NARRATIVE: TOWARDS CUSTOMER CENTRIC SERVICES: SUSPENSION OF EXPECTATIONS AND TRUST

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INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC ORGANIZATION AND SERVICE DESIGN PILOT-PROJECTS

This narrative is written from the basis of experiences gained in working in collaboration with the City of Helsinki (later referred as the City) in a public service design project. The City has a new strategy where developing internal and external networks, user-driven innovation and business-friendly attitude are emphasized. The strategy has been implemented in three pilot-cases, titled as the Service Journey-projects, where the customer-centric and user-driven approach of service design, has been used for the first time. The aim of the pilot-cases has been in improving the public services for small and medium-sized enterprises and the actual execution of the projects has been carried out by two external service design consultants.

The development of public services requires a cross-functional process. This demands a new kind of thinking and attitude from different departments of the public body, which traditionally have been used to operating mostly within their own departments. Also, new means and methods for organizing, planning and facilitating co-operation with different groups of stakeholders are needed. This starting point offered the City a platform for a collaboration project with the Aalto University Service Factory and it was carried out through a project that included three parts conducted by students from different disciplines. This narrative is based on one of the parts, a Master of Arts thesis work, which aimed at exploring and testing how explorative and „designerly" co-design approaches such as design games (Brandt 2006) can be applied in the challenging environment of public services, which is a rather novel play ground for the application of design competence. The study was conducted in the form of three workshops where the service users, subscribers, providers and purchasers were asked to participate with other stakeholders and contributors (see fig.1-3).

This narrative reflects the experience gained by working in co-operation with the City representatives, consultants, and other stakeholders. It also discusses the experiences gained from organizing the workshops in the context of public services, where a novel approach, i.e. co-design, was introduced to the participants at the same time. Finally, some comments and experiences from the City representative's interview have been attached.

THREE WORKSHOPS

Three co-design workshops were organized to support the planning and launching faces of a new Service Journey -project for social and healthcare entrepreneurs, which was a continuation of the earlier three pilot projects.

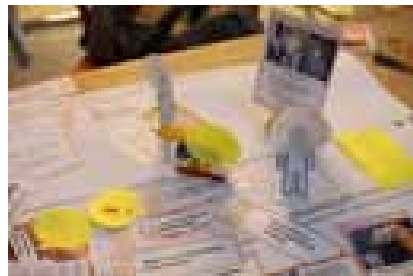*Figure 1: Workshop setting in a context of public service development*

Figure 2-3: Participants negotiating the current state of the services and visioning the dream situations in one of the workshops. Elements from design games such as game rules, turn-taking, visual cards, etc. tangible pieces were utilized to facilitate, stimulate and enhance the discussions.

Except recruiting the participants, all the arrangements for the workshops, such as planning, organizing, facilitating and transcribing the workshops were part of the Master of Arts thesis work. The work was part of a City funded research project and it was supported by Aalto University supervisors. The project group, along with the supervisors and the students from the University, consisted of a project manager and other representatives from the City and a representative from an organization that runs the interests of social and healthcare entrepreneurs. The two consultants were also actively involved in group meetings and attended the workshops.

The goal of the first two workshops was to gather information and experiences from the current situation, and map out the expectations towards the new Service Journey-project. The first workshop was aimed at entrepreneurs who were the customers and the users of the services and there were 14 social and health-care entrepreneurs attending the session. Second workshop was organized for the employees of the City and 10 officers participated the workshop. In the third workshop both parties, 14 officers and 10 entrepreneurs, were brought together to discuss and negotiate current issues raised during the previous workshops and to envision the ideal service journey, future collaboration platforms and the ways and manners through which these visions could be reached.

For most participants, including the project group itself, this was a first experience and contact to participatory design methods and user-driven empathic approaches. Therefore the objectives from the Service Journey – project's perspective were in helping to define, who should be involved in the development process, orientating the participants into the new approach, thinking and methods, and in creating a ground for the upcoming project and cross-functional collaboration. From the research perspective, the aim was to test and develop further a radically different working method that challenges the traditional practices and is suitable for the purposes of the future service development in the City.

EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES
INEXPERIENCED ACTORS
The project set-up was not particularly easy for a master student trained in industrial and strategic design programme to enter. The service design consultants had their own work in progress with the three pilot projects and the development work
had already been going on over a year. This meant, that the people participating the pilot project were already busy and as the project manager stated, tired with the development work and could not be bothered with yet another new project. Even though the City representatives were eager to start the university collaboration project, finding the suitable context to execute the research in reality was bit challenging and time-consuming.

COMPLICATED ORGANIZATION AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS
The service design consultants had backgrounds in economics, service marketing and advertising. Therefore they were not directly familiar with co-design and design games approaches and it was clear that these kinds of workshops could not be attached into their ongoing projects. However the City had made the decision to start a new Service Journey-project, which created a platform where the „designerly" approach could be implemented, but since the decision making in a big organization progresses very slowly, e.g. setting the dates for the workshops turned out to be challenging. Therefore all the three workshops were organized within one month, while the whole collaboration project lasted eight months. This was a bit tight schedule both practically and research wise, since the idea was to utilize the previous workshops contributions and reflect and develop the exercises and the material always to the next workshop.

FATIGUE TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT WORK AND QUESTION OF MOTIVATION
Another matter was that since there are constantly different projects and ventures going on inside the organization, there seem to occur some sort of fatigue towards the constant development processes among the employees. Therefore it can be challenging to try to get them excited about yet another new project, consultant or method. Especially, when they usually don't have extra resources reserved for development projects, but the work has to be made on top of their normal duties. This was shown in the requiting process. Although the call for participation was done by the City it was difficult to try to involve a sufficient number of participants to the workshops, so that the sessions would actually benefit the forth-coming Service Journey-project. Some of the biggest and at the same time most important bureaus are so massive with different departments and sections, it was not enough that only one or two persons participated the workshops. Above mentioned issues are linked to many questions from resources to individual motivation of the officers as well as acknowledging the importance of cross-functional development work.

RISK OF THE UNKNOWN AND STRANGE
Since the goal of the workshops was to support the planning and launching faces of the new project, the idea was that the consultants would continue the development of the project from there. This created a lot of pressure and stress before the first workshop. When people don't have first-hand, personal experiences of the co-design methods, it is impossible for them to fully understand what the methods are all about. When one sees pictures and presentations of workshops where „designerly" approach has been used, it can seem like a childish kindergarten play instead of „serious and productive working". Therefore even though the project group had had several meetings, where methods and plans of the workshops had been introduced, the atmosphere in the last meeting before the workshops was really tense.

TRUST
For most participants these workshops would be the first contact and orientation to service design mindset and participatory methods, and therefore the consultants were nervous about what kind of impression the workshops would leave. They wanted to highlight the point that the workshops would have to be successful in every way. Also the project manager from the City was confused about the structure and the goal of the workshops and it was clear that the attempt to introduce the method to the

Figure 4: Project group in a middle of a quick exercise and introduction to the mindset of the working method before the workshops.

Figure 5-6: Participatory project meeting. With the help of visual map project group tried to achieve consensus and negotiate about the project and research goals.

project group had not been sufficient enough and shared trust towards the student project had not been gained.

Even though the first workshop didn't succeed perfectly, material and exercise wise, it was apparently convincing enough to create trust inside the project group towards the next workshops. After the first workshop participants, including the project group had a chance to leave anonymous feedback of the session. The comments turned out to be almost all positive and enthusiastic. One could almost feel the release of pressure in the air.

REFLECTIONS

They say that there is a first time for everything and within the whole Service Journey -project settings there were plenty of those factors. As the project manager said afterwards, it felt like the whole project was about piloting after piloting for something. It was the first time the City had used service design approach in developing cross-functional public services, it was the first time the consultants had worked with the public sector and it was a first attempt to build research collaboration between the City and the Aalto University's Service Factory in this context. So there was no manual on how to operate in each of these situations. Another important issue was the fact, that the City is a relatively complicated organization with a very traditional and hierarchical decision making structure, which along the inexperienced actors influenced the stickiness of the beginning of the collaboration project.

