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User, Research, and Practice. Learning from Design Consultancies

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Abstract: This paper reports a study that focuses on the impact of design research department on a consultancy's design process. Six 10-business-day long field studies were conducted at design consultancies representing architecture, industrial design, and interaction design. The findings show that design research departments impact the design process through design research outcomes and processes. Design research outcomes mainly target the client; but also serve as a validation tool for designers, provide a checklist for designers to target, and work as a boundary object between the client and the design team. In contrast to research outcomes, the design research processes were observed to have a deeper impact on designers through collaborative learning, contextual information, shared user scenarios, focus on user experience, and project rooms. In conclusion, rather than the existence of a design research department, the active participation of designers in the user involvement process has the biggest impact on the design process.

Keywords: Design research, User-centered design, Epistemic cultures, Design process, Design practice

1. Introduction

User is increasingly evaluated as a source of innovation (Kristensson, Magnusson, & Matthing, 2002; Rohracher & Rohracher, 2005; Sanders & Stappers, 2012; Wasson, 2000). In order to gain advantage in the marketplace, companies turn to users to figure out their unmet needs and wants, be it emotional or physical. Designers serving as user advocates was once considered sufficient to design for users in the past (Krippendorff, 2005). The new emphasis on human-centered design has called for new abilities and tools. Starting with the late 1900s, organizations have searched more systematic ways to include users in the process (Reese, 2002). As a result, various research methods have been used within the design context in order to learn from and with users. Most of these methods, such as ethnography, are borrowed from social sciences.

These practices have also transformed the organizational structures and human resources of firms. Design companies and consultancies have launched design research departments offering user involvement services (Sunderland & Denny, 2007). Social scientists entered the design scene as team members.

These developments show that the positive impact of user-centered design research on design is taken for granted. However, we still know little about the mechanisms through which design research impacts the design process. Squires (2002) notes that the conversion of research results into products and services require designers and researchers to collaborate in the process. Suri (2011) explains that designers need to make their own interpretations. By this way, observations can inform the designers with an effect on their inspiration. Tunstall (2008) focuses on ethnography and explains how ethnography serves as a boundary object – a term coined by Star and Griesemer (1989) for the abstract and concrete objects that enable communication through the development of a common understanding between different groups of people – between people coming from different domains (in her case, anthropology, marketing, and design). Some other scholars (Boztepe, 2007; Melican, 2000) express their concerns and state that user information collected at the fuzzy-front end of design is not always meaningful to designers and is often either not fully implemented or neglected during the design phase.

These evidence shows that we still have limited empirical studies explaining the impact of user and user involvement methods on designers, design thinking and the design process. This study tries to address this gap and questions *the impact of design research department on a consultancy's design process*. Six 10-business-day field studies were conducted at design consultancies representing architecture, industrial design, and interaction design. While each design domain has different disciplinary practices, they can be all assessed under the umbrella of “design”. As my aim is to understand the act of designing, I did not focus on disciplinary differences. Instead, I specifically targeted a variety in the act of design. Studied domains were selected based on the scale of their design outcome.

2. Theoretical framework

Two theories, epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina, 1999) from sociology and constructivist learning theory from education, were helpful in the construction and analysis of this study.

The first theory, epistemic cultures, provided the critical lens and the theoretical framework to study the consultancies with a focus on the knowledge processes and the machineries used in this process. This theory also guided my methodological approach. Karin Knorr Cetina defines epistemic cultures as the “amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms—bonded through affinity, necessity and historical coincidence—which, in a given field, make up *how we know what we know*” (Knorr Cetina, 1999, p. 1). Within science and technology studies, Knorr Cetina provided a unique perspective with a focus on “the machineries of knowledge construction” rather than “knowledge construction” itself. This focus was especially important to understand the diversity in a domain. She used this theory to understand the diversity in two science domains, high energy physics and molecular biology. In her study, she utilized comparative ethnography, as she believes in the importance of moving into practitioners’ epistemic space. This methodological perspective informed me regarding the significance of ethnography and comparisons for my question at hand. Her theory helped me to keep a focus on the machineries of knowledge production in order to understand the epistemic culture within a consultancy.

