Fluency in Uncertainty: finding a way into, and through, participatory design practice.

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design

Sarah Kushinsky

Bachelor of Design (Multimedia) Swinburne

School of Media and Communication
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

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Fluency In Uncertainty: Finding a way into, and through, participatory design practice

Sarah Kushinsky - Candidate for Master of Design (Research Project)
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of the work which has been carried out since the official research program; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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Sarah Kushinsky - Candidate for Master of Design (Research Project)

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An Illustration I used to reflect on this research and communicate it during my third milestone review using Schön’s (1983) metaphor of the hard high ground and swampy lowland of practice (I describe the relevance to my work on p. 36)
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Fluency in Uncertainty: Finding a way into, and through, participatory design practice

What This Research Is About

This research is the story of my transition to a relational design practice and how sharing the design process, through a participatory design approach, changed it. The driving force behind this research was my desire to be able to work in partnership with people to facilitate positive change in their quality of life. My hope was that a participatory design approach would be an effective and principled way to achieve this. The messiness, complexity and uncertainty that the participants and I worked through were fundamental to the story of how this research facilitated positive change to the communication infrastructure and decision-making processes in our shared workplace.

I sought to involve my non-designer co-workers as active, critical partners in the process of designing a communication system for our workplace. Following established participatory design methods I originally planned three workshops. In the lived reality of the intervention, however, I found the workshops impossible to carry out due to a complex network of issues beyond my control. Therefore, whenever transformative change is the goal of an intervention, I argue against a method-centric approach to design in favour of practising participatory design as a mindset (Sanders, 2013).

Through the course of this research, I have come to define a participatory design mindset as one in which participation is viewed as a negotiation (Pihkala & Karasti, 2016) between heterogenous perspectives, issues and circumstances. One that allows participants to dictate the boundaries of their participation and to define the agenda of the intervention. Practising participatory design as a mindset changed my design practice beyond recognition. I had to learn not to be outcome-oriented, which initially pushed me outside my comfort zone. This new, shared, design process—messy, complex and uncertain—was demanding for all involved,
especially myself. However, I believe it allowed us to take the necessary steps to address the root of the problem rather than treating the symptom, as had been the case when I was using a user experience design approach.

As I came to understand and embrace how my practice was changing, I was able to draw parallels with work I had undertaken previously in the field of education and development with underprivileged children in Latin America, where a human-centred mindset had been integral to successful relationships between facilitators and community members.

**Why I Am Undertaking This Research**

Throughout my career I have been compelled by a desire to help to create positive *transformational change* - qualitative structural change to a system (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974) - in the areas of social development and sustainability, whilst being aware of the magnitude of the challenges one faces in attempting to do so.

Three years prior to the commencement of this research, I had worked for several years in education initiatives with underprivileged communities in Latin America and was overwhelmed by the complexity of the problems they faced and of working in that environment. I had also observed that positive outcomes can come from working closely and collaboratively with communities. In hindsight, our method of practice bore many similarities to human-centred design, although we lacked the theory and practitioners’ insight embodied by human-centred design literature, and its methods and tools. I undertook this research hoping to learn about participatory design practice, and that the understandings gleaned through this study would help me to confidently navigate the complexity inherent in a human-centred approach.

My desire to work with people to facilitate positive changes to their quality of life, on their terms, derives from my hearing the stories of my father and grandparents, who survived World War II as Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. Hearing firsthand how my family was able to overcome extreme disadvantage when presented with supportive conditions taught me that disadvantage is not an indicator of lack of ability, nor does it predetermine what’s possible.

My maternal grandmother particularly influenced the direction of my career. She was a passionate teacher and ran an underground school in the Łódź Ghetto in Poland when education was forbidden for Jewish people. She risked her life to continue teaching because she believed that teaching has the power to shape the world and affect the future. Design too has a *world-making* role (Agid, 2012), which is what attracted me to it. My grandmother
taught me that world-making is a privilege and a responsibility, one that is never to be taken for granted.

My mother, also influenced by our family history, was attracted to world-making. She became an ergonomist, and her instincts for user-centred design, coupled with her experience of its politics, have made her an invaluable companion on this journey.

Inspired by the experience and sensibility of my family, I began my practice led by my heart rather than by my head. I also began practising without formal training, relying on intuition, trial and error. My response to the work I was doing in Guatemala and Argentina (See timeline Figure 1) prior to commencing this research was so emotional that it was impenetrably opaque, which made it difficult to reflect on and learn from. Through the course of this research I have been introduced to concepts that have allowed me to better reflect on that experience—gleaning insights that in turn have informed this research—thereby achieving a better balance between heart and head.

