

Communicating the Value of Design Research

Keywords: design research, communication

1. Convener Information

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2. Organizing research question

The overarching question guiding this Conversation is:

- How can we best communicate the value of Design Research?

Extending this we are also interested to explore further questions such as:

- What are the challenges for clearly articulating the diversity of what the term Design Research refers to, while also being concise and clear?
- In a general qualitative research method textbook (e.g., one which introduces many approaches such as ethnography, grounded theory, and action research) *if* there was a section on Design Research, what would it say?
- What existing epistemological, methodological and practical frameworks (or other examples) can we draw upon to help communicate the value of Design Research?

3. Context of Conversation Topic

The session is being convened by a team who all contribute to Design Research Works¹. Design Research Works is a 4-year project that aims to gather evidence about and promote the value of Design Research. The proposed Conversation is part of a programme of workshops and other events running throughout 2022 that are all intended to engage the Design Research community and draw upon their expertise in order to support the goals of Design Research Works. This Conversation specifically seeks to contribute to these aims by exploring strategies for *Communicating the Value of Design Research*.

Design Research is Important

Design Research is one of our most powerful and versatile tools for both shaping and making sense of our rapidly changing world (Sudjic, 2009). It sheds light on “complex social, environmental and cultural challenges” (Rodgers, Francesco and Conerney, 2019) both through the “material world” but also “less tangible domains such as service, interaction and transformation design” (Cooper, 2014). Across systemic issues like climate change, the impact of AI and other emerging technologies, to prevailing inequalities, injustices and health crises, Design Research can be leveraged in myriad ways to critically explore and respond to the 21st century’s complex and interdependent challenges (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). It can achieve this through a variety of practices, methods, and perspectives, including (but not limited to) Research through Design, Critical Design, Speculative Design and Participatory Design. The optimism surrounding Design Research is based on the premise that these tools are excellent facilitators of change, helping us to acknowledge the past, apprehend the future, and focus these lenses on the material concerns of the present; “Design research is a creative and transformative force that can help to shape our lives in more responsible, sustainable, meaningful, and valuable ways” (Rodgers, 2020).

Design Research is Nascent and Diverse

Notwithstanding its growth and success, the assertion that Design Research is “pre-paradigmatic” (Gaver, 2012) remains true, with contemporary scholars grappling to define archetypes, typologies and taxonomies for Design Research (e.g., Pierce, 2021). The impact of this pre-paradigmatic character is that much effort is spent on inward discussions relating to the field’s still-maturing epistemologies, methods, and conventions (Durrant *et al.*, 2017), meanwhile reducing the scope of the field’s potential impact. The panoply of methods that Design Researchers utilise, the diverse—and usually interdisciplinary—skills which they draw upon, and the broad scope of impact, are factors that make the Design Research field one defined by its heterogeneity (Lindley and Coulton, 2020). This heterogeneity is what makes Design Research so powerful, but it also makes it difficult to break free from the pre-paradigmatic mould. The practical impacts of this are evident through the disappearance of otherwise exemplary Design Research projects into “liminal” spaces between disciplines

¹ <https://designresearch.works/>

(Green and Kirk, 2018) and a plethora of initiatives that “do not self-describe in a way that makes them discoverable as examples of Design Research” (Lindley and Coulton, 2020).

Design Research Could be More Ubiquitous in the Future

This proposal builds on the assertion that the world is in need of the unique perspectives Design Research can offer. Moreover, we recognise that while Design Research is ‘alive and kicking’, for newcomers to the field value of Design Research, the distinction between epistemologies, methods, and applications can be hard to disentangle (Green and Lindley, 2021). From this position, we wish to explore the possible future of the field and consider what actions would lead Design Research to becoming *more ubiquitous*. It is this endeavour which frames our research questions.

Elaborating on the Research Questions

The overarching question is:

- How can we best communicate the value of Design Research?

This question will enable the Conversation to build from first principles and a common understanding of the those present. Considering how to articulate the value, utility or purpose of Design Research will enable us to surface insights about how our community can strengthen itself but also about how we can communicate the potential impact of our work more broadly.

Our first sub-question is:

- What are the challenges for clearly articulating the diversity of what the term Design Research refers to, while also being concise and clear?

Posing this query enables the opportunity to begin to identify distinctions between the different constituent parts of Design Research. If we are to find the best way of communicating the value of Design Research it is crucial that we develop strategies to describe a particular example, project or initiative clearly, without undermining other—contrasting—approaches which also identify as Design Research.

The second sub-question is:

- In a general qualitative research method textbook (e.g., one which introduces many approaches such as ethnography, grounded theory, and action research) *if* there was a section on Design Research, what would it say?

