

## COVID co-design does not \*HAVE\* to be digital!

Why 'which platform should we use?'  
should not be your first question

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### Context

Physical distancing in response to the global pandemic has posed the challenge of if and how co-design work could continue without face-to-face interactions. One of the authors (SK) set up an open-access online document for researchers to share suggestions about how this challenge could be overcome (Knowles et al, 2020). This was widely shared and commented on, demonstrating that researchers were anxious to ensure co-design activities were not abandoned in an effort to control the spread of COVID-19.

Reflecting on the suggestions and questions added to the document, one anxiety in particular stood out: 'Which platform should I use?'. The document's main focus became an expanding list of different digital meeting packages, and the pros and cons of each (considering cost, security, recording options, popularity, and more). Despite SK frequently condensing this section, as of January 2021 it runs to seven pages (almost half the document). By contrast, a suggestion (instigated by JL) to explore (non-digital) cultural probes did not provoke further discussion.

The document is evidence of how committed researchers were to ensuring co-design continues. But the focus was largely on how to replicate common co-design events, such

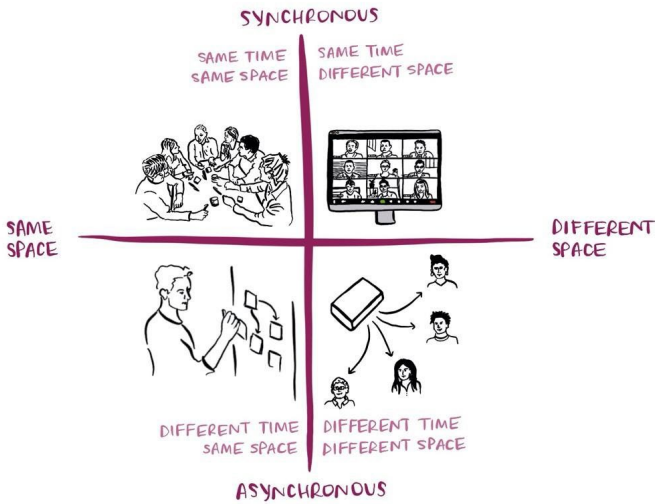
as face-to-face workshops, via online meeting platforms. This may have been pragmatically driven; researchers had access to computers and meeting software. But it also suggests a missed opportunity to expand our repertoire of co-design tools and think more creatively about how (remote) co-design could happen out in the world, as part of people's lives, distinct from how co-design typically looks in research. Rather than consider how co-design might look beyond a university meeting room, digital platforms put meetings inside people's homes and the realities of digital exclusion were largely unaccounted for.

## Introduction

The driving imperative of co-design is egalitarian; ensuring the people who rely on or are affected by a product or service are involved in and influence the design of it. Therefore, the modes of engaging and collaborating under this imperative should be inclusive and accessible, even tailored to the needs and/or preferences of these people.

We (the authors) have many years' experience in co-design. Pre-pandemic, our predominant form of interaction was face-to-face workshops designed to be cognitively, emotionally, and physically accessible for all parties. However, COVID-19 forced us to rethink this model and to begin experimenting with alternative modes of engagement. Early explorations on how to expand the spatiotemporal framework for co-design practice led to the establishment of four quadrants, reproduced in Figure 10.1.

Social distancing has forced a critical examination and experimental adjustment of our approaches to co-design. Like others, we embraced digital platforms (as outlined below) but also extended our exploration to analogue and blended digital-analogue approaches. The latter approaches (such as door-to-door, letterbox-to-letterbox, radio and more) explore and extend formats of collaboration. Testing new or updated modes of collaboration encourages critique of who we are engaging, and how. For us, this critique and



**Figure 10.1:** Spatiotemporal framework for co-design (reproduced from Davis et al, 2021)

new approaches should remain part of the co-design toolkit beyond the current pandemic.

This chapter reports on four approaches to engagement that we have trialled with co-design participants, starting where we did in early lockdown with a purely digital solution, before gradually expanding and blending our approaches. It draws together our early, evolving learnings, and shares our reflections on these ongoing experiments in co-design. More details about these particular cases and a number of others can be found online at: <https://lab4living.org.uk/projects/co-design-during-covid/> (Langley et al, 2021). These are not hypothetical or ‘in theory’ examples; they are things we have actually tried or are trying.

## Typologies

Here we expand on the thinking behind the ‘low contact’ design models shown in Figure 10.1, focusing on the second (Same time and different space) and third (Different time and different space) quadrants. A selection of projects are summarised in Table 10.1 to illustrate a variety of approaches taken.

