organizer. This qualitative record captured Biagioli's holistic experience of being at IFKAD 2015 in Bari and being influenced by the group of researchers gathered for the event.

We then began to collaborate on an iteration of the zine for application by co-designing a version of the method for the GNOSIS 2020 research two-day network event in February 2016 (University of Liverpool, London). This application utilized the zine as a meta-analysis of group findings from a session based on findings in individual zines submitted by session participants. In this iteration of the method the research team tested the possibilities of the zine to express an overall analysis of a process. For that session, the researchers agreed on a zine template to be distributed to network participants on the last day of the network sessions. Network members were also provided with markers, pencils, and various colour and shaped dots and they were asked to record in visual form their experiences and findings from the network sessions as a self-contained zine publication to be gathered by the researchers. Twelve zines were collected at the end of the session.

The approach for this zine was to analyse all the individual zines submitted by session participants (who self-selected whether to provide their zine for the study) and create a composite zine to represent key findings from the research session. These zines were then analysed for their ability to express key ideas running through the sessions; for their ability to express through subjective form a notion that the researchers had observed as collective voice running through the group attending the session. Elements were gathered from each of the zines and a Gnosis 2020 zine format was agreed and applied to encapsulate the knowledge and expressions of the group who attended the session.

The GNOSIS 2020 zine (Issue 1) was designed to be an A6 booklet that folded down from an A3 sheet. It could be read as a booklet, and when fully opened, had an A3 poster on the backside. Page one (the cover page) had a schematic drawn by the network organizer which expressed her vision for the network in

