An approach to re-designing leaving care interactions

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Abstract

Due to the high instances of young people in care becoming homeless after leaving care, the study I undertook for my PhD in design research explored how an intervention could be co-designed to support young people and leaving care workers (LCWs) to share and elicit views about where a young person could live when they leave care. This article describes the methodology I worked through to re-design this interaction and why I think this approach resulted in positive outcomes for the people who tested the new interaction.

Keywords

Methodology, leaving care interactions, designing for experiences

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Need for this study

Research shows that the most positive experiences and outcomes for young people when leaving care are generally associated with three factors: early intervention and minimum delay on entry into care; experiences of stability in care; and a supported transition when becoming independent (Biehal et al., 1995; Dixon and Stein, 2002; Gaskell, 2010; Bazalgette et al., 2010). Unfortunately experiences of leaving care are generally described as 'accelerated and compressed' (Stein, 2006) and sadly around a third of those living on the streets have lived in care (Robson, 2008:11). Not surprisingly, some young people describe the experience of leaving care negatively, for example, feeling pushed out of where they have lived (and the care system) before they were ready, and being ill-prepared or supported as they left (Biehal et al., 1995; Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008, 2009; Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, 2009; Bazalgette et al., 2010). Workers also describe experiencing difficulties supporting young people who are determined to leave care (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008). Consequently the literature paints a picture where there are opportunities to try

and improve this experience for young people and the people they work with during this transition.

Designing for experiences

Design has historically and traditionally been coveted as the creation of things. Simon (1996) explains 'things' are material man-made objects that people use to enable artificial aspects of our lives. The artificial being described as the design of pointed stone arrowheads, decorative design in the arts and craft movement, and the industrial and commercial application of design to products and services in the 20th century (Innes, 2007). However Buchanan (2001) suggests this focus has evolved from 'things' (symbols and products), to designing for action (what people experience and do) and thought (how people perceive and think about their environment).
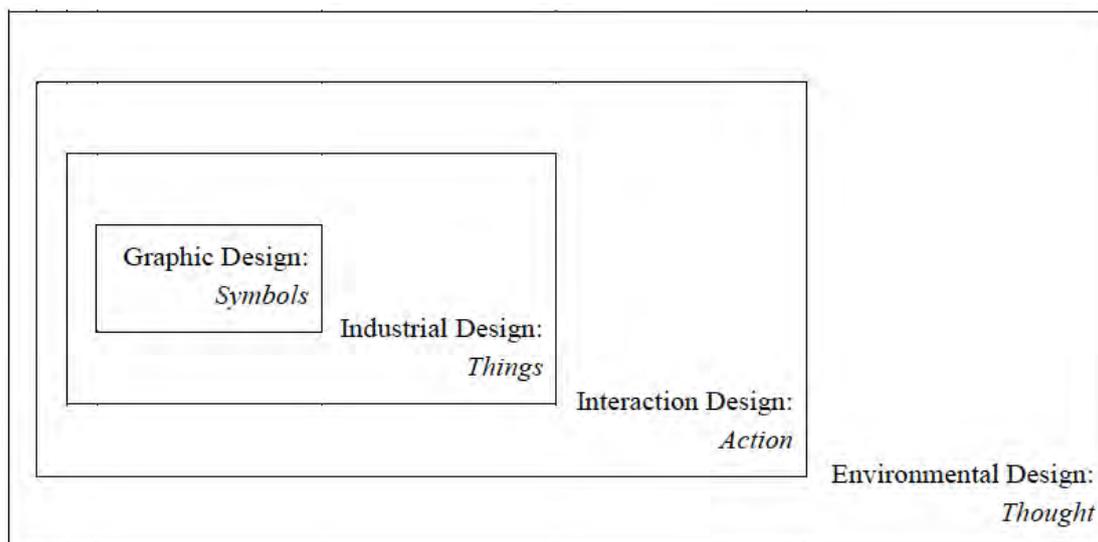
Figure 1: Buchanan's (2001:12) four orders of design, visually reinterpreted by Segelstrom (Source: Segelstrom, 2013).

This evolution highlights that some design practitioners position their practice as an intervention, initiating and supporting changes in the outcomes people desire. This interventionist perspective is summarised by Manzini as designing for something (an effect or change that is sought), rather than creating something (a symbol or product) (Manzini in Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011, p. 3).

