
Mobilizing Senior Citizens in Co-Design Work

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Abstract

This paper addresses methodological considerations of participation in design for ageing. Based on the notions of *design culture*, *communities of everyday practice* and *situated elderliness* we present accounts from two settings and discuss methodological issues related to mobilizing senior citizens in co-design work.

Author Keywords

Co-design, design culture, communities of everyday practices, situated elderliness.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Evaluation/methodology

Introduction

Participatory design and co-design processes with older adults require rethinking of conventional methodological approaches for recruiting participants. Methodological challenges are related to recruitment, mobilizing and continued motivation of senior participants. We share experiences from the Give&Take (GT) project based on co-design laboratories in Austria and Denmark. The project explores concepts for service sharing and designs a tablet based app for service sharing in local communities. Notions of *design culture*, *everyday practice* and *situated elderliness* backgrounds our accounts of recruitment from both co-design settings and frames methodological issues

related to mobilizing senior citizens in co-design work. We discuss our experiences from both settings and suggest methodological strategies.

Design culture

New understandings and design practices are needed in the area of ageing, since the design should be oriented towards everyday practices in mundane settings rather than towards a professional practice; and as 'modernist' or monitoring approaches tend to conceptualize old age from an objective and deficit-driven perspective perpetuating a notion of ageing as an ongoing 'diminishment' of function" [2]. [7] proposes that the concept of *design culture* [5] is closely related to co-design and inclusive design strategies, and use that term to define a reflective culture in the area of aging motivated by questions such as: 1) How do designers perceive, define, and reflect upon ageing? Here we concentrate on new, positive notions of ageing. Ageing has a social aspect, and it is situated in everyday life. 2) How do designers and researchers find the right people with whom to co-explore new design ideas? And what is a co-exploration of ageing? Here we concentrate on communities and their everyday practices and informally organized local structures as starting points. 3) What are the roles of designers and researchers who work in this area? Here we turn to issues of designers' approaches, especially the balance between designers' creative skills and the effects of these skills on positive approaches to aging [7].

Everyday practices and situated elderliness

Participatory design in everyday settings requires other methods for mobilizing participants than in professional practices. In the latter case, participants are recruited based on their role as professional practitioners in organizations. In contrast, participatory design projects in every-

day settings engage with people that may have a weak or ad hoc connection to the setting [3] through living in a certain area or being ad hoc participants of communities loosely coupled to the setting. In the GT project, *everyday practices* in the settings were explored as a framing and starting point for engaging participants in design as suggested by [1]. The concept of communities of practice was originally developed in studies of work settings to capture the skills and competencies enacted by people engaged in a professional practice [6]: "In using the term community, we do not imply some primordial culture-sharing entity. We assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints. In our view, participation at multiple levels is entailed in membership in a community of practice. Nor does the term community imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" [6, 97-98]. Originally the notion of communities of practice was used to understand situated learning in organizations, but it has also become influential in participatory design as a way of understanding relations between different user groups in a specific context [8]. Lave & Wenger [6] also highlight formation of identity as an important aspect of progressing from the 'legitimate, peripheral participation' in a practice as a newcomer, to becoming a full member of a community of practice. When expanding that concept to include everyday practices outside work one could talk about *communities of everyday practice*, where senior citizens similarly are skillfully enacting everyday practices as seniors, and also develop their identity as senior citizens. They start to enact what we would call *situated elderliness*; including activities that have become more

challenging to carry out. It could be related to the individual, e.g. not being able to pull up one's socks or stockings, or to external changes, e.g. when a bank requires all transactions to be carried out via Internet. Changing bank practices may suddenly cast senior citizens in a new light as 'being old' due to their current lack of Internet experience. This highly contextual designation of people as 'old' is *situated elderliness* [1].

Give&Take: experience on mobilizing seniors

In the GT project, researchers, SMEs and end-users co-design a reciprocal exchange-service for a good senior life. Through engaging senior citizens in dialogue meetings, workshops and living lab activities, we design a service that empowers seniors to maintain societal engagement as a key to mental, social and physical well-being. There are strong societal macro trends and documented positive effects of seniors' prolonged professional activity and voluntary work. The technological solution comprises a mobile platform for knowledge and experience transfer by making skills and competencies visible in local communities. Participants in the co-design activities in the GT project are citizens from local senior communities in Frederiksberg, Vienna and Schwechat in two European countries.

In the Frederiksberg setting a municipality representative and researchers recruited citizens through local senior communities. First, an identification of existing senior communities in the municipality was done. We identified +100 large and small communities of different character and focus, which were assessed to find the most appropriate for taking part in the project. Senior communities should: 1) potentially involve several generations, 2) have local presence in a neighborhood, 3) be linked to other

nearby senior communities, 4) have a gender balance, and 5) represent different social groups and interests. Ten senior communities were selected. They were contacted and a preliminary meeting with a key person in the community was arranged. We used a visual introduction to the project and the co-design process for that meeting, which was frequently revised and adjusted according to the experiences gained. The meetings ended with arranging a pre-meeting with 3-8 members of the community. One of the communities was reluctant to participate, because they feared that the introduction of digital tools and platforms could cause loneliness. Part of mobilizing citizens is to be prepared for listening to and accepting such concerns. For mobilizing citizens for pre-meetings we used a leaflet on the project. The leaflet was carefully designed to communicate in the everyday setting and language of the senior citizens.

In Vienna setting there was no support from municipalities or the like to identify participants. We 1) contacted participants of former research projects in the Living Lab Schwechat [4]; and 2) identified existing sharing communities and communities, which mainly target older adults in Vienna. This resulted in 16 sharing projects and 14 larger organizations, which were connected to senior groups or communities. Interviews were conducted about the background of the sharing communities and their way to mobilize people. This served as starting points to find an appropriate community where a new Living Lab for end-user engagements in the GT project could be established. With one of Vienna's Neighborhood Centers a community meeting the same criteria as the ones participating in Frederiksberg was found. It is in charge of around 10000 people and offers space and support

for a wide range of groups organized by volunteers of the center. The project team keeps the project visible in the area and makes the Living Lab grow through local events and poster-invitations to events related to the GT project in the neighborhood. Additionally articles about the GT activities were included in leaflets that are published quarterly by the neighborhood center. The activities in the Living Lab Schwechat were similar ranging from showing visibility by participating in some of their events and keeping the participants updated about the project's progress by newsletters.

Mobilizing senior citizens in co-design work

In co-design projects both designers and end-users come with a certain set of attitudes, which challenge participation. In mobilizing processes in the two settings described above we identified issues related to attitudes and everyday conditions. Among seniors these include: 1) lack of identity as 'old' ('this is not about me'), 2) lack of believe to have anything interesting to contribute ('my life is not something special'), 3) fear of technology as creating loneliness, 4) fear of digital illiteracy or no interest in new technology, and 5) feeling uncomfortable with co-design methods (exposing yourself, playful activities). Among designers we observed: 1) difficulties identifying an entrance for recruitment or lack of formal organization for recruiting participants, 2) difficulties identifying loosely coupled communities based on common *everyday practices*, 3) ways of perceiving, defining, and reflecting upon ageing, 4) lack of respect for the busy life senior citizens, 5) difficulties creating trust (seniors participants are afraid of a hidden agenda about reduced quality of care / less public service). As *concluding reflections* we point towards methodological strategies for mobilizing senior citizens in co-design work. As designers in such settings we

need to: 1) Understand and respect everyday practices and life of participants, 2) understand which ad hoc or loosely coupled infrastructures define a community, and 3) be prepared to revise how we perceive, define and reflect upon ageing.

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