THE ZINE METHOD AS A FORM OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

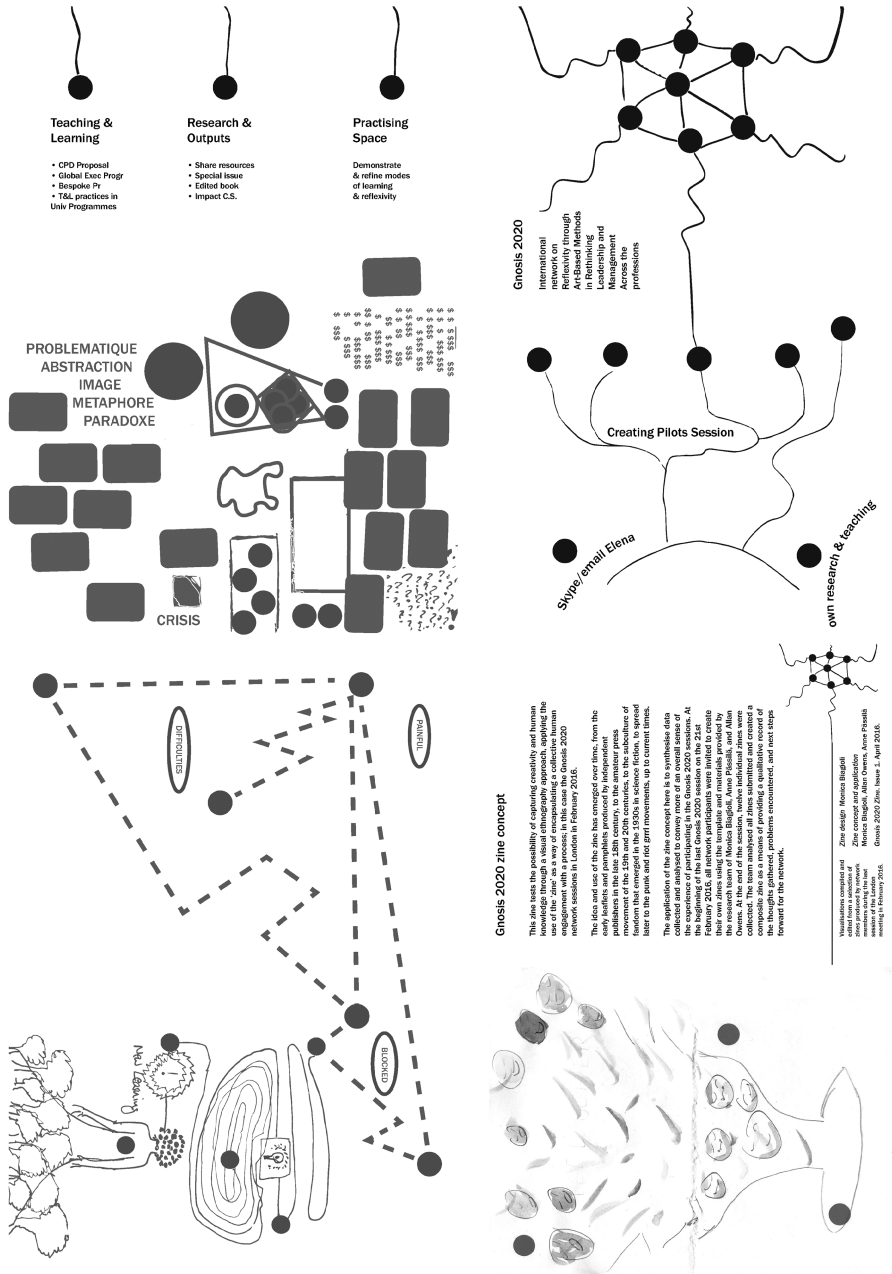


FIGURE 9.2: Zine produced for Gnosis 2020 in 2016. Design by Monica Biagioli.

visual form. Page two (two-page spread) reading left to right: on the left (leading from the network visualization on the cover) were the key dimensions that the network organizer identified in her zine as well as the kinds of activities/outputs she envisioned for them. On the facing page was a visualization by one of the network attendees that expressed the complexity of the territory the network was engaging with as well as its problems. Page three was a montage of three different visualizations from three different participant zines: the schematic, the text headers and the representation of the human form processing learning. Those were put together to express the subjective/objective links and relationships involved in the network.

In other words, quantitative analysis in zine form was being used to quantify certain key stages/processes of problem-solving/new learning, but also to foreground the subjective dimension of processing in a qualitative form of representation that best suited the participant. Page four was a hopeful representation of how new learning could be processed in an effective way to integrate negative/positive feelings and outcomes from the process. The facing page had a statement from the research team about this approach of gathering input, analysing content and representing it in qualitative format. Page five (the back cover) was a schematic (visually linked to the front cover schematic) produced by one of the network participants that expressed well the intention of the network to continue



FIGURE 9.3: *IFKAD 2016 Zine*. Co-designed zine: Allan Owens and Anne Pässilä.



and what the network organizer hoped for in terms of contact and interaction, as well as next steps for the network.

We concluded that it was problematic to do a meta-analysis of the zines as one composite zine, as this would unhelpfully privilege the perspective of the research team, and decided instead that it was a more useful application of the method to allow participants to use it as a subjective processing space. We then co-designed the current application of the zine method for the IFKAD 2016 Conference. The multi-page format developed was adapted by Biagioli from an existing artist book format (Golden 2010) and its application was co-designed with Owens and Pässilä for the organizational context. The application of the method was envisioned as a subjective space for reflection and/or analysis by individual conference participants. As a result of the findings from the zine application for Gnosis 2020, no meta-analysis zine was produced as originally planned, as the researchers agreed that the individual zines represented holistic forms of qualitative analysis. Instead, the individual zines would be submitted, retaining their individual perspective and contributing through the entirety of their form to a collective reflection on the conference.

Conference participants were invited to take a zine template and create their own zines to record their impressions and interests during the conference. A selection of zines were exhibited during the keynote speech by Clive Holtham (again participants self-selected whether to exhibit their zines or not). Those zines were given to the conference organizer as a qualitative record of the conference.

Biagioli further tested the zine method (Biagioli et al. 2016a, 2016b) alongside other qualitative methods in a collaborative research study in October 2016 with Master's students in service design as part of a larger study of generative methods in service design pedagogy published in *The Design Journal* (Ali et al. 2017). Because of its playful format, the students first engaged with the zine by folding and unfolding it, trying to figure out the possibilities of its construction. The researcher expected students to apply visuals singularly on each page and then allow for all those single expressions to come together in a variety of ad hoc constructions. Instead, a majority of the students worked out a holistic concept for the zine and used the single pages to represent the various, complex elements within that structure. This took the format into new applications not expected at the onset of the research session.