The second theory, the constructivist learning theory (CLT), was useful in looking at designers’ knowledge construction and the effects of various factors (e.g., context, collaboration) on this. CLT differentiates between information and knowledge. Learning requires knowledge construction (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Merrill, 1991; Resnick, 1989) that depends on active involvement in a collaborative process. “The social environment is critical to the development of our individual understanding as

well as to the development of the body of propositions we call knowledge" (Savery & Duffy, 1996, p. 136). Instructor serves as a facilitator (Brownstein, 2001) and the context, together with all its materials, where the learning takes places affects the process (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt University, 1991). In comparison to traditional inscriptive method of teaching, CLT defines factors that are effective in learning and makes analysis on these factors. Evaluating learning as a constructive process together with the effective factors helped me to analyse the possible impact of design research department on designers' learning.

3. Methodology

In order to study the impact of the existence of a design research department on consultancies' design processes, I conducted short-term ethnographic studies at six design consultancies from three design domains. During my 10-day visits at each consultancy, my main data collection method was participant observation. I had the chance to observe designers and design researchers working in front of their computers, in project team meetings and client meetings. These observations were stored in diaries. Observations were triangulated with semi-structured interviews (52 interviews), informal interviews, a free-listing exercise (143 forms), a questionnaire (134 questionnaires), document analysis and website analysis. Visual and verbal data were coded based on Charmaz's (2006) steps of initial, focused, and theoretical coding with Atlas.ti.

In order to better understand the difference with the existence of a design research department, I studied one consultancy with design research department and one without for each of the three design domains. This gave me the chance to make comparisons. One of the studied industrial design consultancies was in the process of launching a design research department. A design researcher was working with them for a month at the time of my visit. As the full integration of design research department had not taken place back then, my observations for that consultancy reflects their situation without a design research department.

In terms of design research practice, there were 4 different types of projects within design consultancies: 1) projects which does not involve design research; 2) projects in which designers conduct design research; 3) projects in which design researchers conduct the research; and 4) collaborative projects in which designers and design researchers work together on the research. For this paper, I specifically focused on the third and the fourth types of projects.

All the consultancies are from Northwest USA. They all have national and international reputation. While the initial selection of possible consultancies to approach had a specific selection criteria (e.g., number of employees, commitment to user-centered design on their website), the final list of studied consultancies are not based on random sampling. Because of the proprietary project information, it is hard to get acceptance as a participant observer. Thus, the consultancies were based on convenience sampling.

The design domains to be studied were chosen to reflect the variety in the size of design outcome (buildings versus interfaces) and user-centeredness. Architecture was selected as it is one of the oldest design domains and as it deals with larger scale projects. Industrial design is known for its focus on user-centeredness and design research. Interaction design is one of the newest design domains. It has a focus on research informed design processes. While five of the design consultancies served a single design domain, industrial design consultancy with the design research department employed both industrial and interaction designers and were active in both design domains. As they were originally established as an industrial design consultancy, I evaluated this consultancy as an industrial design consultancy.

In order to protect studied design consultancies' and designers' confidentiality, a pseudonym is assigned to each consultancy. Arch stands for architectural consultancies, ID for industrial design consultancies, and IxD for interaction design consultancies. The extension 1 represents consultancies without design research departments and 2 represents the ones with design research departments. Table 1 summarizes the final list of pseudonyms given to studied consultancies.

Table 1. Final list of studies consultancies with their pseudonyms.

	Architecture	Industrial design	Interaction design
Without design research department	Arch1	ID1	IxD1
With design research department	Arch2	ID2	IxD2

4. Findings

Design research service was integrated as a separate department in all three design consultancies with design researchers. During my visit at each consultancy, I had the chance to observe a variety of projects. Not only the topic changed for each project but there were also differences in the process. One of these differences was related to the human resources that were allocated to each project. For example, the existence of a design research department within a consultancy does not guarantee the inclusion of design researchers and user involvement in every project. The main reason for this is the client. Clients are the ultimate decision makers. As one engineer from ID1 noted, "Clients determine the inclusion of user research in a project and the degree of project teams' interactions with users" through the control over project budget and schedule. Thus, the design research department's or design researcher's involvement in the project is the client's decision. Similarly, client also decides on the designer's participation in the research process. According to an industrial designer (ID2) "… most industrial design projects are still far too fast moving and frankly too inexpensive to afford the time and money investment required by these exercises [user involvement]."