### Same time and different space

*Online workshops using videoconferencing and digital collaboration software*

*Projects: Microsolidarity, NOVELL Redesign*

*Tools: Zoom, Jitsy, Toasty, Miro, Mural, Google Slides, Mentimeter*

The use of digital collaboration tools has extended boundaries for participation. Videoconferencing enabled a geographic dis-location of participants but also allowed us to engage with broader demographic groups. We found it important to consider the design of the experience and that the interaction must extend beyond developing a workshop schedule and content. Creating preparation materials, training packs, and drop-in sessions helped engage those with limited computer skills, or using technology such as a smartphone rather than a laptop computer, which limits the usability of collaboration tools. Allowing access to the platforms beyond the time-boundary of the workshop session can also help engage participants who would like ‘just a little more time’ to contribute their thoughts after the official end of the workshop session.

Unstable internet connections, personal resistance, fear of ‘getting it wrong’, a lack of confidence, or inexperience with technology were all seen to inhibit participation in a digital space and require careful intervention.

**Table 10.1** Selection of test-bed projects

Project title	Synopsis
Active Wythenshawe	Supporting the residents of Wythenshawe to be more active, whatever their physical ability, using existing/natural resources in the neighbourhood. Tools: Postal drop of zines, social media, radio, email.
(Re)building Stories of Harm in the NHS	Exploring how patients and families can be meaningfully involved (beyond their role as a ‘witness’ or source of evidence) in Serious Incident Investigations and developing resources to support their involvement in future investigations. Tools: Narrative reconstruction kits, activity books, virtual/physical workshops, Miro.
Downsizing	Exploring the experience of people aged 65+ moving from a suburban home to an inner-city apartment. Tools: Postal workbooks.
Food Futures	Using a gamified co-research process to help community members to discover their local food system, build their adaptive capacity, and explore what the future of food in their region could be. Tools: Workshop in a box, Virtual games, Miro, Google Docs.
Microsolidarity-in-Action	Using the community building and communicative practices of Microsolidarity to host empathy and capacity building games. Tools: Workshops, Google slides, liberating structures, Jitsy, Toasty, Mural.
NOVELL Redesign	Engaging nationally with stroke survivors, neuroscience researchers, rehabilitation professionals, designers, and health administrators to rethink the design of in-patient rehabilitation environments. Tools: Miro, Zoom, Mentimeter.
Whole Mouth Health	Investigating the perceptions of ‘whole of mouth health’ with international stakeholders and participant groups from Australia, Chile, Nigeria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Tools: Workbooks, workshops.

*Online workshops using videoconferencing and physical materials**Projects: FDI, (Re)building Stories of Harm in the NHS, Food Futures**Tools: Activity booklets, zines, story kits, Zoom, Miro*

Digital communication does not necessarily mean digital interaction, and it is possible to blend the distribution of physical materials with a virtual event. We have employed zines, activity booklets, and story kits as physical materials used in partnership with real-time digital communication. The advantage of this approach is that as a facilitator, the designer can be present and responsive. This experience largely tries to replicate a face-to-face workshop rather than investing in new opportunities to engage with people in a distributed way. As participants cannot physically share or pass around materials, the tacit experience of collectively contributing can be diminished. Engagement can extend beyond the temporal constraints of the session, but the live nature can limit the potential for exploring these objects in-situ.

**Different time and different space***Distributed workshops using 'workshop in a box' with a pass-the-parcel approach for collaboration**Projects: Food Futures**Tools: Card games, co-research game boards, systems discovery canvases*

Initial provocations are prepared, participants respond to them, and then pass on via post, with later recipients interacting with, and adding to, others' responses. Provocations are mock-ups, props, visuals, or sketch ideas, sometimes deliberately 'extreme' or even contentious, intended to stimulate thinking, reflection, feedback, and discussion. This increases the flexibility of participation and takes gamified workshop processes into participants' homes/workplaces,

increasing engagement for time-poor participants. The pressure of the unfamiliar is reduced by working in private, but the self-facilitated process can limit the ability to ask for help. Participation through pre-existing networks results in swifter parcel movement but raises questions around a potential echo-chamber effect. Although slower, a longer, mediated chain can facilitate greater diversity of participant voices, and in doing so, expand social learning opportunities between participants.

*Distributed workbooks or activities sent via post, with digital interface made available independently*

*Projects: Downsizing, FDI, NOVELL Redesign, Active Wythenshawe, (Re)building Stories of Harm*

*Tools: Workbooks, Zoom (on request), 3D story building kits*

In this fully distributed, hybrid model we have found a significant increase in the depth of engagement, particularly on tasks that engage people with their surroundings. This model capitalises on the strengths and capacities of digital and material formats but not necessarily at the same time. However, facilitation usually happens independently with limited opportunities for real-time group interaction.

