DTM Podcast #6: Participation in Design Processes

Show Notes

Peter talks to Jocelyn Bailey, an expert in using participative processes in the design of complex social systems. Jocelyn has worked with members of the UK Parliament to raise awareness of design approaches to solving complex problems, she has worked with USCreates, and recently completed a PhD thesis on emerging practices of design in the UK government. In the interview they talk about the different ways of including people in the design process and what can sometimes go wrong. They also discuss problems with finding the right people to codesign with, and appropriately representing specific population groups. Following the interview Peter and Mieke discuss the difference between participation and codesign, why sometimes not including designers in a codesign process can work better, and why designing your own method is best.

During the interview Jocelyn mentions several key references *Participation: The new tyranny*, by Bill Cooke and Uma Khotari, was published in 2001. Thomas Markussen is a teacher and researcher at the University of Southern Denmark looking at issues of participation in design processes he recently co-authored a paper looking at the democracy of healthcare. Josina Vink and Katarina Wetter-Edman have published work in the area of codesign, power, and participation. One of their recent papers was *Staging aesthetic disruption through design methods for service innovation.* A good resource that Jocelyn uses for codesign inspiration is Liberating Structures: “microstructures that enhance relational coordination and trust … quickly fostering lively participation in groups of any size”.

In the discussion after the interview Mieke talks about a codesign project called The Future of Fish, a non-profit ‘change incubator’. There are some good videos explaining the codesign involved in the project. Mieke also talks about how to tackle complex systems through codesign in her blog.

Peter talks about the participative work of Hilary Cottam, the controversial UK Designer of the Year 2005. Hilary worked with the UK Design Council to produce the ‘Double Diamond’ model of design, and has worked on many difficult social design challenges.

Podcast Transcript

Introduction

Peter Lloyd: Hi, everyone, it's Peter here. This is the sixth DTM podcast. In this podcast I talked to Jocelyn Bailey, who is an expert on participation and using participative practices in design and codesign. We touched on quite a few subjects, but hopefully you'll find it interesting and, as with other podcasts, it's followed by a discussion between Mieke and I where we pick up on various things that Josslyn talks about and gives some further references to the subject area. I hope you enjoy it, and here we go...

Part 1: Interview

Peter Lloyd: Joining us in the studio today is Jocelyn Bailey. Jocelyn has spent a lot of time working with the UK government, really trying to convince them of the benefits of taking a design approach to some of the problems that governments have particularly in the area of policy. Her research area is also in design for government, too. But she is an expert in participation and codesign and she work for an organisation called UScreates that use these collaborative approaches in working on complex policy related problems such as homelessness, child obesity, health screening, things like that. You're an expert in how to involve people in the process of design, which is why we're talking to you. Jocelyn, welcome to the DTM Pod.

Jocelyn Bailey: Thank you very much for inviting me. Very pleased to be here.

Peter Lloyd: My first question is, how do you approach the idea of participation, when you get a project brief? How do you start thinking about involving people in solving a complex problem?

Jocelyn Bailey: Well, first of all, we would introduce the idea of participation into a project brief that might not have specified it because we would argue that that would be a different or better way of finding out more about the problem or about coming up with some ideas and solutions.

Peter Lloyd: You recommend that to the client?

Jocelyn Bailey: We might actively sort of propose that to a client, even if they hadn't asked for it. But in terms of then thinking about how it works within a project or a process, I suppose we'd start off by thinking about what we were trying to achieve and then who we might need to talk to or hear from in order to understand a particular problem in various different dimensions. There's this idea of 'representativeness' that you might want, or statistical reliability or whatever the term is, that you might want to, if you know that there are as X proportion of people affected by this issue, then you'd want to talk to a representative sample of those people. However, I think our approach would be to try and talk to people with lots of different perspectives on the issue as a way of getting a more, a broader set of insights about what might be going on. And also, I suppose, assuming that social problems or social issues are not subject to laws of statistical probability.

Peter Lloyd: Can you give an example?

Jocelyn Bailey: For example, with homelessness if the challenge is to think about what to do to help a particular council reduce homelessness in its area, you might not only want to talk to people who are experiencing homelessness, but also people who are not experiencing homelessness, but perhaps people who seem to exhibit some of the same characteristics as those people who are experiencing homelessness and yet are not homeless.

