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# Establishing Trust through Storytelling: A Model for Co-Design

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Recent research has demonstrated that it is critical for designers to establish trust with collaborators in their ability, integrity and benevolence for successful co-design. It has also been acknowledged that in part, this trust is established through storytelling exchanges between designer and collaborator. This paper examines this finding across eight cases where stories have been exchanged between designer and collaborator at different stages in the design process. The cases are comprised of interviews with key stakeholders working in collaborative settings from: IDEO; the National Health Service; Glasgow School of Art; Northumbrian Water; Unilever; Royal Bank of Scotland; Tomato; Traffic Penalty Tribunal; and True North. The emerging themes suggest: stories based on real-life settings help to establish trust in ability and benevolence due to the compassion they can demonstrate; stories that employ novel modes of communication help to establish trust in integrity due to the fulfilment of an expectation to be 'cutting edge', and, stories that include elements of humour help to establish trust in benevolence due to the revealing of character. These findings are presented as a model for co-design, to help an ordinarily instinctive activity become strategic.

**Keywords:** *storytelling; trust; co-design; collaboration*

## 1 Introduction

The role of design is ever growing, and has been promoted as a vehicle for organisational change across private (Gloppen, 2011; Junginger, 2006; Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009), public (Bevan, Robert, & Bate, 2007; Design Commission, 2013) and voluntary community sector settings (Author, 2015). As design has moved from its traditional field of making 'things' to creating change, the focus of research has initially been to track impact, in order to justify the presence of the discipline in fields normally linked to traditional management subject areas (Sangiorgi, 2011; Wetter Edman, 2011). More recently, focus has shifted to understanding the collaborative relationship between designer and organisation, as that too has altered as a result of this new focus on designing behaviour, rather than objects (Yee, Jefferies, & Michlewski, 2017; Yee, Jefferies, & Tan, 2014).

A recent research inquiry has established the importance of trust between designer and organisation, in order to co-design strategic level processes and enact radical change (Author, 2015). The designer's trustworthiness was more important to the collaborator than the trust vested in the methods being applied, as the collaborator had to believe in their

ability to use the approach in the best way possible for the organisation (Author, 2015; Author, 2017). The research presented in this paper builds on this initial understanding by interrogating the role that storytelling plays in establishing this trust across three different cases, before proposing a new approach to using storytelling to enhance co-design in organisational contexts.

### **1.1 Important Types of Trust in Collaboration**

The importance of the trust between designer and collaborator has not been widely discussed to date. Research conducted into this topic has predominantly focused on the different forms of empathy and their role in design projects (e.g. Goleman, 2007; Kimbell, 2013; Koupric & Visser, 2009, Young, 2014). Goleman (2006, p. 101) builds on the idea of empathy by suggesting that people can display types of intelligence, such as 'emotional' and 'social', which can be linked to a designer's ability to elicit trust from a client or stakeholder. Recent research has also explored the role of the designer in projects that aim to bring about change (Tan, 2012; Yee, Jefferies, & Michlewski, 2017; Yee, Jefferies, & Tan, 2014), suggesting that personality traits, as well as design skill, are significant in achieving success. Amongst these texts, the importance of trust is often mentioned, but *how* it is elicited between a designer and collaborator is not explicitly explored.

The development of trust and its importance in relationships and activities has been studied across a variety of subjects, including social sciences, psychology, economics, and management. Based on the analysis of various literature, Rousseau et al., (1998) created the following definition:

"Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another". (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395).

Rousseau *et al.* (1998, p. 395) suggest that there are two conditions of trust, the first being risk. In this study, the collaborations with designers (introduced in the proceeding section) can be seen as carrying risk, as the organisations were engaging with an external consultancy or team to try and further an internal objective. In three instances, this risk was heightened as the engagement was with design students from UK universities, where the implied inexperience of the students created a sense of risk.

The second condition of trust is interdependence, where "the interests of one party cannot be achieved without reliance upon another" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). In all co-design projects, success cannot be achieved without engagement with key stakeholders to help the designers shape successful solutions. Therefore trust, by Rousseau's definition of both risk and interdependence, was present in all of these cases.

The varying theories of trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Williamson, 1993) mean that there are also many models on how to view the outcomes, causes or prerequisites of trust. As there are no specific models on the development of trust in relation to design in social contexts, it is appropriate to draw on those proffered by organisational discourse to support the discussion of the development of trust in this case study. Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) model of trust is the most widely accepted in the relevant literature, and its three aspects of perceived trustworthiness; ability, integrity and benevolence, will be used to frame this study's findings.

