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Probious: Researching Australian Communication Design Through Collaboration and Design Practice

Abstract

This article contributes to mounting evidence of the value of participatory methods in discovering knowledge about design. It discusses an on-going study into the experiences and self-perceptions of Australian communication designers, focusing on designers' contribution to research direction and methods. We argue that researcher-driven approaches to knowledge production are too reductive to discover critical information about complex, human phenomena like design, especially where they occur in diverse circumstances. A variety of design-led interactions saw designers and researchers jointly develop research tools and questions to enhance the study's relevance to the design community and establish the foundations for a collaborative research partnership. To engage designers' participation and guidance, the research design process used familiar language and practices. The stress on creative processes in the resultant cultural probes was vital in allowing participants to reflect on their practices, experiences and situations in open-ended ways, rather than pre-empting research questions as with established social survey methods. The article reports some early research findings, but mainly presents an epistemological and methodological discussion on the importance of involving those being researched in research design, reflexive collaboration challenging researchers' perspectives on the issues under investigation.

Introduction: a focus on Australian communication design

The Australian communication design industry represents a significant field of economic activity and cultural enterprise spanning advertising, animation, broadcast graphics, corporate branding, environmental signage and way-finding, exhibition and display design, graphic design, illustration, information design, interaction design, motion graphics, service design and packaging at least. The recent report *Five Years On: Victoria's Design Sector 2003-2008* (Wallis Consulting Group, 2008), prepared for Design Victoria, focuses on economic activity and employment around design and the use of design by Victorian businesses to drive competitiveness and innovation. The report states that the design sector contributes \$7 billion to the Victorian economy. It estimates that 37% of businesses in Victoria (69,000 organisations) use design services; the design sector employs 76,350 people, 50% of them in communication design; the overall employment associated with design is 185,350 people; the total revenue of design consultancies is \$4.9 billion. Extrapolated nationally, these statistics suggest the scale of the Australian design sector and the important place of communication design within it.

Communication design also has a significant influence over the texture of everyday life, it being a vital contributor to what Jenkins (2006) describes as an era of affective economics in which many organisations seek to engage the public and stakeholders through the aesthetic and emotional packaging of their activities and identity. Yet little is really known about Australian communication design, both in terms of its history and contemporary operation. The only history of the field, Geoffrey Caban's *A Fine Line: A History of Australian Commercial Art*, was

published in 1983. Caban opens with a strong attack on scholarly neglect of Australian commercial art, especially by comparison to the attention given to Australia's visual artists and to Euro-American graphic designers. Collective memory is important to the elaboration and operation of a cultural field, but the failure of others after Caban to take up the project of writing Australian communication design history in any significant way is a seeming judgment on the relevance of historical approaches to understanding 'creative' industries and occupations like communication design, which are closely linked to economic patterns and technological developments.

Caban uses traditional art concepts of canonisation and authorship to frame his historical narrative of Australian graphic design, mostly neglecting the interrelated economic, socio-political and cultural factors affecting the field's development. He does, however, identify diversification of practices to be a characteristic of graphic design by the early 1980s, noting this to be an obstacle to the proper recognition and coherent discussion of the field. The range of practices comprising Australian communication design is much greater in 2011. The growing role of information and communications technology in societies continues to create new applications for communication design. With the growth of the Australian economy and population in recent decades, the network of events, individuals, groups and organisations that comprise Australian communication design has also significantly expanded. However, the small group of prominent designers who form the public face of this sector mask this complexity.

Communication design has struggled to gain recognition comparable to other Australian creative fields, notably architecture and visual art. Arguably its own recognition and representation processes have had a negative role here in denying the human diversity of the sector. For example, since the 1960s communication design has used awards and competitions to raise its profile and prestige. This closed, elitist system of recognition conceals the collective nature of communication design practice. The small percentage of prominent well-known communication design consultancies masks the identity and role of the proliferation of micro and small businesses in the sector, as well as the activity of many freelance workers. Heinich (2009, p. 85) highlights the role of competitive recognition in establishing power-relations among peers, distinguishing between 'recognition conceived as egalitarian respect [and] recognition conceived as un-egalitarian esteem.' Her discussion of the relationship between market-oriented occupations and recognition processes suggests that industry assessments of merit, reputation and stature provide poor insight in the nature of fields of creative enterprise.