Peter Lloyd: So you have to think quite carefully about the characteristics of the people that you want to involve in the process, so is that quite a big part of the process?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, we wouldn't necessarily do all of that before we began the project, but that would be the front end of a project would normally be thinking about doing a little bit more research about what is the nature of the problem we think we're working on and then trying to work out what are the dimensions of this that we want to find out about, and who might be able to inform us about that and sometimes thinking quite laterally or creatively about who that might be.

Peter Lloyd: When you're putting your projects together, do you have any working theory or do you draw any on any particular theory around participation and codesign?

Jocelyn Bailey: Some of the stuff I've just said comes from thinking about how to identify subjects in an ethnographic research process. We do, I suppose, draw a little bit on some ethnographic theory, but in a very light touch way. Generally, I would say we are, although I was definitely working with people who had PhDs in this subject area but as an organization we were quite atheoretical in terms of how we went about doing what we were doing.

Peter Lloyd: Approach things...

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, and certainly how I learned how to do things was sort of by osmosis. Watching and copying colleagues and doing projects with them. It was quite practice-based in a way.

Peter Lloyd: You had a kind of working theory of how to do things?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, we definitely had certain things that we would do that we felt would make the process go smoother. For example, we would always brief people before, on the phone, have a conversation with people before they turned up at the codesign workshop, whatever it was we're doing. We would always try and dress the room to make it feel welcoming, actually, whether that's sort of buying some flowers, making sure there's tea and coffee and that kind of thing, making it a nice welcoming space. And we would have a bit of a discussion at the beginning about some of the etiquette around codesign, ways that we would like people to be in the workshop in order to sort of optimize the codesign process. For example, sharing ideas rather than

keeping them in your head, for example, or listening to everybody else's idea and not blocking other people's ideas, building on things that other people said. We had a whole list.

Peter Lloyd: So in a way you're sort teaching people certain behaviors?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, I think if we'd had longer, then perhaps we wouldn't have been so explicit about saying these are the required behaviors. But because quite often you don't take up too much of people's time actually, there was a certain expediency to just saying this is how we would like everybody to behave, please. Yeah. And mostly people kind of responded quite well to that. Then we would be doing certain activities as part of the codesign workshop but we would normally start off with some kind of warm up thing that helped everyone relax a little bit or just loosen up a little bit. If we wanted them to draw something, we would start off with the drawing activity or if we wanted them to think creatively about something, we'd start off with a sort of lateral thinking activity.

Peter Lloyd: So you're using a basic theory of psychology in a way that people are more communicative when they're relaxed and they're happy. You're creating an environment where they can they can perform essentially?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah, absolutely. There are also some other things I would say about, we did one codesign process with about with over 100 people. That was far too many!

Peter Lloyd: What problem were you working on?

Jocelyn Bailey: We were trying to establish a kind of social / professional community within a particular bit of the health service. A bunch of professionals who all work on the same thing, but in different organizations and we were trying to create a social network for them to all link up. The organization we were working with had recruited a large number of these people to codesign this thing that they were all going to be part of, but there are limits to how many people you can meaningfully do codesign with, because there has to be a sense that everyone in the room has heard and understood the things that the other people in the room have said, or at least if they haven't heard

what everyone said, they've heard, you know, maybe what a third of the people have said. Each individual has a sense of the range of views and ideas and experience in the room and are therefore able to accept why a particular outcome of the codesign process is the way it is. But with hundreds of people, the outcome, or an outcome, may look wildly different to what a group of 10 people working together have come up with, and therefore they can feel quite alienated from the whole process. I think there are sort of practical physical limits to the numbers of people it is really possible to do it well with.

Peter Lloyd: You're also creating a listening environment as well as a talking environment?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, and a kind of social space as well.

Peter Lloyd: I had a question around how things work out in practice? What's the best participative process that you've sort of been involved with and what can go wrong and, sort of a follow up question is, when things go wrong, do interesting things happen? Is that more interesting in one way than things going right?