4.1 Design Research Outcome

When the design research department is involved, the projects generally last longer. The findings from the research phase are stored in the form of booklets, videos, presentations, reports, and posters. These documents include personas, user scenarios, insights, actionable insights, photographs from the field, quotations, design suggestions, prescriptive applications, concepts, design and service standards, and defined areas for development. Even if designers are not involved in the research process, they do not always wait for these deliverables to start designing. A design researcher from ID2 illustrated this situation in her process diagram in Figure 1. She explained that designers generally start designing while they are still working on the analysis and synthesis.

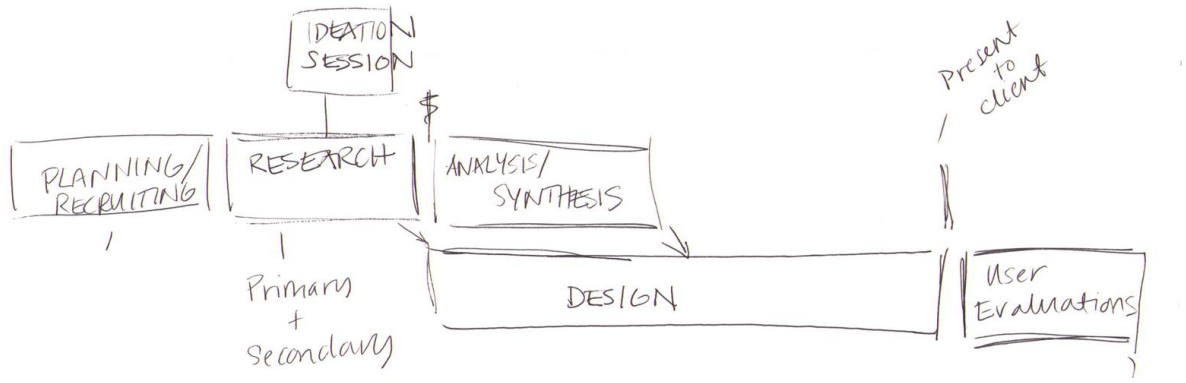

Figure 1. A process diagram by a design researcher working at ID2.

Designers also do not see the deliverables from the research process for themselves. Designers from all consultancies did not list design research deliverables and findings as one the most significant user information in their process. A project manager from Arch2 showed a research booklet that was put together by the design research department and told "It is for the client." At the same consultancy, within a monthly design meeting on a healthcare project, designers used their own experiences in order evaluate the design process. However, design research department had conducted research and prepared a booklet for this project. Designers' limited connection with the design research results is also evident in the following quotations:

> "It was interesting that a lot of what they [design researchers] said [about the user] I think we already knew or thought." (interaction designer, IxD2)

> "In general, when working with research findings from our research team, I find that it serves as a validation of our own secondary research and instincts as designers." (industrial designer, ID2)

Especially when designers do not participate in the research process, designers have a tendency to focus on design research results mainly as goals/guidelines for them to meet. A creative director (IxD2) explained: "Of all the research they did, they ended up with these five guidelines and this is where it starts to get very tangible for our team as we are concepting. Because then we can start saying: We need to come up with some design concepts and creative concepts for a campaign that is consistent with these five guidelines." These guidelines help designers to "go into creative in a guided fashion" (Interaction designer, IxD2). An architect from Arch2 explained research is for "developing evaluation criteria." Similarly, as seen in Figure 2, a creative director from IxD2 and a healthcare architect from Arch2 noted "guidelines" and "goals" as the outcome of research phase.