Due to the same reasons, communication and building shared understanding among the project group were things that were problematic during the entire project. Looking backwards now, it is easy to see how there should

be some kind of alternative way to introduce a novel approach to the project group and workshop participants in the future. If the project manager asks you still after four months of collaboration, right before the workshop; "what was it again that you were doing", clearly the traditional powerpoint presentations are not enough to introduce the co-design and design game methods – even though they were practiced with a small scale exercise in one of the project group meetings earlier (see fig. 4). In the same way the project manager had experienced the orientation phase extremely difficult, because it had taken a lot of effort from the City representative's part to communicate the organizational structures, functions and manners as well as their expectations for the collaboration to the students and hence, achieving a common vision and consensus had been hard to reach (despite the attempts to try to communicate the complexity of the initial project setting with a visual map, see fig. 5-6). These are important issues that should be investigated more in the future.

One reason to the communication problems was probably also the nature of the methods as well as terms and language that were used. Although it is always pointed out that a framework for innovation and creation of change requires liberating and relaxed atmosphere where there is room for failure, it is not easily implemented in real life situations. The employees of a traditional public organization were asked to throw themselves into different and unknown actions and thinking, which challenged the normal behavioral patterns, e.g. meetings or workshops they were accustomed to, which is related to previous work done in Aalto University (Mattelmäki et al. 2009). Working

with tangible and visual material, such as carbon figurines, lego blogs, pictures, clue and scissors represented to the project group even different activities than the service design consultants had introduced and used before.

Therefore it is easy to understand how these matters can awake doubt, fear of unknown and there is a risk of losing credibility. It takes a lot of courage from the manager's side to trust and believe in these methods, especially when there is no guarantee on how people will react and operate and what kind of results participants will produce. Furthermore, retrospectively thinking the project manager assumed, that one of the factors that created pressure before the first workshop was the situation, where a student project in a manner of speaking stepped into the territory of the consultants. In this way the consultants couldn't start the new project with their own terms and were thus obligated to take part in the collaboration project. As the project manager sees it, the pressure of succeeding was linked to the ways the consultants work, which is purely business and maybe cannot be as experimental as research approach can be.

From a master student's point of view the situation would have been extremely challenging without the support and backup coming from the supervisors and the knowledge gained from previous work and literature review. Due to these factors there was not really a risk or a fear of failing completely, but it was a bit painful and frustrating to notice how difficult it was to try to achieve some credibility and to try to convince the project group about the benefits of the working method. Because of the tight schedule between the workshops, there was not as much time as originally planned to develop the workshop tasks

and analyze the produced material, and it feels like the workshops were organized in too much rush. Even though the research objectives were in that sense achieved, that a radically different working method was introduced, tested and developed further, it feels like the workshop structures, tasks and materials could have been designed even more comprehensive way. This is linked to the fact, that it is always better, more effective and more creative to bounce ideas with another colleague or team. Planning and organizing as well as producing and developing the workshop materials is rather a group effort than a single person's job, even though the supervisor of the thesis work contributed a lot to the process. Thinking about the future projects and the development of one's professional skills, these have been very valuable lessons to learn.

IMPACT

The project manager described afterwards that the workshops were a real eye-opening experience for her and revealed a whole new perspective on what working together with different parties could be. She was especially delighted of the concreteness and efficiency of the teamwork during the workshops, and the amount of material produced in a small period of time. The fact that results of the previous workshop was directly utilized in the next workshops, and therefore quickly open and available to everyone to use as tools for the future development, was also a positive experience as the project manager noted it. From her point of view there is now even more enthusiastic desire to continue doing collaboration projects with the Aalto University in the future.

One could say that the true impact of the collaboration therefore was in demonstrating a different method which enabled various groups of people to encounter each other, share their viewpoints and ideas together, build a shared understanding of the situations and imagine the future situations together in a stimulating workshop environment. How the consultants on the other hand had utilized the workshop results, or if they could have utilized them at all in their future work, remains unknown.

Although the instant feedback from the workshops were highly positive, the true impacts of this kind of working methods should be investigated more closely and in a longer period of time. One impact could be the change in attitudes and growing interest of implementing design practices and „designerly" methods more and more into the organizational practices. There has already been a continuation for the workshops, as an internal, cross-functional workshop for the City employees was organized in a different context and more forms of collaboration are under negotiations.

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