The competitive, commercial nature of the communication design industry links recognition processes to scope for material profits and commercial dominance. We have previously discussed the implications for a cultural field when its public image and voice is restricted to a select and unrepresentative group, especially at a time of increasing awareness across societies of the importance of opening representation to a diversity of people (Akama & Barnes, 2009). Processes of recognition and representation in profit-oriented occupations have implications and meanings outside the field. In discussing the public image of Australian communication design, we challenged the evident lack of women designers and designers from diverse backgrounds among prominent Australian designers. The lack of available data on the makeup of the Australian communication design work force in terms of gender, socio-cultural background and geographic distribution prompted us to begin investigating the diversity of people, practices and circumstances comprising Australian communication design to complement the industry's self-representation around a consultancy structure and the successful fulfilment of profit-oriented services for high-profile commercial and institutional clients. The stress on commercial imperatives and relations with clients fosters a culture that closely guards practices and projects for fear of giving away some real or perceived commercial advantage. Communication design works also have short life spans, the material basis for tracing developments in communication design being quickly lost.

Research methodology

In addition to design history, a range of approaches is currently used to investigate contemporary design. Clark and Brody (2009, p. 1), for example, describe the emergence of design studies as a response to 'the complicated activity of design.' Design studies encompasses a wide range of research themes and varied empirical and theoretical approaches, including anthropology, cultural geography, feminism, history, journalism, material culture, philosophy, practice-based inquiry, semiotics, sociology, technology studies and visual culture. Undertaking theoretically informed investigations, especially those that take a social constructionist perspective, can deliver significant insight into the nature and application of design. However, securing the co-operation of those within Australian communication design to identify the diversity of people, practices, experiences and circumstances that comprise it is a significant practical hurdle to researching the sector.

We chose to frame this design research project, called Probius, as a multi-site, ethnographic exploration (Marcus, 1995) initiated from the perspectives of individual designers. Allen (2009) argues that the perception of academic research as a superior form of knowing rest on the use of systematic methods and objective distance from the phenomena under examination. Allen, however, highlights the epistemological and ethical implications of raising one form of knowing over others on the basis of methods alone, especially when the elevation of academic knowledge production devalues ordinary people's experiential knowledge of the social world. He specifically notes the propensity of academic disciplines to focus on specific dimensions of a phenomenon, seeing disciplinary thinking driving a high degree of conceptual abstraction in data gathering and analysis and leading to particular biases in the development of conceptual tools, frameworks and research methods. Similarly, the focus on established concepts and methods in research practice typically sees new phenomena integrated into the body of disciplinary knowledge as researchers work from the known to the unknown.

Academic research examines social phenomenon through an external, top-down process. Cognisant of the problems in raising particular methods of understanding above others to claim special expertise, we decided to investigate Australian communication design—as a dynamic creative industry about which there is little documented knowledge—by working from inside the field, developing research tools and questions from the ground-up. In the early stages of the Probius project, we gave prominence to the personal experience and local knowledge of individual designers to avoid the objectification of our research subjects and to produce a diversity of insights and concepts as the basis for further research. There was good justification for this approach given our area of interest. Subjectivity, affective experience and meaning are the raw material of communication design, although the current industry-driven image of the field in Australia is of a seamless, uncomplicated extension of mainstream corporate and consumer culture, with some high-culture elements thrown into the mix.

In substantially echoing this view, the report into the Victorian design industry, *Five Years On* (Wallis Consulting Group, 2008), shows that when researchers set out to discover the factual reality of a phenomenon they often do so from a fixed conceptual perspective. The report's mix of quantitative and anecdotal 'evidence' on Victorian design reduces design to a set of basic economic exchanges to establish design's importance to the state. Australian communication design has clearly co-evolved with the corporate, commercial and public sectors it serves, but there is also a tension between the industry's current stress on frameworks of business and marketing and vestigial ideas of communication design's capacity for creative expression, cultural intervention and experimentation as a result of its historical connections with visual art. Predicting that the Australian communication design sector would likely reflect the social, cultural and economic complexity of Australian society and the diversification of the systems constituting it, we sought to begin to untangle the strands of experience, identity and subjectivity running

through the sector by seeking the insights of practicing designers through collaboration.

The philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (2002) emphasize the nature of life as process, tendering the idea of constant becoming as a better way to conceptualise the world than philosophy's traditional focus on being. In discussing the methodological challenges and innovations arising from the study of complex phenomenon, the sociologist John Urry (2004, p. 110) notes that researchers tackling complexity in the natural and social sciences no longer use reductive processes to look for fundamental laws, but rather approach physical, biological and social worlds as 'dynamic systems possessing emergent properties.' The idea of tracing flux suits the interaction of diverse, interdependent agents and forces at work in Australian communication design. Our approach in the initial stages of the Probius project has been to seek to tap into the experiences and perceptions of individual designers to identify the emergent characteristics and heterogeneous elements linked to the contemporary state of communication design and from there build a sense of the influences on the field from the broader socio-economic system.

To ensure the relevance of the study to the sector being investigated, we have sought to make individual designers and the communication design sector as a whole participants in the research endeavour. Between 2009-2011, a total of six design research workshops took place with many volunteer participants, including practitioners from industry, design educators and postgraduate and Honours students. Their contribution has been central to generating as many research issues and themes as possible, as well identifying any incentives or barriers to designers' input. The workshops proposed open-ended data gathering methods to enable a diversity of responses to expand the parameters of research, rather than seeking finite answers to fixed questions. An important approach we introduced into the research design process after the first workshop was Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti's concept of 'Cultural Probe' (1999), a research method specifically conceived to capture 'inspirational data' and drive expansive exploration of an area of investigation, often before specific questions and issues are known. A cultural probe is a package of items sent to research participants, each component seeking to trigger unconstrained responses that reveal information about the individual research subject and elicit insights into new possibilities. A common cultural probe item is a disposable camera accompanied by a trigger statement such as 'In the morning I...', or '... really annoys me', which prompts participants to complete the sentence by taking a photo.

We mailed the first experimental probes in May 2011 to twenty designers around Australia, sending two to each of Australia's states and territories and the rest to areas outside the large urban centres where there is no concentration of cultural activity and related support services. The designers who contributed to the development of the probes suggested some prospective participants. Others volunteered when a request was made at national and state level through the Australian Graphic Design Association. Since diversity was an interest of the project, we chose probe participants of varying age, experience, ethnic and social background and gender. Conducting systematic quantitative or qualitative analysis of research participants' responses was not the aim for the first batch of probes, which explored a variety of themes including identity, hopes and wishes, creative inspiration, the individual paths to becoming a designer, professional and personal values, and the immediate cultural, social and geographic contexts in which the designers worked to identify propitious paths for further investigation.

The remainder of this article reflects on the process undertaken in designing the probes and then analyses their effectiveness and relevance in investigating the diversity of Australian communication design based on the feedback and responses received.

Navigating the research process with design practitioners

Fallman's (2005) idea of 'research-oriented-design' best describes the research approach most communication designers employ in the creation of designed

artefacts, where relevant information and ideas are sought to support designing. Downton (2003) refers to this approach as 'research for design'. Such exploratory searching includes gathering information about the client's business or service offerings, the collection of other information to enable specific design work to be undertaken, such as first-hand observation of the design context or general recourse to written and visual sources such as books, journals and websites for inspiration and to extend design thinking.

The majority of participants in the workshops were practicing designers. For them to become co-designers and co-researchers, we needed to introduce an alternative understanding of research, although our sense of the conceptual, empirical and analytical frameworks for investigation was still nascent. Predicting the potential to alienate the designer participants, we resisted any temptation to discuss methods and methodologies of data gathering and analysis in academic terms. Instead, we described the aim of the workshops as finding ways to ask questions about communication designers' experience and practice. To encourage the designers to propose ways to ask these questions in ways other designers would find interesting and relevant, we framed the matter of design research as 'problem-solving', an idea central to the communication designer's daily work for clients. As well as approaching the discussion of research tools and methods through the language of design, we provided examples of what a probe item could be. Could an exquisite corpse be modified to ask a question? Would a partially completed storyboard trigger designers to contribute their own story? Would the invitation to finish a sentence with an image inspire designers to engage with the inquiry?