Jocelyn Bailey: Often, just as a basic principle, things always go differently to how you've planned them. There are two ways of dealing with that. One way is to not plan too carefully, which if you are happy improvising, I think is totally acceptable. The other thing is to have lots of contingency plans. I've seen people who are comfortable with one or the other. I think they're both actually acceptable ways of doing things, as long as you always accept that probably what you're going to end up doing or, things will turn out differently to your idea

Peter Lloyd: What you'd planned?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah, exactly. In terms of sort of good and bad outcomes, I think what a good and bad outcome is slightly depends on what your agenda is in running the codesign process. If it's basically about finding a solution to a problem and that's the brief that you've been set by a client, then lots of things that might happen in a codesign process where it goes slightly awry might feel incredibly unhelpful. Whereas if

you were a design researcher or a community organizer or even a student running a project where there isn't necessarily a client with a specific brief that you're beholden to, that might be, the things that go wrong or the ways that things go off-piste might be really interesting. I think generally things that I think are good, whatever the kind of context is: I think if at least some of the people there feel like they've learned something or have a different perspective on an issue, as a result of having been through a participatory process then I think that's always a good thing. Like learning is a good thing.

Peter Lloyd: The idea is that you've created an open environment that allows people to speak their minds and that other people see that as insightful?

Jocelyn Bailey: That people might have learned something from listening to someone they would never normally get to hear from, for example. I think there's also a nice thing that happens where, people often say that they are not creative or that they're not artistic or they can't draw or sort of make these statements about themselves, which are sort of, obviously they've learned that from somewhere, but they're also inaccurate. And it's a shame really because I think all human beings are creative. And I think giving people license to just exercise that muscle that they don't normally get to exercise even for a short time in the context of a codesign workshop is a liberating experience for people and they often find that quite a positive thing, even if at the beginning they're not very comfortable about the idea of it. A thing that looks like a good thing, which often I'm a bit wary of, is the sort of high-energy and positivity at the end of a workshop where people have gone through a process and come up with a solution they're really excited about. But it's always a virtual solution and what the codesign process or the codesign workshop doesn't take you through is the much trickier, messier task of actually implementing things. I think that kind of high point at the end of a codesign workshop can be a bit misleading.

Peter Lloyd: A false dawn?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, and often things don't get implemented after that so everyone's very pleased with a virtual outcome, and I think that is something to be wary of.

Peter Lloyd: And when things go wrong, what tends to happen?

Jocelyn Bailey: Normally that has to do with people not sort of behaving in scare quotes the way that they're supposed to. And that's normally to do with the fact that people have very different perspectives and interests and agendas on an issue. And that's perfectly valid and there are some codesign processes where it's okay for those things to be surfaced and it's okay for conflict to arise.

Peter Lloyd: So sometimes people refuse to take part?

Jocelyn Bailey: Sometimes people might actually refuse to participate. Quite often what happens if you're doing a codesign process within an organization people might have been sent along to participate and they may not be there willingly, and that's not always a very good basis on which to be proceeding.

Peter Lloyd: So you've got some people there that don't really want to be there or they don't agree with the premise for being there?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, and then they sort of will opt out or refuse in various different ways. There is this concept, a term coined by Cook and Khatami, they talk about the tyranny of participation. Participation or participatory practice is something that's been introduced in lots of different fields. Basically, their argument is that there's no congenial or positive opposite to joining it. So if you don't agree with the terms on which the participatory process is happening, and you decide that you don't want to participate, then that's always perceived as a negative, or anti-social or unhelpful or there's no kind of way of that being positively understood, which is why they refer to as the tyranny of participation. There is this kind of slightly socially coercive thing about participatory processes that you then also find people reacting to because they can sense that they are being enrolled in something and they're not quite sure what it is, but they are not sure if they want to go along with it.

Peter Lloyd: There are lots of kind of issues around the edges of the straightforwardly "participate in my creative process and everything will be fine" kind of thing?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah, it's an incredibly messy thing to try and engage with. I think the longer I've done it, the more I've been able to do something that approximates to what is described as the platonic ideal of a codesign process but it's still never happened.