Mayer *et al.*, (1995) define the first of the factors in perceived trustworthiness as *ability*, described as the “group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain”. Many other models have identified similar factors (e.g. Gabarro, 1978; Kee & Knox, 1970; Williamson, 1993), the terms often used imply an expertise or competence that is more generic. However, this model depicts a trustee’s perceived ability as task and situation-specific; in one area they may be considered expert, and in another, be perceived to lack the necessary ability (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

*Integrity* in this model “involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable.” (Mayer *et al.*, 1995, p. 719). Those ‘principles’ need to correspond with those held personally by the trustor (the person imparting the trust), but also the organisational principles. Mayer *et al.*, (1995) cite other research projects on trust relationships, such as those conducted by Gabarro (1978), who defines integrity as character, and Hart *et al.*, (1986), who describe it as openness or congruity, as further evidence of the importance of integrity in perceived trustworthiness.

Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) third and final component of trustworthiness is *benevolence*; “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor... that the trustee has some specific attachment to the trustor” (Mayer *et al.*, 1995, p. 718). A trustee has to demonstrate that their relationship with the trustor, in this case, the client, is not purely about personal gain. A designer’s benevolence would be judged in relation to their desire to achieve the best outcomes for the stakeholders or organisation i.e. putting organisational goals ahead of individual ones (Rosen & Jerdee, 1977). Previous research has found that the trust placed in the designer, was more important than that they placed in the approach, as the designer was the only proponent of the ‘benevolent’ trait, which was particularly important in a social context (Author, 2015).

Whilst researchers have considered the relationship between trust and the impact of design on an organisation (Author, 2015; Yee, Jefferies, & Michlewski, 2017; Yee, White, & Lennon, 2015), research into precisely *how* designers present the three features of trustworthiness is of particular value to those looking to co-design in contexts where risk and interdependence exist.

## **1.2 Establishing a Criteria for Storytelling in Collaboration**

In the research inquiry related to this paper, storytelling was found to be one of the ways that the designer established trust in both the approach, and themselves as the proponent of the process. They used storytelling to share previous successful applications of design and service users’ experiences across all project settings (Warwick, 2015).

Storytelling is a useful phenomenon to acknowledge when examining collaborative processes, as the universality of stories in sharing and conveying knowledge is well recognised (Collison & Mackenzie, 1999; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; McDonnell, Lloyd, & Valkenburg, 2004; Nonaka & Takeushi, 1995). Collaborative relationships such as those between designers and their clients provide a platform for storytelling to occur during the conveyance of knowledge from one party to another (Leonardi & Bailey, 2008). In these instances of storytelling, designers are able to exhibit the factors that elicit trust.

Storytelling can take many forms, including conversation, presentation and storybook. In relation to displaying factors of trustworthiness, both psychological and dialogic models of

storytelling are relevant. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) developed a theory of the narrative construction of reality, in which he set the following criteria for an occurrence of storytelling:

- Action directed towards goal
- Order established between events and states
- Sensitivity towards what is canonical in human interaction
- The revealing of a narrator's perspective

Further to this, storytelling's specific relationship with design has been considered from a variety of viewpoints. Design researcher Peter Lloyd (2000) examines dialogue between members of design teams in order to extrapolate the stories that they tell during the process of designing. Of particular interest in his research is the criteria he establishes to identify an occurrence of storytelling:

- It can be interpreted or read
- Different narrative viewpoints can be included
- There is a sense of closure; a definite ending
- A name can be invented that references the complex of action

A verbal exchange between designers constitutes only one form of communication that designers may use during a collaborative design project. The first criterion suggests that a story is interpreted or read. With respect to other formats of communication that designers may use, such as imagery and film, it could be argued that a story can also be heard or watched, both of which also require interpretation.

Therefore, when adapting this criterion to the context of a collaborative design project, it should simply state that '*it can be interpreted*'. The third criterion suggests a sense of closure is required; however, a concept, which by all intentions may require further development, can be communicated using an open-ended story to stimulate further discussion. Therefore, it is not necessary to fulfil this criterion at all times during a collaborative design project. The second and the fourth criteria are wholly relevant. As a viewpoint or range of viewpoints can be represented through a concept or range of concepts. Also, when communicating a design concept, it is likely that a name will be invented to reference the story, which can then act as a recall for the design concept itself.