The findings from this session were significant and exciting, as students responded very strongly to the method, applying it in a variety of ways to express a problem area being investigated, a solution being developed or simply as a space 'to be alone with yourself' and allow for conflict and difficult emotions that result from the problem-solving process to emerge and be acknowledged.



Mapping emotions during project through drawing. Signe. Detail from her conclusion zine. 2016



Framing the problem.  
Shaika. 2016



Solving the problem.  
Tritra. 2016



Prototyping the solution.  
Jeff. 2016



Reflecting on emotion.  
Signe. 2016

FIGURE 9.4: Zine method research with Master's students in service design, 2016.

The Master's students applied the format in four key ways as an active part of processing their current projects on the course. They used the zine to collect and record their own emotions in a design process; in other words, applied as a private space to record emotion during a process. They used it as a means to set out and explain a problem area; in other words, as a material prototype/visual aid to visually express how the problem was framed and what the process was for solving it. They adapted the visual form of the zine to express ways forward in the process; in other words, as an actual early version, rough prototype of the outcome intended for the project. Finally, they used the zine as a presentation tool to communicate within their project team and to present ideas to the client.

Biagioli conducted a further session with Master's students in Documentary Photography in March 2017, applying the method as a self-reflection tool to record the outcomes of their collaborative group working unit.

The outcomes of all of these zine applications were presented at 'Beyond Text' in May 2017 (Storyhouse, Chester, UK). Visual exemplars of all the zines were exhibited during the session and made available to Beyond Text participants. A variety of paper stocks and constructions and applications were presented to demonstrate visually and physically the range of format options and the scope of applications available with the method. Blank zine templates (first applied at IFKAD 2016) were made available to participants who were invited to apply the method to record their experience at subsequent Beyond Text project meetings including session at the University of Vic, Catalonia (2017).

As a research team we have applied the zine method in various additional research, applied and teaching contexts including: work with the method by Ph.D. students at University of Chester, UK; application of the method within the context of MA research at University of Chester; ArtsEqual LUT research as artful inquiry, Lahti, Finland; application of method in an audience/participant study at Storyhouse in Chester, UK; presentation of method and workshop at Zamek Cieszyn, Cieszyn, Poland, 2018; application of method during RSA NHS R&D Mental health care session, Liverpool, UK, 2018; application of method at University of Central Lancashire, 2018; application in leadership coaching and as facilitation in business by Realising Potential Ltd, 2018; application of method by conference participants during the Association of Cognitive Analytic Therapy Conference 2018.

### *Critique of practice*

The zine method has proven to be a strong visualizing tool – a method of paper prototyping – that allows user/participants to model the process or the problem area and/or its solution and use that model as an active element of presenting the idea. Through applications of the method over the past four years, we have observed that one of the key functions of the zine method is as an affordance for emotional responses; either for private consumption (self-reflection) or as a means to communicate conflict within a system or a process and express its potential causes. In terms of artistic elements, the method offers a process-based, multi-page technique of qualitative analysis. This allows the project stakeholder a means to record impressions and notions of a process before, during and/or after. A further benefit of the method is that it affords a wide range of symbolic, illustrative and textual means of recording impressions and notions throughout a process.

As a means of conducting research, the method provides a designed artefact that is reflective, interpretative and notional; all of these emphasizing subjective forms of representing experience that can be lost in more abstracted, rationally based quantitative methods. The method in its form reinforces the perception of content as a phenomenon; a thing as it appears and is interpreted in perception and reflection, as distinguished from its real nature as a thing-in-itself (Collins 2014). The method encourages the active use of subjective forms of expression and analysis in project construction, analysis and development. The visual prototype is applied in this method as an integral part of ideation, problem-solving and innovation. It is not seen simply as a decorative prop.