The emphasis on design exploration circumvented the need to start with fixed research questions, prompting a more playful ideation process. At the same time, some participants struggled with the open-endedness of the project. They wanted more specific parameters for what the probes should be like and a better sense of what the outcome of the project would be, especially in respect of how it would improve awareness and understanding of communication design. The workshop participants were generally enthusiastic about revealing the diversity of communication design to the public and design community. However, in the first workshop it was quite difficult to move some participants beyond the idea of simply promoting the value of communication design. Some participants questioned whether Australian designers would be interested in making their practice 'public', preferring instead to develop their client base and put their efforts into educating the client about the nature and value of communication design. Others initially felt the study should explore the inherent nature and purpose of communication design, rather than investigating the communication design workforce and the features and experiences of work in the industry.

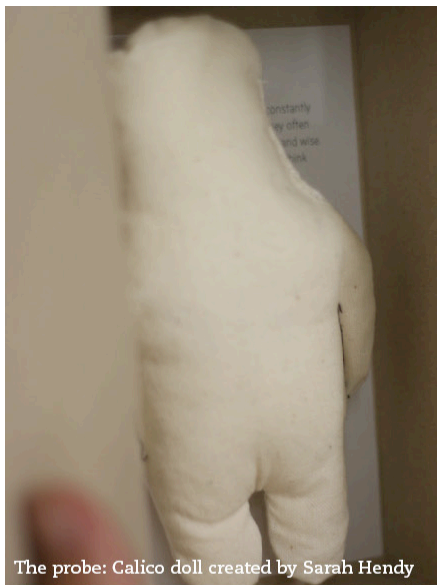
Since we were seeking to take our lead from what designers saw as important, it was difficult to provide guidance here and we came to see the problem-solving mind-set of the designers as an obstacle to research enquiry. In practice, communication designers are expected to quickly frame responses to their clients' needs, designers' professional competency and reputation being based on their ability to advise, guide, provide knowledge and act as an expert (Dorst and Cross, 2001; Frascara, 2004). Focusing on specific outcomes is an objective instilled in designers through design education and constantly reinforced in practice, enabling designers to rapidly respond to client's expectations and needs. By contrast, we sought to approach the investigation of Australian communication design through an ongoing, iterative process that would evolve as issues and information emerged, rather than as a linear procedure based on the idea of the perfectibility of knowledge and the possibility of achieving finite outcomes.

Conducting the design research workshops involved a delicate balance between keeping objectives, processes and outcomes open while producing some actual tools to explore our subject. For instance, we were careful not to let the aim of making communication design visible to the public dictate what the individual probes should be; this could have limited the research activity to forms of responses that designers saw as exhibition-worthy. The design community are overly familiar with the display of collections of polished design work in award

exhibitions. The messy elements of the design process—the ideas that are rejected, the compromises that are made, the tangents that are temporarily pursued—these are rarely captured and almost never revealed publicly. To us, these processes suggested much more promise for understanding the multi-dimensional complexity of communication design practice. The paradox at the heart of the Probius project is that the communication design community does not really value individual designers' immediate experience of practice due to design's focus on refined outcomes. These facets of communication design practices needed investigation during the initial workshops phase of the study. We did not know what could or should be made visible about this field and were looking to the participating designers to guide us.