This hypothetical question is intended to achieve two things. Firstly, by imagining a future where it is the norm (rather than the exception as it is today) for a *general-purpose* research methods textbook to contain a section on Design Research, the question provides a tangible and practical focus with which to explore the overarching question of how to articulate the value of Design Research. The second aim of this question is to actually begin the process of

imagining what the content of such a chapter would be, with a view to developing that content as an eventual outcome of the Conversation.

The third sub-question is:

- What existing epistemological, methodological and practical frameworks (or other examples) can we draw upon to help communicate the value of Design Research?

The final line of questioning is intended to bring the conversation to a close by exploring and citing existing work which may contribute to or inform the outcomes and write-up of the Conversation.

4. Set-up of the session

The session will be a hybrid session. The 90 minutes will be utilised as follows:

- [15 minutes] Convener CC to welcome, introduce the notion of Principled Space (see below) and facilitate short informal introductions (timings based on the number of participants).
- [10 minutes] Convener JL to describe the motivation and context for the Conversation, inviting questions.
- [5 minutes] Convener DG to introduce and explain worksheet (Fig 1).
- [40 minutes] Convener JL (supported by co-conveners) to chair discussion with all attendees, ensuring attention is given to each question (~10 minutes each).
- [15 minutes] Convener AB to invite final comments and feedback of the content on the worksheets (see Fig 1).
- [5 minutes] Convener CC to formally close and discuss possible routes for continuing the Conversation in the future.

Principled Space

During the introduction, CC will explain the notion of Principled Space², ensuring to emphasise that we want the Conversation to be inclusive. This will include providing attendees (remote and physical) with an electronic means of contacting CC during the Conversation if they feel they are being excluded in anyway or for any reason.

We are particularly keen to ensure that those with quieter voices are not eclipsed by those with louder voices, hence we will invite anyone who has not yet contributed to speak at the end of each section. We will also provide a means for contributing digitally (e.g., via a chat interface) that those in the room or remotely can use to provide their input; this will be monitored throughout the Conversation.

² <https://barcworkshop.org/resources/principled-space/>

Documenting Contributions

Throughout the Conversation, convener MS will capture proceedings using a sketch-noting approach³ resulting in a visual record of the event. Throughout the Conversation, both physical and remote participants will be provided with an *Archetypal Research Methods Workbook* (Fig 1). The worksheet directly aligns to our second sub-question (discussing the content be for a Design Research section of a general research methods textbook) and provides participants with some prompts for the kinds of content that appear in such books.

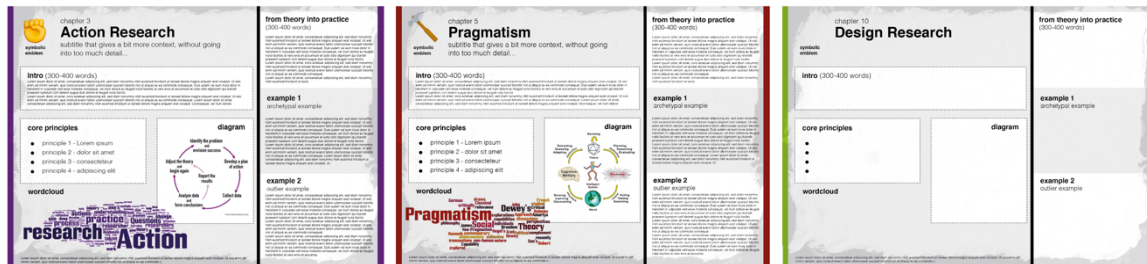


Fig 1. A mock-up of the 'Archetypal Research Methods Workbook', including the blank 'Design Research' worksheet (NB these are drafts, and will be refined pending acceptance).

As well as our direct participation in the Conversation, the sketch notes and worksheets will inform the production of the concluding report. Participants will be asked if they would like to comment on the report before it is submitted and, for those who do, their contact details will be securely stored to facilitate that communication.

6. References

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³ <https://interactions.acm.org/blog/view/sketchblog-1-the-rise-and-rise-of-the-sketchnote>

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About the Conveners:

Joseph Lindley is a Research Fellow and currently leads Design Research Works, a project aimed at promoting and understanding the value of Design Research.

David Green is a Senior Research Associate and a Design Researcher with a background in participatory documentary making and Human-Computer Interaction.

Claire Coulton works for leading Design Research lab ImaginationLancaster and has over 10-years' experience managing and supporting large-scale Design Research projects.

Arne Berger is a Professor of Human Computer Interaction at Hochschule Anhalt their research uses Design Research to democratize the adoption of emerging technologies.

Miriam Sturdee is a Research Fellow and Artist, their research is focused on enabling those outside of creative disciplines to benefit from practice and creativity-led methods.