

Long abstract—

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Photo-elicitation and cultural probes as precedent for new tools and methods for interdisciplinary collaboration in public space

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Interdisciplinary collaboration between social sciences and new design practices (service design, social innovation, transition design) acknowledge individual and community complexity and agency (Irwin 2015). As Forlizzi has noted, problems and solutions in this realm are exceedingly complex, and optimal solutions are difficult to derive (Forlizzi 2013). Therefore, co-creation of value needs to take place working in an embedded way in communities where change occurs over time through “perturbing the existing social system” that also includes the evolving design program in the community. Understanding social practices as they “co-evolve” requires examining the “traces” (in the sense of indexical forms of representation e.g. semiotics) of the user (in addition to more direct engagement). It is conversely essential to expose unacknowledged biases in the interdisciplinary team vis a vis community perspective. For example, designers accept a priori methods such as “service ecology” mapping and diagramming as the basis for abstracting social systems. These mapping practices may resist “perturbation,” or real change mandated by the community and may subtly reinforce a kind of rigidity exemplified by bureaucratic hierarchies.

Collaborative work puts the respective researchers into negotiating their disciplinary claims to knowledge as a kind of epistemological “border work.” A third kind of “border work” is called for through co-designing in communities in public sociology/design and social innovation, one that employs strategies and methods intended to not only capture meaning as given data— based on processes of interpretation often dictated by disciplinary, epistemological and methodological norms—but also to offer greater space for local voices to be heard and allow for dialogic interactions between researchers and community members toward a deeper understanding of subjective culture. For interdisciplinary teams that combine research with application so directly we are interested in enlarging on methods that “make the everyday world it’s problematic” (Smith 1990) where human experience is the primary focus, or, “...where the body, emotions, and senses are viewed phenomenologically, together with an increased focus on representation (Liebenberg 2009). Our presentation will examine new border or boundary methodologies, based on earlier precedents such as photo-elicitation and cultural probes. We will present possible extensions to these methods from a graduate research group one of us is leading this spring in the Department of Graphic Design, North Carolina State University. We posit that these methods are not static or simply a “toolkit” but are actually a kind of interaction design problem that can be “redesigned” based on the relationships between affordances and interpretation (or in this case ‘outcomes’). We will show a framework for these reinvestigated techniques using three primary themes of scale, granularity, and long-term time/engagement, through the graduate work group’s case studies and “border/boundary” research probes working with local stakeholders. Finally “border work” is a powerful concept to engage design students and social science students with.

We will discuss the role that an engaged interdisciplinary collaboration plays in education and course design for ‘service learning’ (undergraduate) and design research (graduate).

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