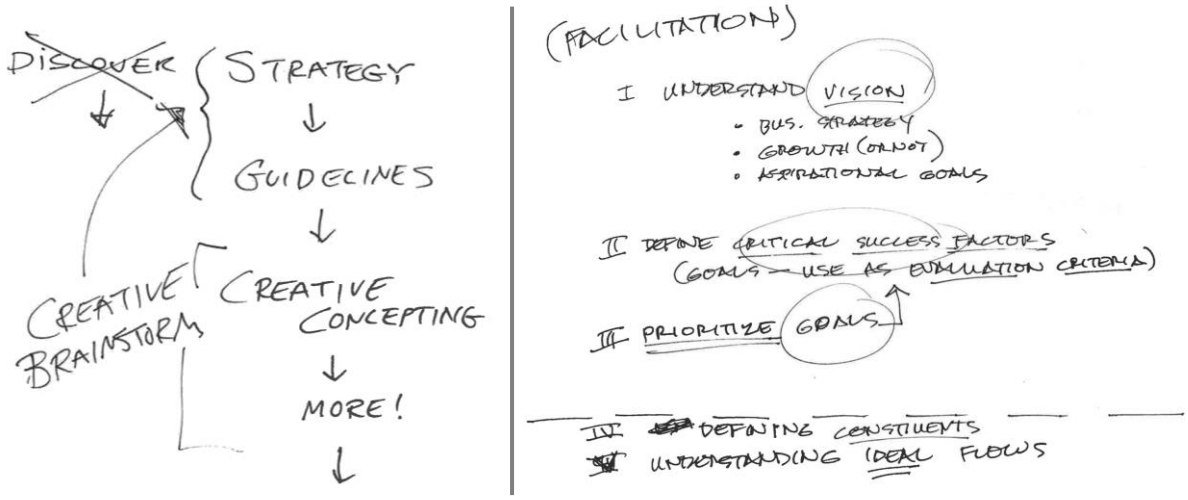

Figure 2. Process diagrams by a creative director (IxD2) and a healthcare architect (Arch2).

These guidelines/goals become objective ways of evaluating and measuring the success of proposed design solutions later in the design process. Designers use these findings for "defending solutions" (architect, Arch2) and "validating the design" (interaction designer, IxD2) within client meetings. Thus, design research results are "also useful as a way to frame the problem/solution to … clients" (industrial designer, ID2). It is believed that, it makes clients happier (manager, Arch2) as solutions "are coming from a point of confidence" (design researcher, Arch2). In this sense, design research department's work "puts everybody on the same page. It takes subjectivity out of the equation ..." (executive creative director, IxD2). Design research results help the design team and the client to find a common ground to structure their conversation and to discuss. Manager from ID1 specifically explained the need for such a common ground as follows:

> "If you are having a conversation with the client, or even when you are trying to collaborate with each other as a team, and if the discussion becomes about whose idea is right or better, then what you are setting up is a situation where someone has to win and someone has to lose. It sounds like an argument and usually it is tearing down our relationship … what I often suggest is, "Let's focus the conversation to what is best for the product" or "what is best for the user." … [It] helps collaboration become better."

4.2 Design Research Process

Designers describe themselves as "integrative, tactile learners" (architect, Arch2). When they participate in research, "the [user involvement] process they are going through is very enlightening" for them (design researcher, ID2). A design researcher (IxD2) shared her observation on how designers got excited when they see a "real person" through the user involvement process. An art director (IxD2) validated this observation and commented, "it is definitely more interesting to see them [users]."

For the designers who participated in the research process, my questions regarding research outcomes were mostly answered in reference to their own observations in the field rather than design research department's findings. For example, the executive director of IxD2 explained his conclusion from a research process for an application as follows:

> "We were initially thinking like we can have this app, … people can check in, … they can make friends. When we finally did the research and talked to these people, they did not actually care about that. They just cared about being part of the

> emotional journey … and that is what it is about… That changed everything on what our approach was."