After several workshops centering on informal dialogue, brainstorming and visualisation, the designers came to see that a cultural probe, although taking the form of an artefact, was not the outcome of the research. It was a tool that delivered a question to which the research team, which now included them, did not know the answer. Early brainstorming sessions generated an abundance of ideas for probe tools. These ideas included disposable cameras to document insights and charting moods over a day. The group drafted open-ended questions, such as 'What would you tell a child about graphic design?', 'What does your mother say you do?' and 'What does it feel like to be a graphic designer?'. Also proposed was a flash-mob SMS to document precise activity at 10:53:44 and a prompt to collect 'design blunder' stories. The designer participants developed a strong interest in prompting playful, conceptual responses to avoid ones that simply promoted an individual designer or consultancy. The participants also felt that the probe items should be aesthetically pleasurable and emotionally engaging to help designers respond in individual, personal and 'designerly' ways.

The final elements for the cultural probe were designed to delight, arouse curiosity, be engaging, relevant and prompt reflection. Some were deliberately ambiguous and fun; others were thought-provoking. Once the workshop participants embraced the idea that fixed responses were not the aim, they allowed their creativity to drive design. For example, the theme of designers' identity prompted one participant to stitch a calico doll representing a simplified human form (Figure 1). The designer proposed it as a 'blank canvas' to enable diverse responses. Another participant, prompted by the sense that designers like making lists, conceived a simple paper concertina asking for responses to the prompt 'What do I...?. Each fold, when opened, qualifying the questions by adding action verbs including 'consider', 'influence', 'contribute' and 'prevent' (Figure 2). The humble nature of this probe invited a spontaneous, uninhibited response, even though the questions it asked were profound. A more open-ended probe was a magnetic poetry kit (Figure 3), consisting of words related to a designer's practice like 'client', 'hierarchy', 'communication' and 'Helvetica'. This probe was not led by specific questions. It invited respondents to play with it, to make up sentences that might not say anything specific, aligning with Schön's (1983) argument that designers' judgment processes are commonly felt rather than cognitively made, intuition and tacit knowledge being an inherent attribute of the design process. A number of probe elements engaged designers' 'sensual' process (Tonkinwise, 2007) in involving the direct manipulation of mediums including fabric, magnets and paper, or visual imagery and typography.



The probe: Calico doll created by Sarah Hendy



Response: By Emily Pacey, NSW



Response: By Drew Joyce, SA



Response: By Russell Goodman and Mick Barlow, WA



Response: By Dan Withey, SA



Response: By Michael Agzarian, NSW

Figure 1. 'Calico Doll' probe item. Photographed by [name withheld].

The designers' responses and what to do about them

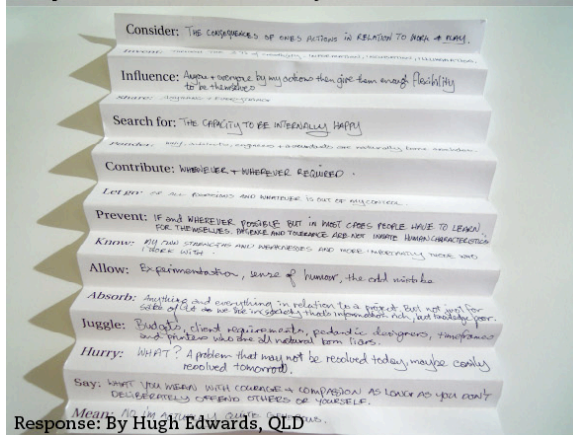
In using cultural probe as a research method, we were expecting a diversity of responses reflecting the range of identities, circumstances and experiences of individual designers. It may be, however, that cultural probe is such a fine-grained form of fieldwork that it resists sense-making activity. The variability and ambiguity of outcomes is a central criticism of cultural probe. This is often identified as an integral barrier to the achievement of research rigour (see Crabtree et al., 2003). That no clear findings can seemingly be drawn from the method vexes those who want design research to strive for objectivity and the generalisation and verifiability of research findings. Quantitative research, with its roots in scientific positivism, is most commonly linked with the perception of reliability and validity in research, where research fields that conduct qualitative research are often more open about the nature and purpose of research rigor given the complexity and variability of human responses. The division between scientific realism and social constructivism is a primary tension within design research. For some, design research will only produce reliable knowledge and gain legitimacy as an academic discipline if it is based on the systematic, comparative analysis of methodically produced empirical data, practices in the natural sciences being an exemplar (e.g. Archer, 1995). For others, the basis of design in human actions, needs and responses privileges issues of representation, contingent meaning and contextual specificity, the search for linear causality and general scientific laws being less important than exploring the diversity of design practices and values (e.g. Buchanan, 2001; Wood, 2000).