There are many design disciplines that utilise this theoretical perspective. For example service design (Schneider and Stickdorn, 2012), interaction design (Sharp et al. 2007) and experience design (Bate and Robert, 2007). Of these approaches 'designing for an experience' is said to be

> concerned with designing for the richness of human experiences with the wide variety of new technologies and media that are available... to use

these developments to give people the chance to have a richer life, to include people who might otherwise feel excluded, and to ensure that everybody has a chance to have their say, especially those who often feel voiceless (McCarthy and Wright, 2010, p. 18).

Of note, people's experiences are not 'designed', they are 'designed for', as to 'design an experience' would dismiss the ability of people to act and make decisions. Additionally, when designing for experiences designers always create products. To be clear: the definition of products underlying this thesis is one of an 'array of objects, activities, services and environments that fill the life-world' (Margolin, 1997, p. 227). Consequently experienced design involves creating 'situations and leavers [products] that people can interact with' (Forlizzi and Ford, 2000, p. 420), to enable them to create the experiences they would like.

Overview of the methodology

Three literature reviews were conducted prior to this study being designed. They reviewed leaving care services in Scotland (LCSs), design research methodologies, and social science research approaches. Unfortunately, the first review revealed there are only a small number of publications about LCSs, and there are gaps in the literature when seeking to understand the operational, experiential and practical aspects of the provision and receipt of LCSs in Scotland. Consequently the first stage in this study involved understanding how the LCS operates in practice and what people's experiences of providing and accessing this service are. The second stage involved participatively designing conversations between young people and leaving care workers (LCWs) about where they may live as they leave care. Finally the third stage involved testing this re-designed interaction in situ and evaluating the experiential outcomes of this new interaction.

Stages		
1: Understand people's experiences	2: Create the intervention	3: Evaluate people's experiences of the intervention
Research questions		
1. What are young people's and LCWs' experiences of sharing and eliciting views about where a young person may live as they leave care?	2. What kind of intervention could be designed to enhance experiences between young people and LCWs as they share and elicit views about where a young person may live as they leave care?	3. What are young people's and LCWs' experiences of this intervention?
Objectives		
1. Understand people's experiences of 'this conversation' 2. Understand if an intervention is needed 3. Understand what an intervention may respond to	4. Design the intervention 5. Analyse data acquired when designing the intervention and develop the intervention 6. Repeat objectives 4 and 5 until the intervention is ready to pilot 7. Pilot the intervention and refine if necessary	8. Test the intervention 9. Acquire data about people's experiences of the intervention 10. Analyse this data and write up the findings

Figure 2: Aims, objectives and research questions for each stage of the study (Source: Rice, 2016).

Stage 1 - Understanding people's experiences

An ethnographic approach was taken to acquire data on the nature of conversations between young people and LCWs about where they may live as they leave care. Ten young people were observed working with one LCW. Four of these observations were analysed using reflective practice and praxis. The findings of this stage identified that during this conversation people felt anxious and confused, and found it difficult to make sense of what the other person said and meant.

Stage 2 - Create the intervention

An intervention that focused on improving people's experiences of working together was co-designed and prototyped with nine young people who had left care, three who were leaving care, and five LCWs. Reflection-in-and-on-action, and reflexive praxis were used as analytical mediums to weave together knowledge from the ethnography with knowledge acquired during the co-design workshops with the participants.

The intervention that was co-designed encouraged people to work in partnership **and as part of a facilitated conversation to 'explore', 'educate' and 'plan' where a** young person may live as they leave care. This intervention was supported and enabled by prototypes of visual communication materials that aimed to enable people to engage in a participatory conversation.

Stage 3 – Evaluate people's experiences of the intervention

The same five LCWs each invited a young person they were working with and who was ready to engage in this conversation to test the intervention with them in si**tu (young people's home and social work offices). These five young people** had not previously participated in the study. One-to-one interviews were conducted with four of those young people, along with a focus group with all of the LCWs, to understand peopl**e's experiences of the intervention. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to understand people's** experience of the intervention.

Outcomes of the re-designed interaction

Stage 1 of this work presented a formative evaluation of this interaction and highlighted that during this conversation (as stated earlier) people tended to feel anxious and confused. As most young people had fixed thoughts about where they wanted to live, LCWs spent time persuading them to think differently, an approach that was not always successful. Add an overwhelming amount of verbal information, the use of jargon, and no aids in place to respond to these

difficulties, and the outcomes of this interaction were not congruous with the aims of the service, to

> '...**enable the y**oung person to make a successful transition to independent adult living. This means the young person must be empowered to make decisions and take control of their lives. To do this they must be at the heart of the assessment and planning process and fully involved in all **aspects of their own throughcare and aftercare.' (Scottish Executive,** 2004a:8).