Peter Lloyd: Do you have any sort of tips, tricks, techniques, methods that you use or could recommend?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah. One thing I've observed is this tendency to, there's a tendency to assume that there is a set of methods out there which, and there definitely are methods out there that you can use, but you can also just invent them yourself. That's kind of your job to design the thing, design the tool that you think is going to give you the outcome that you're looking for, not just sort of take something off the shelf from elsewhere. There's a really good thing called liberating structures, which is a resource of practical methods and tools to do with groups of people on problem solving.

Peter Lloyd: Is that a web resource?

Jocelyn Bailey: A web resource yes. In terms of thinking through some of the issues around codesign. That's what you'd want to then go and look at some of the academic literature for. People like Thomas Markussen has written quite a lot about democracy in politics and codesign, participatory design. Josina Vink and Katarina Wetter-Edman have written about politics and power and ethics in codesign. In terms of other tips and tricks and things that I use, one analogy or one metaphor that I find really useful is to think about it like designing a game. There are certain moves that the set of players are going to have to make. You need to sort of think those through ahead of them, like and you don't quite know what they're going to do but there are some probable pathways they're going to follow, and to just think, okay, so if I'm asking them to do this thing at this point, where is that likely to lead and what needs to happen after that in order to then get us across the finish line

Peter Lloyd: Altogether across the finish line.

Jocelyn Bailey: Altogether across the finish line, how might I shepherd this group of people towards that particular outcome? And is what I've got planned going to do that or do I need to think of something different on the spot?

Peter Lloyd: So almost without them realizing they're going from stage to stage and you're sort of managing that experience, but not that they would really realise?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yes, but not in a kind of Machiavellian, puppet master type way, because you also want to be open to the things that people are saying and what's actually going on for that group of people. Another helpful metaphor is just to think of yourself as the host. And you want to try and be quite a skillful host, you want everybody to have the airtime to speak and to say what they think and to feel comfortable and to actually have a good time as well. And that's a set of skills that is a different set of skills to the sort of designerly set of skills.

Peter Lloyd: Creating a stage, a comfortable stage for people?

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah, hosting a comfortable sort of social happening.

Peter Lloyd: That is quite a different range of skills that you've developed, from starting off as a designer into a different kind of design but different kinds of abilities too.

Jocelyn Bailey: Yeah, it draws on a very different part of my brain to the bit that learned how to design architectural layouts.

Peter Lloyd: OK, my final question is about sort of representation in a way, who you get to participate in your processes, So I'm thinking of people that are very hard to reach. I guess in homelessness, homeless people are quite hard to reach. But if you need people from different ethnicities, people from different genders, people from different countries or with different expertise, it is difficult to get a mix of people and I'm wondering how much that mix of people that you get actually affect the outcome. So how much those people that you get in the room actually represent the things that you you need representing?

Jocelyn Bailey: It's always going to be imperfect. You're never going to be able to get exactly the perfect set of participants. I think one thing that's really important is just to think through what the rationale is for who you're involving and why you're involving them and definitely avoid tokenism. There is an argument that doing it imperfectly is better than coming up with ideas on your own with input from nobody. 'Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good' or whatever that saying is!

Peter Lloyd: Okay, I think that's a good point to end. Thank you very much, Jocelyn, it's been great talking to you.

Part 2 Discussion of Interview

Peter Lloyd: That was Jocelyn Bailey, it was good talking to her. I think she's got a lot of experience particularly in working at high levels of government. But you're also very experienced in participation, Mieke. I wonder what you thought of the interview?

Mieke van der Bijl: It was really nice to listen to Jocelyn talking about her work. I know her work a little bit and it's interesting to hear how she talks about politics and democracy and those kind of things. One of the things that we really need to talk about when we talk about codesign is the history of this, because something strange is going on here, which I think is causing a lot of confusion. So the terms, 'codesign' and 'participatory design', they are kind of being intermixed, but they're actually quite different things. Participatory design is quite an old term, it's got a Scandinavian tradition.

Peter Lloyd: I think it goes back to architecture, too, in the early 70s with participatory approaches trying to get past the tyranny of architects deciding everything for the people that were inhabiting their buildings.