When comparing these criteria to Bruner's (1990), it can be seen that there are some similarities: both agree that a story must reveal a perspective or viewpoint; Bruner (1990) suggests that there must be an order of either events or states and Lloyd (2000) proposes that there must be a definite ending suggesting an order of events or states. However, in addition to Bruner's (1990) criteria, Lloyd (2000) also suggests that a story must be interpretable, meaning that an understanding of something can be gained from it and that a name can constitute a reference to the story. An adaptation of these criteria for an instance of storytelling in a collaborative design project is communicated below:

- There is action directed towards a goal
- It can be interpreted by the audience
- There is a sequence of events and/or states
- There is a sensitivity towards user interaction
- The designer's perspective is revealed in the communication

- A name can be invented to reference the complex of action

It is this combination of these theorists' models for storytelling, adapted to the context of a collaborative design project, which define the specific instances of storytelling that this research examines. The cases presented in this paper all refer to stories exchanged between designer and collaborator that fulfil this criteria. It discusses these projects in relation to the three factors of trustworthiness established in the previous section; *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence*, in order to suggest how different types of storytelling can be used to exhibit each one.

## 2 Methodology

A case study research design was chosen to “define topics broadly not narrowly, cover contextual conditions and not just phenomenon of study, and rely on multiple and not just singular sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 33). This study is thought to be the first exploring the role of storytelling in eliciting trust in co-design projects, and as such, dictated an exploratory design (Yin, 2003, p. 3). An embedded, multiple-case design was chosen, exploring design projects that involved eight different organisations and designers, allowing the authors to draw more generalizable insights (Yin, 2003, p. 45).

Cases had to comprise of a situation where organisations worked collaboratively with designers who communicated using storytelling as defined in section 1.2. However, it should be noted that trust was not explicitly mentioned in any of the research material or interview questions, so as not to prejudice the research.

The research was qualitative by nature, in order to explore “well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 3). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Robson, 2011) with key stakeholders (both designers and organisational employees) involved in each collaborative setting. Interviewees were asked to speak about the storytelling that occurred and how this had impact. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was then conducted, in order to establish relationships between storytelling and trust. The cases were as follows:

### 2.1 IDEO

IDEO are a world-leading global design consultancy. They have over seven hundred employees in nine different locations across the world. They work collaboratively with many different types of organisations on complex challenges. Much of the communication that takes place between them and their collaborators involve examples of storytelling. An interview was conducted with an employee of IDEO about their collective experiences of co-design projects whilst working there.

### 2.2 National Health Service and Glasgow School of Arts

In 2012, designers from the Glasgow School of Art collaborated with the National Health Service in order to help them re-design the nutritional management and monitoring system for vulnerable, older hospital patients. There were several examples of storytelling during the co-design project. An interview was conducted with a designer from Glasgow School of Arts about their experiences during this project.

### 2.3 Northumbrian Water

Northumbrian Water are a utilities company based in the North East of England. In 2016, they worked collaboratively with Northumbria University Design School. They asked

industrial design students to co-design concepts that would stop the general public from flushing unsuitable things down the toilet. In total, five groups of three designers presented their work at interim and final stages, which were all examples of storytelling that met the aforementioned criteria. An interview was conducted with an employee from Northumbrian Water about their experiences during this project.

#### **2.4 Unilever**

Unilever's Research and Development Centre, UK, has a long-standing relationship with many universities and design consultancies. During these relationships they have collaborated on many projects for their Laundry and Household Care departments from 2004 until present day. Much of the communication that took place during these projects involved examples of storytelling. An interview was conducted with an employee from Unilever about their experiences, having been involved in many of these projects.

#### **2.5 Royal Bank of Scotland and Glasgow School of Arts**

In 2016/17, designers from Glasgow School of Art collaborated with the Royal Bank of Scotland to help them re-think their Security Assurance services. An interview with an employee from the Royal Bank of Scotland, and three interviews with designers from Glasgow School of Art, were conducted about their experiences during this project, in which they described several examples of storytelling.

#### **2.6 Tomato**

Tomato are a London-based design consultancy that specialise in brand, product and digital experiences. The majority of the communication that takes place between them and their collaborators involve examples of storytelling. An interview was conducted with an employee of Tomato about their collective experiences of co-design projects whilst working there.

#### **2.7 Traffic Penalty Tribunal**

The Traffic Penalty Tribunal are a Government department charged with managing the parking appeals system in the UK. The parking appeals system relates to the council's monitoring of illegally parked cars; if a member of the public is issued with a penalty for parking illegally they have a right to appeal this judgment. Since 2009, the Traffic Penalty Tribunal have worked with designers to co-design new concepts for parking appeals related systems. Much of the communication that took place during this work involved examples of storytelling. Two interviews were conducted about this experience, one with the Chief Adjudicator of the Traffic Penalty Tribunal and one with an in-house designer that worked for the Traffic Penalty Tribunal for a number of years.

#### **2.8 True North**

True North are a Manchester-based design consultancy that specialise in co-designing brand experience. Most of the communication that takes place between them and their collaborators involve examples of storytelling. An interview was conducted with an employee of True North about their collective experiences whilst working there.