This model provides an opportunity to contribute at a time *and* location that suits individual participants. The process of synthesis and engaging with the ideas of others occurs through a multi-stage approach built on the British Design Council's Double Diamond Design Process (Design Council, 2015). Data contributed in previous workbooks and activities are represented back in subsequent activities that enable participants to reflect on how their contributions fit with others.

While this approach is successful in allowing people to remain connected and contributing over a long timescale, some participants requested opportunities to engage in real-time. We responded by distributing activities that facilitated a conversation, such as completing an activity, or gathering perspectives from their family, friends, or colleagues.

The key challenge for facilitators is that they cannot respond to queries or redirect participants in real-time. Guidance has been built into these processes, but a negative experience appears to be amplified by the distributed approach. With no opportunity for intervention, frustration can build.

### **Assemblages**

The examples above discuss specific tools and techniques deployed across various co-design projects, many of which incorporate multiple models of collaboration. This blended approach provides significant opportunities to plan collaborative processes that can be agile and tailored to many different stakeholders' needs. The spatiotemporal framework developed provides a strong foundation for considering the options for engagement in low contact co-design and suggests forms that may be suitable to different communities. We use Critical Pragmatism (Forester, 2013) to guide our planning process, mapping and investigating various stakeholder's needs and preferences to assemble a suite of collaborative approaches (we refer to this as an assemblage). Rather than limit ourselves to replicating face-to-face meetings digitally, we consider stakeholder needs first, then explore tools and techniques to address these. It is future oriented, deliberate, and reflective. We offer Table 10.2 to help overcome barriers to participation with explorations of blended assemblages.

### **Ongoing explorations: barriers**

Ongoing engagement with our test-bed projects continues to raise questions and prompt deliberative, reflective conversations around who participates and how. This discussion also relates to the role of power and its distribution throughout co-design processes. Flattening hierarchies poses questions around consensus and plurality, a topic we continue to engage with through investigations in group decision-making and consensus building.



**Table 10.2:** Indicative mapping of barriers to participation among various participation models (Y indicates 'yes a significant barrier', M indicates 'maybe a barrier')

	Q1: same time same space	Q2: same time different space	Q3: different time same space	Q4: different time different space
Participants' time	Y	Y		
Mobility	Y		Y	
Accessibility		Y	Y	
Digital Skills		Y		
Literacy		Y	Y	M
Compromised immunity	Y		M	
Social fears or phobias	Y	Y		
Dexterity challenges		M	M	Y
Cognitive/Neural challenges		M	M	M
Process duration			M	Y

Throughout, continued mapping and consideration of the spatiotemporal framework reveals some of the barriers to participation that can (but do not always) occur in each quadrant (see Table 10.2).

While no single method is barrier-free, working with blended assemblages, adopting a critically pragmatic approach, and foregrounding participants' needs, creates a support structure by compensating the weaknesses of one method through the strengths of another. The assemblages that best scaffolds participation is contextual, particularly where facilitators (and/or other participants) are absent.

## Conclusion

Blended assemblages of co-design processes can help to overcome barriers and challenges in particular methods to minimise exclusion and maximise inclusion and collective decision-making in participation. They provide a flexible framework for processes that are highly contextual. Resources,

budget, and timeframe all play a role in how a blended assemblage is devised. Context also informs the consideration of inclusivity, empowerment, and creativity to determine the blend that maximises participation for all.

The examples we have outlined above are still being evaluated for their efficacy; they are offered here as inspiration and to challenge the digital default as well as complement digital approaches. We have found the practical tools offered here useful for both planning and evaluating approaches and encourage others to reflect and discuss their experiences. In a post-pandemic world, there is no benefit in returning solely to previous co-design practices. These expanded spatiotemporal models will continue to be relevant to the co-design community and should be utilised.

### **What needs to be done**

- Explore blended approaches to promote inclusivity for varying literacy levels, and accessibility for differing neural, cognitive, physical, technological abilities.
- Enable partners to contribute to an ongoing process rather than at time-locked windows of opportunity (events) organised and controlled by you.
- Explore collaboration in blended approaches with the aim of achieving collective participation, not just individual engagement in parallel.
- Learn about the balance between prescriptive tasks and emergent thinking through ‘doing’ activities and participatory sessions.
- Critically appraise the emerging role of designers/researchers within each blended approach.
- Prioritise (co-)creating blended approaches that empower participants with the space and authority to participate in ways of their own choosing.

## References

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