The findings from Stage 3 indicated overwhelmingly that the intervention supported and enabled positively enhanced experiences for young people and LCWs. At a **superficial level young people described the intervention as 'brilliant', 'fun', 'good', 'exciting', 'a relief', and LCWs said the intervention was 'an absolute luxury' and 'so precious'.**

At a deeper level, the analysis identified young people reporting experiences that were grouped into subthemes such as feeling: knowledgeable; thoughtful; able **to see the 'bigger picture'; listened to and understood; like they got to know** their LCW; and that they were working together. They also appreciated: being able to see what was being spoken about; being able to work through an activity rather than talk; that the activity was personalised to them; and the good explanations their LCWs provided.

LCWs felt that: difficult conversation were easier; there was a shift in p**ower/control so young people were more involved in 'this conversation'; they** got to know the young person they were working with; they were able to address gaps in their knowledge about accommodation resources; and could see **young people 'thinking out loud' as they engaged in the activities which helped** them interpret how young people were feeling. They also believed they were **better able to connect young people's expectations with reality. LCWs thought** this in turn helped young people better understand what they were saying, and develop trust between them and the young person they were working with.

In addition to this service improvement, an unintended positive outcome was uncovered which better supports this transition. The re-designed interaction has been found to prompt other conversations (for example about emotional support, dealing with money and caring for oneself), which enable LCWs to **respond more holistically to young people's needs.**

Whilst we were pleased the outcomes of the intervention were positive, it should be noted that the findings have been derived from a small sample. Also the geographical region the LCS is based in and the design of this service will **influence this sample. Additionally, as people's experiences are individual and** temporally specific this will also influence the data that was collated.

What contributed to the success of this intervention?

I believe there were several aspects that contributed to this intervention being successful. Firstly, I had worked as a volunteer with young people who had experience of living in and leaving care, therefore I had experience of talking about their lived experiences and being aware of power dynamics and how they may be interpreted during conversations. The second aspect was that the depth and range of the ethnographic observations provided a wide variety of insights into young people's and the LCWs' experiences. For example I observed the LCW work with young people who communicated with her in many different ways, and some who chose not to communicate with her at all. This enabled me to see a range of approaches people took to this conversation in different situations and contexts. This enabled me to think more generally about what people may need to encourage a constructive dialogue. Thirdly, being involved in both the ethnography and the co-design of workshops, I was able to utilise evidence from both methods together, which I believe strengthened our conversations and enriched the experiences we were designing for. Finally, I had a pre-existing relationship with most of the young people who I co-designed the intervention with. The ethnographic methods I employed also offered the opportunity for me to develop relationships with each member of the LCS team. I believe this meant that people were willing and able to provide honest feedback when designing and critiquing our intervention together. I also experienced people being open to me challenging their views, and trusted me when I asked them to try working in different ways.

Conclusion

Designing for experiences is a practice people with design training tend to engage in. This practice utilises the knowledge and skills of a designer as a participant in a participatory action research cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). This cycle supports a movement from establishing findings to exploring **how this knowledge can be used to improve people's experiences. However**, a designer does not need to be present in an action research cycle; anyone with knowledge and experience of a particular situation can be part of creating the solution. If this approach interests you, I would encourage you to read about action research. I found the writings of Reason and Bradbury (2006; 2008), Dicks (2010), and Coghlan and Bryden-Miller (2014) really helpful when understanding and positioning the approach I learnt about and engaged in during my study.

About the author

Gayle Rice works at the Institute for Research and Innovation for Social Services (IRISS) as a project manager where she focuses on innovation and improvement. She works with people in the social service sector to explore and

develop ideas, processes, roles, tools and training. She does this using participative and creative methods and evidencing the outcomes of these projects as well as instances when this work is embedded in everyday practice. Prior to joining IRISS Gayle worked as a graphic designer, facilitator and researcher for a variety of commercial clients, public services, social enterprises and start-ups. Gayle has recently completed her PhD at The Glasgow School of Art in the School of Design where she developed an interdisciplinary approach to **design for young people and their leaving care workers' experiences of** conversations about leaving care.

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