Designers' reference to their own observations rather than the research department's findings is not a surprise for design researchers. A design researcher (ID2) explained that the research becomes meaningful through interpretation and this involves subjectivity. Therefore, there are changes in individual's interpretations. Design research helps designers to make informed interpretations. When designers participated in the research process, these interpretations were observed to be more user experience oriented. Designers who have not participated in research explained their design solutions in reference to buildings/products/interfaces and use sentences such as "This --- [a consumer product] will be operated…" (industrial designer, ID1). On the other hand, the designers who participated in research explain the design solution through user experiences and generally started their sentences with "the user." These user experience oriented perspective was also observed to be helpful in teamwork. When involved in design research, team members used similar user scenarios while explaining the project. For example, the interaction designers at ID2 used similar storylines while explaining an out-of-the-box consumer product experience that they recently designed.

In addition to users, designers commonly referenced design researchers as a source of information. They think "researchers bring freshness to the project and they articulate aspirations" (programmer, Arch2). Even the designers from ID1, who had been working with a design researcher for a month, commented on the positive impact of the researcher. They acknowledged that the design resesarcher asked different questions that were valuable for the project. Part of this value comes from the fact that design researchers have much broader focus on user and user research than designers. Two design researchers (Arch2) explained that they needed to understand the larger ecosystem in order to gain knowledge on the design problem. In contrast, the architect (Arch2) had a focus on programming and developing a "common language." A project manager from Arch2 also highlighted the difference in researchers' and designers' perspective: "They [design researchers] remember questions that we might have forgotten to ask. They bring depth to the design decisions we have and they develop much better results, …help us gain a deeper understanding."

Within studied consultancies, design research results mostly stored in special project rooms. This was also related to the fact that these projects lasted longer and a space was needed for the analysis of research data. The walls of these rooms were mostly covered with post-its, photographs, and papers (Figure 3). A design researcher from ID2 explained that they try to store findings in concrete forms (such as artifacts, sketches, scenarios) in order for designers to better incorporation of user research in their process. Most teamwork takes place in these rooms. They become venues for designer-design researcher interaction. Furthermore, these places serve as mediums to remind user and user research to designers and expose designers to available research information throughout the process.

Figure 3. Project rooms from ID2 and IxD2.

In addition to project rooms, design researchers also remind user and design research results to designers. While design researchers involvement with the project decreases after the research phase, they interact with the designers to ensure that the project is moving in line with the desired user experience (design research, IxD2). For example, in a monthly in-house meeting at Arch2, it was the design researchers who brought up the questions regarding the patients' experience in the space.

The designers who had the chance to participate in design research expressed a change in their perspective. The executive creative director from IxD2 defined themselves as "doers" prior to the establishment of the design research department. Now, he sees themselves as "thinkers and doers." A design research from the same consultancy added: "We were implementers then. We were doing what we were asked to. Now we are shifting."

While designers, design researchers, and managers stated the positive input of design research, they also criticize the fact that this does not happen seamlesly (such as the limited impact of design research departments' process outcomes on design process). Two architects from Arch2 commented on their consultancy's structure (being organized as a studio) and size as possible obstacles for the seamless integration of the design researchers' user involvement results into the design process.

5. Discussion

Findings from this study show that design research department impacts the design process through two machineries: design research outcome and design research process. Among these two, design research process seems to have a larger effect on designers.

5.1 Design Research Outcomes

Designers' comments regarding design research outcomes support Melican's (2000) and Boztepe's (2007) statements regarding the limited impact of design research outcomes on designers and design process. Designers evaluate design research outcomes mostly as a service to client rather than themselves. The fast pace of design projects do not help either. Even if designers had not participated in the research process, they were observed to start developing solutions before the finalization of design research process and seldom revisit the design research outcomes while designing. Within the process, they utilize these outcomes as a validation tool to make sure their intuitive knowledge is correct and as a checklist that needs to be accomplished through design solution. Design researchers keep reminding about the design research outcomes and the user later

in the process as well. While designers have known as user advocates in their teams (Krippendorff, 2005), for the consultancies that have design research departments, design researchers seem to take over this task.