Mieke van der Bijl: That's right, and particularly in in workplace design. And it was this kind of democratic ideal that if you are designing something - a workplace for workers - then those workers should have a say in whatever you were designing. So that was really the democratic part. But also, you know, they realized quite quickly that if they were doing that, they were actually generating much better designs as well, that were much more usable and useful. And people were much happier in those workplaces. So this idea of participatory design then also started gaining traction in the design of computer systems and human-centred design and really understanding that when you involve people in your design process, you will get better outcomes, apart from this democratic ideal.

Peter Lloyd: So that they're feeding ideas into the design process for the designer to draw on somehow. It's a kind of wider pool of ideas?

Mieke van der Bijl: Yeah, that's how I would probably explain it. And what's important to mention there is that the designer is in charge in the end, even though there is a democratic ideal. You involve people in the process, they participate so to say, but they are not creating a design. Now, codesign, which basically means collaborative design, has a very different origin. I mean, we've been talking about collaborative design for a long time and there have been many studies about how designers from different disciplines work together collaboratively to create a design. In industrial design we would typically look at how a multi-disciplinary team involving product designers, marketeers, engineers all work together and collaboratively they create a design.

Peter Lloyd: Which really is every design process, in practice every design process is collaborative.

Mieke van der Bijl: That's right. There's no such thing as a non-collaborative design process, at least not in the type of design that we're doing in this faculty. In that case, there's not one person who is in charge. This is really essentially a collaborative process. Now, since design has become more popular in a public context and public-sector context, but also social context, this idea of participation has gained traction very quickly, because of course this democratic ideal is very important. If we are going to design stuff here for people, then we should involve those people in the process.

Somehow that has become codesign and a problem with it is, and I think that Jocelyn explained that in a way, is that if you involve people in the process as part of this democratic ideal, but you call it codesign, then people are going to expect that you're actually going to design something together in this process.

Peter Lloyd: And that's going to be the outcome?

Mieke van der Bijl: That is the outcome. That is the goal. So then people are often disappointed. You know, when this virtual solution that Jocelyn calls it, is not going to be implemented. The other side of that is that I often see with students here, the Masters students when they're graduating. There seems to be some kind of idea that you have to do a codesign session. And then what I ask students: "why are you doing that?" They will say: "well, you know, there will be lots of ideas that are generated there and then I will choose one of those and work with that". But then when I ask them, you know, what is your role as a designer if you're leaving it up to those people to design something for you, and those people are not even designers, then that's always an important question to ask.

Peter Lloyd: I think that's what I was trying to get to in the interview, that the political bits around the edges of codesign processes, but also participatory processes where there's a, not exactly a hidden agenda, but someone has to make decisions at some point. It's sort of like the premise that you get people into a room to collaborate and what their expectations about what the result will be. But who's really going to make the decision? In a lot of political processes, I think Jocelyn talked about homelessness, I think they presented a solution but it wasn't taken up by the local government. Some other political process can take over and just sideline the result. And that can be really disappointing.

Mieke van der Bijl: Yes. And I think it's important to clarify that when you invite people to a session like that, that it's really to get a better sense of what the problem really is. I mean, that's what Jocelyn was saying at the start, this is really about gaining an understanding of the problem. And it's different from ethnographic study because in in these sessions, you often have people actually create something and you ask them for ideas. But the goal is not the idea in itself. It's why they create the idea and why they

think it is a good idea. It's really, again, input for a broader design process. Now, what you're seeing is quite important about the political aspect of it, because this context that Jocelyn is talking about is quite different from a regular design process where you have a lot more to say as a designer. You do need to think about who is making the decisions here and if that person should also be there in that process.

Peter Lloyd: But also one of the key decisions that I talked about with Jocelyn was who you invite and how representative they are of the group that you're trying to get to. Certainly in the history of product design, user-centered design, we've created this concept of the abstract ‘user’. The user is the center of the process. But who is that user? Normally, it's whoever is around you. You have to be quite thorough and rigorous to really get to the people who are actually going to use your products and see how they use the products in the process of developing that product, too. We're in an educational environment. The users are whoever is around, which happens to be students. You're conflating one category of person with another category of person. I think that's an important thing that has to be said: how you get these people and who they actually represent, and whether that's useful in your process, is important.

Mieke van der Bijl: Absolutely. The other thing that plays out in this public and social space is that you don't just invite users, the people who are going to be affected with whatever is being designed, you also invite people who will start taking action. They're more active people in this in this context, which means that you need to also help them create solutions or interventions, whatever you want to call them that's going to work for them.