### **3 Case Examples and Discussion**

After conducting a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews, several themes emerged in relation to how storytelling had contributed to establishing trust. However, there were three key themes present in multiple cases:

- Storytelling based on real-life experiences observed by the designer established trust in their ability.
- Novel modes of communication to tell stories established trust in the designer's integrity.
- Storytelling based on real-life experiences observed by the designer, delivered with an element of humour, established trust in their benevolence.

For illustrative purposes, the following sections will describe an example of how these themes existed in one of the cases. It should be noted that examples of the stories are not included in the discussion, as they are deemed commercially sensitive. Instead, the sense of the story has been described and the focus of the discussion is on the impact of the story in relation to perceived trustworthiness of the designer.

### **3.1 Northumbrian Water Case Example: establishing trust in ability**

In this case, an employee from Northumbrian Water was interviewed about a collaborative design project that asked industrial design students from Northumbria University to create concepts that would stop the general public from flushing unsuitable items down the toilet. The Northumbrian Water employee focused a lot of their responses on the final concept pitches.

The employee from Northumbrian Water proclaimed unprompted that pitches delivered through storytelling '*worked better*', and that when storytelling isn't used '*there's no context*' and the pitch therefore '*doesn't have the same level of meaning*'. When asked to explain why they believed this was the case, they began to recall the pitches and concluded that those using storytelling based those stories on real-life observations. It was these instances of real-life observations that demonstrated to the Northumbrian Water employee that these teams were more capable than the others. When probing further as to why they believed this to be the case, they stressed the importance of making stories '*as real as possible*', because they believed that when '*research [becomes] the foundation of your story*', you are simply demonstrating the ability you have to compile research into a meaningful insight. They proposed that an organisation can learn from the insight presented in a story of this type, whether or not it has led to a commercially viable concept.

The Northumbrian Water employee proclaimed that they were '*bowled over*' by the stories the industrial design students told. Further to this, they explained that it transpired that storytelling was the '*best way to sell the ideas*' and invigorate thinking around the problem that the design students used to inspire their concept generation (how to get people to stop flushing inappropriate items down the toilet). The change in thinking that this project stimulated has led to Northumbrian Water seeking future collaboration with designers to develop the students' concepts, and also to confront other problems that the organisation has with respect to the wider services they provide. The stories therefore simultaneously demonstrated the students' ability in this domain, but also the relevance of design to a non-design organisation. This experience correlates with those described in four other cases: National Health Service and Glasgow School of Arts; Unilever; Royal Bank of Scotland and Glasgow School of Arts; and Traffic Penalty Tribunal.

### **3.2 Unilever Case Example: establishing trust in integrity**

In this case, an employee from Unilever's Research and Development Plant in Port Sunlight, UK, was interviewed about a series of collaborative co-design projects they had overseen



during their employment. Designers working collaboratively with Unilever included design students from various UK-based universities, and a number of professional UK-based design consultancies. During the interview, discussion was focused on the communications they were engaged in by designers, including project meetings, emails and concept presentations, and the impacts this had had on the organisation.

During the interview, again unprompted, the employee from Unilever proclaimed that communication following a storytelling format was always more engaging. When asked to explain this further, they stated that storytelling *'helps you focus your mind on what might actually work and what might not work or what would be really interesting if you could get it to work'*. When probed further as to how storytelling focuses your mind, they explained that the novelty of the communication demanded their full attention. They proposed that when experiencing stories delivered in modes such as film and animation, as opposed to *'the usual PowerPoint presentation'*, you were much less likely to become distracted. An expectation that designers operated on the *'cutting edge'* of technology, with respect to modes of storytelling, was implied. When thinking retrospectively about their collective experiences of novel storytelling, they surmised that this was a primary reason why Unilever had had such a long-standing relationship with design professionals. When asked to explain this further, they attributed engaging novel storytelling to *'authenticating basic ideas'*; bringing a level of integrity to their working relationships.

It is important to mention that when in a situation where the integrity of a working relationship is influenced by the capability of using what is perceived as a novel mode of storytelling, there are various implications. Firstly, you must understand what is perceived as novel by your audience, and secondly, you must understand how to stay on the vanguard of novel storytelling during a time when diverse communication styles become ever more mainstream.

When reflecting on the body of work that has happened collaboratively between designers and Unilever, the Unilever employee acknowledged that a cultural change had taken place in the organisation. Part of the responsibility of their role within Unilever was to *'find new ways of working'* and they firmly believe that design has helped to achieve this goal, in particular due to the stories they have told. This correlated with the impacts of storytelling described in the following cases: IDEO, Northumbrian Water, Tomato, and, True North.