Gaver, Boucher, Pennington and Walker (2004) stress that cultural probe was developed to make a contribution to the processes of designing, not for analytical research. Probes are 'collections of evocative tasks meant to elicit inspirational responses from people—not comprehensive information about them, but fragmentary clues about their lives and thoughts' (p. 1). Their position identifies a key difference between design propositions and empirical knowledge production. Rosenberg (2006, p. 4), for example, argues that rather than looking retrospectively about what is, design 'brings into being—not only as provocation or reflection on our world—but in order to make the world or a small measure of it differently', as such, design cannot be shackled to an epistemological mould based on the 'certainty of the given'. We specifically sought to engage this aspect of design in establishing some early thematic and methodological foundations for investigating communication design, seeing the participation of the designers leading the speculative proposal of research questions and methods.

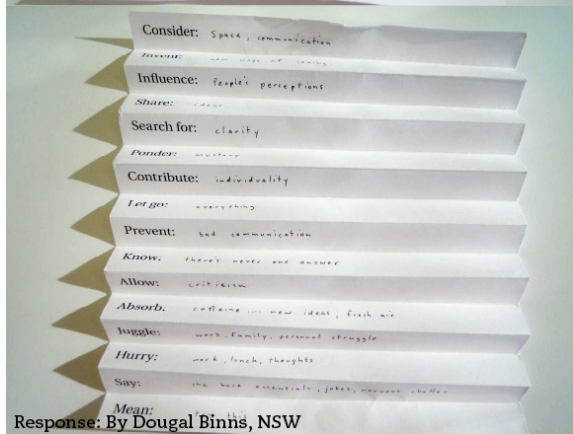
The ten responses received so far show that cultural probe provides plentiful scope for the expression of difference. However, this in itself poses a significant hermeneutic challenge in building generalised theory from micro-level specificity. Obviously, the general expectation in academic research is to encompass investigations with a scope for theory building. The meanings of stitches and marks made on a calico doll, for example, are not explicit, although they suggest alternative forms of subjectivity and self-expression to the professional work of the designer. The magnetic poetry tool suggests dimensions of playfulness in designerly creativity of a different order to that usually expressed in commercial design work. The probe items 'What I care about', 'What do I...?' and 'Journey to becoming a designer' were intentionally thought-provoking to elicit statements of values from respondents. Where the communication design sector's self-representation often focuses on the commercial impact of design, the probe respondents emphasised the relationships with family and friends that nourish their creativity and make their working life meaningful. The responses suggested that life experiences were as important to designers in their professional development as prestigious positions like 'senior designer' or 'creative director'. Valuing human relationships and personal experience is not specific to designers, but it reveals a human dimension to communication design that is eclipsed by the sectors' focus on successful projects, mostly to the exclusion of the people who labour away on them. The rich personal stories included in the returned probes contrast the professionalised face of Australian communication design. Nevertheless, we are still grappling with the issue of whether and how the creative responses of individual designers reflect collective experiences within the field and how the research should proceed to establish knowledge.



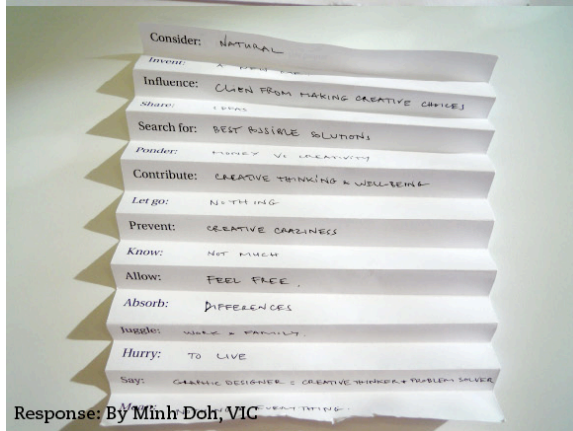
The probe: 'What do I...?' created by Naomi Savio