One of the most referenced impacts of design research outcomes is related to their role in client-consultancy interaction. Designers and executives explained the significance of these outcomes for building a common ground with the client for discussion. For the cases that involved design research, the client-design team interaction mostly took in reference to these outcomes, thus the user and the user experience. In this sense, design research outcomes serve as boundary objects as theorized by Star and Griesemer (1989). This is also in line with Tunstall's (2008) observations.

5.2 Design Research Process

Rather than the design research outcomes, designers' comments mostly had references to things that are related to design research process. The designers, who had the chance to collaborate with design researchers and who had the chance to take a part in research, were enthusiastic about research. My questions regarding what they had learned from research got replied in reference to their own experiences and observations within the field rather than the design research outcomes. As Suri (2011) explained the significance of interpretation, studied designers relied on their interpretation from the field the most. This finding also validates Squires's (2002) argument regarding the significance of designers' participation and designer-design researcher collaboration in the research phase. It is also in line with the foundation of the CLT outlined by Savery and Duffy (1996) that gives priority to involvement in contrast to dictation.

When the designers' comments that reference design research process are reviewed, five main clusters stand out. The first one addresses collaborative learning as in CLT. Designers not only referenced learning from users, but they also expressed the significance of learning from design researchers. Through interaction, designers are exposed to the design researchers' worldview. This helps designers to evaluate the design problem from different perspectives. One of these perspectives comes from the contextual and holistic approach of design researchers. This is also the second observation regarding the impact of process on designers. As one manager (Arch2) said, design researchers bring "depth to the design decisions." Design researchers focus is much larger than designers while conducting research. This might be because of their educational and professional background. They study the larger ecosystem that the problem exists. This broader perspective helps designers to gain knowledge on context better and bring freshness to the design problem. In these respects, design researchers become facilitators in designers learning process. Within this collaborative learning process through research, designers construct their user knowledge together with design researchers. Collaborative learning was also observed to result in shared stories among designers' user scenarios. This shared scenarios are helpful in putting the members of the design team on the same page while designing. This can be classified as another impact of design research process.

Fourth impact is observed about the change in designers perspective on the design problem. As explained in the findings section, designers who had participated in the research used user-centered narratives while explaining their design solutions. In contrast, the sentences of designers who had not participated were more focused on design outcomes (i.e., building, product, interface). Thus, it might be possible to say that design research expands designers' focus on experience.

CLT addresses the significance of context on learning (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt University, 1991). The environments within in consultancies were observed to have a similar effect, especially the project rooms. Most of the projects that involved design research had dedicated

project rooms within consultancies. These rooms' walls and desks stored data from the field. Designers and design researchers were observed to meet at these rooms while discussing on projects. While designers might not be going over the available data in the room, these material were helpful for reminding them about the field and the user. Therefore, project rooms should be considered as another impact of design research on the design process.

6. Conclusion

Findings of this study show that design research departments are in the process of creating a user-centered epistemic culture within the studied consultancies. The main machinery of this culture is the participation. Rather than the existence of a design research department, the active participation of designers within the research process was found to have the biggest impact on designers. Through participation, designers better gain the chance to be exposed to contextual information, to learn from design researchers, to share similar user scenarios with the rest of the design team, to focus on the user experience, and to be reminded about their observations through project rooms. On the other hand, a design research outcome has the biggest impact on client-design team relationship. They serve as boundary objects for these two parties to build a healthier communication. These outcomes also work as validation tools and design guidelines for designers.

These findings provide some useful insights for design practice and education. Evidence from this study can help design practitioners to defend the need for designer-design researcher participation to the client. Firms can consider restructuring their organizations. Rather than separating departments based on occupation, they can restructure departments to include both designers and design researchers. This might further increase the knowledge exchange between these people. From the perspective of design education, this study illustrates the significance of being exposed to design research methods and practice as a student. This will help designers to better collaborate with design researchers and to be active in the field.

While this study tries to uncover the impact of design research departments on design process, the findings should be supported with further studies. Current study only looks at six consultancies using an ethnographic approach. Further studies can cover more consultancies and use other research approaches in order to validate or defeat these findings.

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