### **3.3 Traffic Penalty Tribunal Case Example: establishing trust in benevolence**

In this case, a designer and chief adjudicator (self-proclaimed storytellers) working for The Traffic Penalty Tribunal were interviewed about their experiences of pitching new concepts for dealing with parking appeals to various councils in the UK.

During the interview, both the designer and the chief adjudicator explained that it was crucial to *'win over'* their audiences as quite often they were *'dyed in the wool'* people. By this, they meant that the people in their audiences had only ever done things in a certain way and that because of this, they anticipated it might be difficult to change their mind about how to do these things. When asked how storytelling had helped them in these situations, they proposed that providing context through telling stories based on the *'real-life experiences'* of people parking illegally, and those enforcing the law, seemed effective. When asked to discuss this further, they described that when you create a story from the real-life experiences of many, you have to condense these people down into a single character. In thinking about this character, and their voice in the story, you have the possibility to inject

personality quirks that add a level of humour. They believed that doing this can ‘*make [a storytelling experience] fun*’, and appeal that it appeals to ‘*the lighter side*’ of your audience. When reflecting on these instances of storytelling, they believed that a more positive experience had been achieved as the audience trusted in the benevolence of their ambitions.

The designer and chief adjudicator from the Traffic Penalty Tribunal collaborated with many councils throughout the UK, and also presented their work at an IFG conference event that included representation from Westminster. Evidence of the change that this work has stimulated in their collaborative partners is considerable; the Traffic Penalty Tribunal became the first body to develop an online parking appeals system in one particular council, and the stories they have told about the success of this project have stimulated similar work in other areas. For example, a UK court of justice also reformed their appeals service by providing an online system as a result of this work. The designer directly linked the impact to the relationship they developed in each setting, which highlights the importance of the stories told to persuade councils that they wanted to ‘do good’ for the organisation and its stakeholders. This experience correlates with experiences described in the Northumbrian Water and Unilever cases.

#### **4 Establishing Trust through Storytelling: A Model for Co-Design**

It is essential that trust is established between designers and organisations when working collaboratively; without trust, the success of co-design is limited (Warwick, 2015). As demonstrated by the research this paper discusses, storytelling has an intimate relationship with establishing trust in a number of ways.

Firstly, storytelling can establish trust in the ability of a designer. Before revealing their concept, a designer has an opportunity to tell a story that justifies the concept’s existence. This might happen on an informal basis during discussion, or a more formal basis such as a design pitch. In this instance, stories told from the perspectives of real people have proven to give an organisation trust in the designer’s ability. For example, before revealing a concept for a time-saving kitchen gadget, a designer might tell a story about a single parent family preparing a meal based on their observational research. These types of stories were identified as establishing trust in a designer’s ability in five cases examined.

Secondly, storytelling can establish trust in the integrity of a designer. During collaboration between designer and organisation, there are a number of opportunities to share stories on an informal basis about previous work. This typically occurs during the early stages of project negotiation. In these instances, showing work that employed novel styles of communication reinforced trust in the designer’s integrity. However, when comparing case studies, it became apparent that what is deemed as novel by an organisation is dependent on their experience. For example, using a movie to pitch a concept might seem novel to an organisation that has only ever used PowerPoint presentations, whereas an organisation that has seen many movie presentations might find an animation more novel. It transpired that there is an expectation from organisations that designers are ‘cutting edge’ with regards to the communication styles they use when storytelling. As such, novel communication styles were identified as giving confidence in designers’ integrity in all cases examined.

Finally, storytelling can establish trust in the benevolence of a designer. The organisations in all cases examined identified that using the perspectives of real people in stories that discuss and pitch concepts can indicate benevolence. This was attributed to the fact that

showing an understanding of someone other than oneself is viewed as compassionate. Further to this, they also indicated that having humorous content in a story also established trust in benevolence. The rationale given for this was that these types of stories revealed the personality of the designer(s) to the organisations they were working with, making the collaboration feel more ‘friendly’.

These conclusions are summarised in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1: Establishing Trust through Storytelling: A Model for Co-Design

This co-design model offers valuable insight into the way designers can use storytelling to elicit the three factors of trustworthiness, in order to maximise the impact of co-design. It is of value to both practitioners and academics working in contexts where there is a perceived risk in the engagement, and interdependence between designer and client, that dictates the presence of trust. Designers have used stories intuitively to help forge relationships with clients, but this research provides detail as to the particular types of stories that can help to demonstrate particular factors of trustworthiness to add rigour to this otherwise instinctive activity.

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