

A hands-on discussion of practice that is part of quality academic research should also demonstrate academic impact criteria.

Presentation experience

« 6 » The inclusion of artefacts as *work in progress* balanced the pressure of the presentation, as the research artefacts (in my case bowls) brought to the Rooms of Interest became additional characters in the event, diffusing the *sole authoritative voice* and opening up tactile experience to the other conference delegates. As the target article identifies in a feedback response: “There seemed to be something about having a bowl in your hands that made it easier to ask questions!” (#13 §45) The article rightly acknowledges that the “presence of artefacts in the roundtable setting changed the dynamics and focus of the presentations, from a mode of a single authoritative voice presenting work through verbal and textual means, to a more intimate, supportive and egalitarian one” (§23). Democratic assemblage offers a richer complexity of knowledge and need not mean dumbing down.

« 7 » In line with the novel format of RTD, six “scribes” were introduced to discussions surrounding presentations in the Rooms of Interest “*capturing the unfolding conference experience*” (§37). The scribes work operated best at the level of an illuminated manuscript (<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/TourIntroGen.asp>), where the drawings and quotes enhance the core text but do not supersede it. A band of illumination assembled around the presenter’s core text would mirror the structure of the round table spatial environment of the presentations. If, as mooted in the post-feedback reflections, this was then placed on a wall for further comment during the conference, an additional ring of comments/illuminations could form another border around the document, responding to the original text or developing one of the discussion points. This could form a rich carpet of discussion that has the potential to continue expanding, possibly even at future conferences, like traveling ripples emanating from the impact of an initial presentation.

« 8 » The scribes appeared to hold considerable power in the recording of the presentations as they acted as gate keepers of knowledge, and those presenting had little

opportunity to respond to misunderstandings. A lens that interprets inevitably builds the established canon of knowledge for that event. A chance to continue engaging would act as a remedy to the *authoritative voice of the scribe* (§54). Matching the methodology to the conference content here would mean finding ways of keeping this open and allowing *rings of comment* to be assembled in an ongoing process after the event (§54).

« 9 » It is important to map how all the actants in the conference work to trace their agency. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004: 324) identify particularly significant elements in assemblages as *operators* that work as *assemblage converters*. This is clearly identified in the form of the session chairs (§24). It may be useful to identify and map other key *operators* for the next RTD conference, particularly the “range of functions of the artifact in the submission process” (§49).

Post conference and conclusion

« 10 » For these operators to be fully explored and enabled, a more overt reference to methodology embedded throughout the conference would provide a theoretical and process-based armature on which to develop innovative conference practice. Mapping out transparent rules of assemblage would help match methodology to conference content, so that knowledge gained through design research is able to be re-constructed continually in a flexible *dialogical platform*, reflecting more closely current research activity. This would link closely to the RTD ethos and provide a structure for the conference network to grow outside of the limits of its event and geography. Transparency around theoretical frameworks would also enable the conceptual integration of both physical artefacts and service-design outcomes, with all actants recognised equally for the significance of their input. This could help balance the tension between the two main aims of the conference and restructure the division between the presentations and the delegates’ comments.

« 11 » The RTD paper reflects the interesting tension between embracing a constructivist strategy that allows a range of actants, and the perceived traditional quality-gatekeeping issues that results from this. With a clearer and perhaps more overt methodology, mirrored more closely in the recording, archiving and dissemination of

design research, the issue of balancing the input of actants might largely be resolved. A unifying but adaptable structure would allow a range of content that would not over-prioritise some elements but would develop and adjust organically as research-through-design themes develop in the future.

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Research through Design as a Discursive Dissemination Platform

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> **Upshot** • The aim of this commentary is to provide a perspective on the dissemination of practice-based design research in an international conference, namely Research Through Design (RTD), that utilized a discursive, experimental format. The content of the commentary includes the author’s experience-centered account as a delegate at RTD 2015 and recommendations for future events.

Rooms of Interest: A place for discursive research dissemination

« 1 » Proposed by Christopher Frayling (1993), “research *through* art and design” is a distinctive model of research that permits creative practitioners to utilize their professional practice as a vehicle, meaning that they can maintain and make flourish their practice while advancing themselves into PhD education. Adopting this model and its name, the

Research Through Design (RTD) conference series explores an alternative to the conventional paper presentation format of academic conferences. However, it does not abandon the tradition of oral presentation completely. Instead of a didactic structure, the conference redesigns presentation sessions that facilitate interaction and dialogue between delegates and artifacts and among delegates themselves. Central to the interactive discussion in RTD is the artifact resulting from design practice performed as part of research inquiry and being presented in a curated exhibition during the conference.