There's a really nice example by a lady called Cheryl Dahl, she started this initiative called The Future of Fish, which was about the challenges around overfishing and all the ecosystem problems we have in the oceans about the biodiversity of fish. What she did was she brought a lot of entrepreneurs together who were then trying to do something about this complex problem. They all knew that on their own there was not so much that they could do. For example, she worked with a chef who wanted to cook with more sustainable fish, but she also worked with fishermen and she also worked with people who were kind of in the middle, working at fish auctions, for example. She then invited those people together and organised this codesign session. The outcome

of that is not just one thing, it's multiple things that those people can take on and then start taking forward. And she also has a really interesting process, or interesting principles of who to invite, so who should have a seat at the table? So firstly, that is those people that are going to do something. They are people who can deal with ambiguity. They are willing to take risk. She has a really nice video that I will share in which she talks about the same thing that Jocelyn mentions, she calls it 'No Jerks'. So no one who's going to cut off that creative process. And lastly she says, I don't want designers - no designers! - because I don't want designers to then come up with ideas that my people can't work with. I find that really interesting when you talk about codesign; it's so many different things.

Peter Lloyd: I think it can lead to a lot of different places too. it. You can have these processes outside of design departments, designers, outside the design industries too, which I think is interesting. You're drawing on people's natural ability to want to solve problems and to use their experience in suggesting solutions.

Mieke van der Bijl: Yeah, but it doesn't necessarily have to have anything to do with design. It's much more about, you know, a creative process. Oh, what can I do as an entrepreneur to address this issue, what kind of tools do I have? Is that really still a design process in the sense that we've been talking about it in this podcast?

Peter Lloyd: One of the references that I had is Hilary Cottam, who is a UK based designer. She was awarded Designer of the Year in 2005. She's a sociologist and she was one of the designers of the double diamond process. She worked for the Design Council in the U.K. and came up with the double diamond model. I've interviewed her before and she said, we came up with this double diamond thing, we didn't know if it was going to work! But she is really good at getting the right expertise in the room. That's her real skill. She's worked on the prison system in the UK. I think she's worked on problems of old age and loneliness, things like that. She selects very carefully who you have in the room. She does work with designers, so there are designers in the room, but also architects and people that have real insight into the systems that she's working with. She somehow brings them all together and creates solutions that are really good solutions. She's really impressive, I think.

Peter Lloyd: Do you think there are any limits to participation in terms of what problems can you work on that are better not solved with participation or codesign? Or do you think it always provides some positive effect?

Mieke van der Bijl: Well, we even did codesign with the design of this course if you remember! That's a difficult question...

Peter Lloyd: Because I suppose comparing it to the platonic ideal or the ideal design process where the designer decides everything, you know, everything, every detail, the all-seeing architect.

Mieke van der Bijl: I think it's always useful to have people participate in a process, to be honest, but not participation for the sake of participation. I've had discussions with Paul Heckert about this. He doesn't really believe that you need participatory design at all because designers are skillful enough to design the products themselves. And I'd probably agree with that. But when you're looking at design in more complex spaces and you really want to understand that problem space, then it's always useful to involve people, not as designers, but just, you know, to understand that problems.

Peter Lloyd: I thought Jocelyn made a good point when she said that you're the designer, you should design the tool yourself, not use other tools. Perhaps that's the design process - designing the design process. The real talent is the ability to design a process that's going to deliver an outcome that you don't expect or that you don't have a lot of control over. But you do have a lot of control over how you design the process. So it is control in a different way.

Mieke van der Bijl: I would agree and I think you can actually use your design skills there because it's also about the framing again. Really about why do we really want to do this? What do we want to get out of it? How do we really frame this session? Is this a political session? Is this really a design session? Is this a session to understand the problem space? Is this a session to build relationships? I think that's true that the design of that session is a is a real skill.

Peter Lloyd: OK. I think we should leave it there. This really sparks off a lot of ideas doesn't it about a lot of problems and how we can bring other people into that process. Thanks, Mieke.

Mieke van der Bijl: Thanks, Peter. Very interesting.