Response: By Hugh Edwards, QLD



Response: By Dougal Binns, NSW

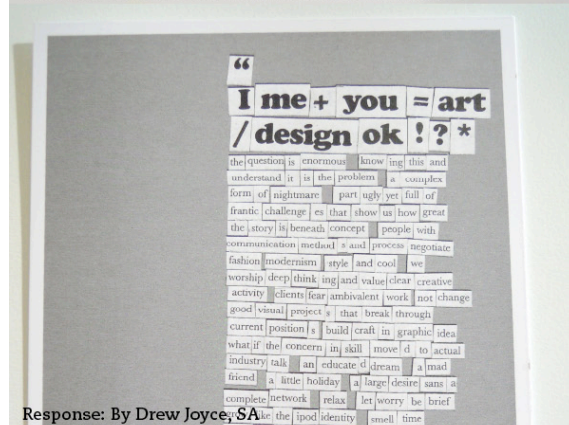


Response: By Minh Doh, VIC

Figure 2. 'What do I ...' probe item. Photographed by the Authors.



The probe: Magnetic typoeetry created by Yoko Akama



Response: By Drew Joyce, SA



Response: By Emily Pacey, NSW



Response: By Michael Agzarian, NSW

Figure 3. 'Magnetic Poetry' probe item.
Photographed by the Authors.

Feedback from participants on the method of cultural probe

Cultural probe is a multi-faceted research tool that reflects innovative thinking and promotes supple approaches to research in seeking to afford participants significant agency in framing responses and influencing research direction. E-mail correspondence from participants suggests they found cultural probe engaging. Alberto, a designer from Canberra, commented, 'it looks like such a fun exercise. Trust me if it were a form to fill out, it would have been chucked long ago :)'. Drew from Adelaide said 'It was good fun to be involved so thanks again for thinking of us. I feel there's a good chance I've well and truly exposed the neurotic designer mind I inhabit. I'm interested to enter into further dialogue if required. Great project.' Becky from Perth revealed the curiosity generated by receiving a 'mystery' box in the mail, commenting, 'This will make you laugh. Just before lunch a large cardboard box arrived and naturally I thought it was your box. So we waited until everyone was back from lunch to open it. After several hours, with palpable excitement, the box was opened only to discover that it was not from you at all, but some Shaker boxes I had ordered last week from the States ... I wasn't disappointed, but I think everyone else was!'

Cultural probe is a valuable research method for investigating widely spread groups, but it demands a high level of motivation and input from research participants. A lack of time to respond to the probe as a result of family and work pressures was an issue for all participants, causing several to pull out of the study. This is an obstacle we need to examine further for the use of cultural probe in the next phase of the study. Highly time-consuming probes were culled during the design workshops, but the comments of respondents underscored that engaging with the contents of each probe not only took time away from work for clients, it required a reflective head-space. Tracy from Hobart, for instance, commented, 'I have received [the] package and I've had a quick look and I am keen to think more about the questions it asks of me.... Great timing really as I feel I need to reflect on those very questions.' She continued to say in another e-mail, 'I actually took yesterday off to spend on my own and tried not to think about anything that involves design. It was extremely hard and I didn't manage it! You've created some kind of epiphany and I'm going to reassess my business and the work I take on. Thank you!'

The workshop participants also confirmed that the research had enabled reflection of their own practices and design in general. However, Hannah from Fingal Head, NSW, ultimately had to pull out of the project, explaining that, 'I have carried around the doodle pad, but keep forgetting to doodle.' Similarly, Michelle from Sydney noted the difficulty in juggling her workload and desire to give the project due time, writing, 'I have been hit with freelance projects on top of full time work so it's been quite hectic for me. I am still keen to finish the articles in the box but at the same time don't want to send a rushed job back.'