« 2 » In this section, I reflect on my experience as a delegate who spoke at RTD 2015, including what worked well and what did not work for me, as well as my recommendations for future RTD events. I focus on the Rooms of Interest, the redesigned presentation sessions in RTD 2015.

« 3 » Supported by the roundtable format, oral presentations with the presence of artifacts in the Rooms of Interest created inclusive and friendly dialogue between delegates. The artifacts were temporarily taken from the curated exhibition to a Room of Interest to support the presentations. Although each Room of Interest started with a didactic structure, in which speakers verbally introduced their projects and presented slideshows on a screen, it became more interactive in the discussion that followed, which functioned in a similar way to design critiques. Rooms of Interest varied in success, depending on how they were facilitated by the session chair. To be able to facilitate and foster discussion in a suitable direction, the session chair has to be knowledgeable in the research areas of all presentations in the session and be able to find shared points between them and generate discussion accordingly. Reading all the papers in the session beforehand and preparing topics that could interest the speakers and other delegates collectively may be key to smooth facilitation that supports discursive momentum in the room so that everyone feels they can contribute to discussion. In one Room of Interest that I considered less successful, the session chair allowed the speakers to speak longer than the time limit, and at times led the discussion to specific issues with which one presentation was not concerned. The latter oversight created awkward moments

for the speaker and probably for some other delegates as well. For this reason, session chairs must be expert facilitators who are

- sensitive to any uncomfortable atmosphere, and
- skillful in creating inclusive conversation.

Documentation of the Rooms of Interest

« 4 » In every Room of Interest, scribes were among other delegates to document the presentations and discussion. I recognized the scribing activity as a research process in which scribes act as researchers observing the session and making research diaries. Through this, they examine the alternative discursive format of the Rooms of Interest, exploring how the concept of research through design can be shared and discussed in situ among delegates. Understanding it this way led me to an expectation of scribe materials being both descriptive and reflective. However, scribe materials were largely descriptive, documenting what was said and shown in the session. As there were several scribes in a Room of Interest, what could have been done after the session as a “research team” was to compare, discuss and interpret their scribe materials, which were data collected from observation. Revisiting their documentation collectively would support the scribes to find key issues discussed in the session to reflect upon, so that the existing scribe materials were highlighted or more texts and drawings were added. Unfortunately, the conference program did not enable such reflection activity between scribes to take place. This would be reflection-on-action (Schön 1983), taking place after the course of actual scribing actions has ended. This form of reflection may illuminate a shared understanding of research through design and its dissemination through the discursive platform of the Rooms of Interest. The shared understanding generated from the scribes’ reflection can then call for further reflection from other delegates.

« 5 » The sharing of scribe documentation with conference delegates to generate further interpretation was sound. However, presenting scribe materials as plenary slideshows on an auditorium screen gave a didactic atmosphere and did not support the delegates’ interaction with what they were seeing. For me, presenting them in

a less formal and a simpler way as sketchbooks displayed on a table or pages on a wall would persuade delegates to contribute their thoughts further by writing or drawing on the same materials. To make the scribing activity successful, the key factor is the recruitment of scribes who need to be experienced as researchers as well as scribes.

Making Space: Extension of the Rooms of Interest

« 6 » The curated exhibition in RTD 2015 that featured artifacts constituting research processes or outcomes was well crafted and tied into the conference, as mentioned in many delegates’ feedback to the online survey (\$48). It facilitated comprehensive and engaging conversation with delegates, especially during the Making Space session. Making Space was a separate plenary session arranged in the exhibition spaces. It encouraged delegates to interact individually with artifacts and to converse with one another by focusing on their personal experience with the artifacts. To me, it worked similarly to discussion in the Rooms of Interest. The main difference was that discussion in Making Space was between the presenter and a person or a small-group audience (2–3 people). This allowed the conversation to go deep into specific details that may not be of interest for the large audience in a Room of Interest.

« 7 » Most of the exhibited artifacts were completed; therefore, the role of artifacts as examples of research explorations was not evident. In my view, it is important for a research exhibition to emphasize the role of artifacts in conducting research, meaning the process of making needs to be transparent and demonstrable through the displayed artifacts. The quality of discussion in the Making Space session and the Rooms of Interest relied on this factor, particularly when the artifacts were diverse in design disciplines.