An area for further study is the integration of mental and physical activities afforded by the method. It has been observed that the movement of the zine is a part of processing knowledge and insight. The inspection of existing zines, the cutting of templates and folding and unfolding of the construction during the making phases and as a presentation tool become part of the ideation process, of the sense-making process. Analysis in this way is activated as much via the movement of the zine folds as by the content inside each 'page'.

Another area rich for further study was uncovered during the Beyond Text Multiplier session at Storyhouse in Chester in 2018 where method hybrids were observed, such as the application of the method as a way of recording other arts-based methods, or application of the method in combination with other arts-based methods ongoing at the same time. For example, during a challenging drama session at the event, notions and feelings emerged that different participants then reported back via the zine during the zine method session at the end of the day. Another example is the watercolour on paper started by Biagioli in a session on artful inquiry in management (session led by Clive Holtham); Biagioli completed the work back in London by cutting up the piece into 'zine pages' that she constructed into a flag zine (Kyle cited in Golden 2010). Once reconstructed as a flag zine, the watercolour was completed applying the dot drawing technique.

Power relations are inexorably linked to the method. As a format, the zine has a long history of application in the expression of collective voice. The contribution of this method is to allow participants a level of agency in how, what and when they record individual notions about a process and whether to contribute their personal zines to a collective situation; be that as a presentation method or to contribute an individual zine for analysis of findings from a research process.

The method is able to engage a group of participants actively as it is a physically constructed form. This application has been observed to be particularly effective in relation to what is felt or experienced during drama and performance sessions as part of the Beyond Text research sessions. The link between thinking and making is strengthened during the zine-making process as notions are captured

and elements are synthesized in relation to one another in the page spreads. The sense-making properties of the method are further reinforced when the zine is used as a communication method with others. Agency is reinforced during the zine-making process as various decisions are taken to select paper stock, devise the zine construction and decide on image-making and text-recording techniques. The ultimate decision is whether to share the zine with anyone else at all and at which point of the process to do so.

### *Consequences and effects*

The contribution of this method is to allow participants a level of agency in how, what and when they record individual notions about a process and whether to contribute their personal zine to a collective situation; be that as a mode of pre-entation or as a means of conducting an evaluation. The zine method is a way to progress understanding iteratively by applying the multi-page format to map a process or negotiation ahead: use it as metaphor; brainstorm ideas; and apply it as a communication tool. One of our collaborators pointed out that when apply-ing zines to organizing collective voicing it is more about collective reflection and meaning-making rather than problem-solving.

The zine method also functions as a means to reflect subjectively on one's own role in a process. Each zine can focus on different points of views and contributions. In this way, it can operate as a self-reflection tool to check 'what is going on with yourself' throughout a process. The zine method affords a contained way to address complexity and ambiguity. Each zine can map and record uncertainties within a process and the role emotion plays in that. It can aid in discovering relationships through juxtaposition of elements placed randomly. In this way, the zine connects previously unrelated elements to provide a fresh perspective and make sense of a situation.

Through this long research arts-based collaboration we have learnt about the energizing potential of interdisciplinary research work as an ensemble. By its very nature, the zine method operates on a relational level including that between the authors of this chapter. This can best be characterized, as ensembles often are, by trust in each other's very different capabilities. The zine method is arrived at through collaboration, participation and chance that is made openly available for use as a format.

There is a lot of scope for participant choice in the application of the zine method. A variety of formats can be made available to choose from. In applying the method, the participants are keenly made aware that they have choice in whether to show outcomes during the process or whether to contribute their zines as research findings at all. This level of agency afforded to participants is not arbitrary, but a necessary component in allowing the method to be applied for

complex processing by the participant. We have learnt that if there is an expectation that the outcome will be shown and/or submitted to a study, this will affect the approach of the participant and what it is he/she chooses to include or exclude from the zine. Participants thus have the ability to choose how to apply the method to their particular circumstance: express the problem to other group members or to oneself; come up with solutions; identify difficulties in the undertaking of the problem area; and/or use it as a presentation method in a narrative structure. The agency that choice generates is central to the zine method.

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