Discussion and Conclusions

This article has explored some of the challenges in researching Australian communication design, arguing that conceptual and methodological innovation is required to investigate its complexity and diversity. The trial of the cultural probes gives us confidence that the method can engage designers to reflect on their experience, identity and practices to reveal dimensions of communication design otherwise hidden from view. The depth and richness of response in each returned probe strengthens our initial research objective in seeking to capture the diversity and vibrancy of Australian communication design. The effort and passion invested by designers suggests that they really care about what it means to be a designer and are prepared to think deeply about the issues and questions this raises while finding the process of response through creative play enjoyable and stimulating. Of course, methodological considerations in research design transcend allegiance to any particular research method. The choice of methods emerges from the sort of knowledge sought, the context for research and researcher's theoretical frames of reference. Creative expression and visual and tactile engagement are inherent to communication design practice and have motivated our use of cultural probe in the Probious project, but we recognise that accommodating designers' ways of working should not be a blanket pre-condition for researching communication design.

Conversely, a cultural probe can be adapted to a range of themes and has significant scope to gather data beyond targeted insights. An overarching issue for our research is the actual need for investigation into Australian communication design. Internationally, there is high interest in the cultural, economic and social roles of design. Scott (2008) argues that fostering creativity is a key concern of societies today, the production of sophisticated goods and services in respect of affective impact and cultural content being regarded as integral to successful economies. Florida (2002) includes designers in a new, highly mythologized 'creative class'. Ross (2003, p. 32) details how creative workers like designers have become the contemporary model of 'entrepreneurial selfhood', with creative and cultural industries being seen as possessing almost boundless scope to create prosperity, regenerate urban areas, drive regional development and enrich social and cultural life. Yet Gill & Pratt (2008), surveying the literature on creative labour, identify the many troubling aspects of such work, including:

a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer); an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields'. (p. 14)

In exploring the inner workings of the Australian communication design industry, the use of cultural probe at the preliminary stage of problem identification has scope to capture minority interests, spectral experiences and the contextual specificity of creative practice.

The findings from the trial phase of the project will shape subsequent research activity, which will see a much larger group of probes sent Australia-wide to capture the complex, contingent state of communication design. We intend to start the process with a small set of designers, who will each be asked to recommend five more designers to receive the cultural probe package and so on until the chain of connections is exhausted or we run out of funds to produce and post the probes. This process should be revealing in itself. The Australian communication design sector may appear like a circumscribed, hierarchical entity, with a small number of prominent designers and a vast number of anonymous workers. The sociologist Bruno Latour (2005, p. 5) describes the social as a complex 'trail of associations between heterogeneous elements'. The philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (2002) use the concepts of 'plateau' and 'rhizome' to describe the multiplicitous, heterogeneous, non-linear nature of the social. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari among others, Urry (2004, p. 109) argues that research addressed to the idea of the 'network' is crucial to understanding the social physics of 'an era in which time and space seem increasingly warped, bent and twisted into strikingly new topologies.' Our process of leveraging designers' networks will hopefully provide some insight into whether communication design operates as a tree-like hierarchy or as a plateau in which 'any multiplicity [is] connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2002, p. 22). In an era of global flows of people, projects and ideas, Australian communication design is increasingly open to external influences and associations. Accepting the limitations of the construct of 'the nation' as a setting for investigating cultural fields, as well as tracing connections between designers within Australia, we will encourage and follow up those living outside Australia.

Latour (2005) contests the methodological purification science has undergone in the quest for robust, generalisable knowledge as well as the imperative for researchers to base research inquiries on isolated phenomenon. In inviting designers into the research design process, the early phases of the Probious project have sought a holistic view of communication design and designers, hopefully avoiding the trap of objectifying the people, practices and situations under examination. We have accepted there are limits to our ability to predict the nature of designers' experience

and situation and have sought to avoid 'abstractions, generalizations, formalizations and idealizations (Schutz cited in Allen, 2009, p. 66)' masking the actuality and complexity of our subject. In choosing research tools that encourage diverse, expansive and nuanced responses from many individual designers, we seek to identify the interrelated human, conceptual and material elements that comprise Australian communication design. The collection of returned probe items will form a significant material archive on the occupation of Australian communication design. Whether made available through a website or in an exhibition format, we hope the resource will spark a multiplicity of investigations into a cultural field that has not generated a significant academic interest despite its scale and influence.

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