Conclusion

« 8 » RTD 2015 was a platform for constructivist learning, combining acts of creativity and rational thinking, as well as a platform for disseminating practice-based knowledge. Within this platform, designer-researchers not only shared and discussed their specific experiences, but also connected them and constructed a general understanding of practice-based design research.

«9» Although research problems in design research can be unique and difficult to generalize, reflective practice focuses on the designers' actions and endeavors (experience), with respect to conjectural conversations with the situation, to reinterpret and improve the problem as a whole (Schön 1983). In case of RTD 2015, the problem was how to compose a conference with an experimental and discursive format to disseminate research through design. It was reinterpreted by delegates' meaningful interaction with artifacts and with one another, so that knowledge about design research and roles of artifacts in research inquiry was generated and shared (§74).

«10» The creative yet rational exploration in the Rooms of Interest supported delegates' reflection on their thinking, actions and feelings as related to their experience of the conference – it is a critical process of reflection-on-action (Schön 1983: 275–283). When delegates' reflection-on-action in a Room of Interest was documented through scribing, the scribe documentation could become an activator for further reflection-on-action by the scribes who documented that Room of Interest and then by delegates who were not present there. Rooms of Interest served as performative exploration with an aim of constructing a model for research dissemination that combines linguistic with non-linguistic presentations and promotes interactive knowledge exchange.

Recommendations

«11» Although RTD 2015 was a success in my view as a delegate, there is room for improvement, with challenges ahead. A tension to be addressed is the inclusion of artifacts in the central exhibition. If RTD aims to focus on “design as a knowledge-generating activity” (§56), the conference ought to encourage presentations of artifacts in progress and documentation of their making process, rather than completed artifacts alone. This is to disclose how the artifacts actually arise from the process of design practice carried out for research inquiry and what purposes the practice has within the research, whether it (1) poses a research problem, (2) provides a context of inquiry, (3) serves as a research method or (4) provides evidence to support outcomes of research (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes 2007).

By doing so, embodied knowledge that may not be fully articulated can be apprehended through artifacts, thus contributing to the advancement of design epistemology.

«12» The role of curation must be played in the peer-review stage to ensure the inclusion of design processes evidenced by ongoing artifacts, unsuccessful experiments and documentation of the processes, such as research diaries, videos, photographs, etc. The double peer review could be structured in a way that one reviewer (external) focuses on the submission's quality and rigor of argumentation that corresponds to academic criteria while the other (internal) concentrates on the curation of submitted artifacts and of “research, discussions, experiences and provocations” (§63), evaluating the quality of the artifacts as such and their roles in research.

«13» Organizers may examine other platforms for efficacious dissemination of practice-based research. An example that can be used as a starting point is the international conference series “The Art of Research” (AOR)¹ held biennially at Aalto University in Finland. By examining other similar platforms, some insight may be gained into how artifacts and their visual presentations can be combined with textual presentations to demonstrate:

- how knowledge may be embodied in artifacts and their creation; and
- how artifacts and their creation may be contextualized in a research process as outcomes and a method respectively – the epistemological challenges for this form of research.

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1 | The first conference took place in 2005 under the name “CHIASMA2005: Combining Art and Design Practices with Research.” The conference series was rebranded to “The Art of Research” in 2007.

The RTD Community and the Big Picture

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> Upshot • The Research Through Design (RTD) conferences represent important steps towards more meaningful academic practices, not only within the field of research through design but potentially for many related academic fields. In order to realize this potential, I would like to take a step back and look at the RTD community in the context of a larger academic landscape.

«1» To start from the beginning: the account of the background and emergence of research through design that opens the target article is, to the best of my knowledge, comprehensive and accurate. It leads on to the suggestion that new dissemination platforms are needed (§15), which I strongly agree with. As I see it, academic knowledge production is nothing but an ongoing discourse in a research community, and it seems clear to me that the communicative infrastructures employed by a research community are going to have an impact on the form and qualities of its discourse.

«2» Like the authors, I have also found the predominance of text formats and conventionalized conference rituals to be a potential problem for design-based research. I was therefore very interested in the ideas behind the RTD conference when first hearing about it in the summer of 2014, and tried to put some effort into developing a strong submission in order to be accepted to the 2015 conference and have a chance to experience it first hand. I was fortunate to make it through the selection process, and thus I can give some comments on the article based on my trip to Cambridge in March 2015.

«3» In a nutshell, the sense I came away with is one of contributing to an emerging research community. This is also borne out in the article, where the authors reflect on two iterations of the experimental RTD conference format and discuss how it can/should be further developed as a “dialogical platform” for the research-through-