![Timeline of My Practice](image)

Where This Research Began and How It Changed

I was drawn to participatory design after a digital communication resource I had designed and created for my workplace, Childcare For People (CFP), remained unused by my co-workers. CFP is a non-profit childcare provider in Melbourne, Australia. I had adhered to the principles and best practice for user experience design when designing and creating the resource, so when my co-workers failed to use it, it made me question that approach. Sanders (2008), a prominent participatory and human-centred design researcher and practitioner, differentiates between various forms of design practice and research by placing them along an

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1 The name of this organisation and all personal names have been changed for anonymity
axis from expert mindset, wherein users are seen as subjects, to participatory mindset, in which users are seen as active co-creators, sharing in a partnership of expertise (see Figure 2).

Faced with the limits of my own expertise, working in partnership with my co-workers—the prospective users of the communication system—appeared the more effective and logical way to proceed. When I began this intervention I was unsure how that partnership might work and what my role within it should be. It became clear as the intervention progressed that my focus on, and faith in, methods to be able to facilitate effective participatory design had caused me to oversimplify how complex and challenging that partnership would be.

This study began with one project: a series of three participatory design workshops aimed at delivering a communication system for the staff of CFP. Each workshop was planned to work with a small group of staff members (5-8 voluntary participants who would be paid for their time by the organisation), and to utilise a different established participatory design method, allowing for the scaffolding of collective problem definition, investigation and idea generation. The goal was to work towards a communication system that participants both needed and wanted; however, the participants were unwilling to participate in the workshops I had planned. It became obvious that I had underestimated the scope of the problem and overestimated how open the participants would be to engaging in the project. What I had failed to understand was the extent to which the design problem was inseparable from the socio-material network in which it was situated; as I began to understand this it became clear that multi-dimensional, entangled, social factors constituted the design problem, and so must be integral to the design process. I had to let go of my planned workshops and adopt an approach that was responsive to the context and to the participants, who subsequently agreed
to take part in the research, but on their own terms (I discuss this in detail throughout, beginning on pg. 25). My position as an embedded designer and researcher afforded me the luxury of time, allowing the adoption of an approach that was iterative and ongoing.

I understood from the outset that participatory design was no panacea. While I had heard participatory design referred to often as a messy practice (Frauenberger et al., 2015; Akama, 2008), I underestimated how overwhelming and complicated this mess would be. Becoming a participatory design practitioner has involved learning to identify and manoeuvre within the socio-material mess that underlies design problems. In theory when researching participatory design it is possible and necessary to focus on one issue, such as how interpersonal politics or values manifest in the lived reality of an intervention. But in practice each issue is an area of study that could take a lifetime to master, and all were in play from the beginning of the intervention, underpinned by all of the personal issues going on in the complex context of each participants’ life. Every one of these issues was consequential to the project, interrelated, interdependent and inextricable from one another, making for a mess that was exceedingly challenging to negotiate.

Letting Go of Old Perceptions and Tendencies and Finding New Ones

Over the course of this research I found I needed to let go of my perception of design practice as a professional competency in which a tangible outcome is delivered in a limited time frame, a view I had developed based on the training received in my undergraduate degree (a Bachelor of Design in Digital Media) and reinforced in professional practice. In this commercial form of design practice the definition of the design problem is limited through the lens of the person who wrote the brief and the designer, therefore the design problem is defined by the pre-perceived solution rather than the solution defined by the problem. My perception of design as a discipline was limited by its teaching as vocational training, training directed to the specific and technical demands of a profession in which clients want rapid, tidy solutions, often to complex problems for which this expectation is impossible to fulfil (I talk more about this on p.37). This was in opposition to developing participatory design capacity, one wherein design is seen as a way to explore problems holistically which can be slow and messy (I dissect this slow messiness in detail on p. %)

At CFP the original definition of the design problem and its prospective solution—agreed upon by upper management and myself—did not resonate with the staff. This was evidenced by the fact that they did not use the resulting resource nor wish to participate in the workshops.

My tendency to reify established participatory design tools and methods, one that is common in human-centred design (Iversen, Halskov & Leong, 2010), left me unprepared for the possibility that these methods may be inappropriate and impossible to carry out (for a
When I was unable to carry out the workshops I had to refocus the goal of the research from designing a communication system, together with the participants, to seeking to:

- Understand the problem from multiple perspectives;
- Understand what was affecting the participants’ willingness and ability to participate in the intervention and in the workplace; and
- Enable the conditions for democratic participation.

Initially I was unsure if what I was doing could be classified as design, as it was removed from both the process and outcome I had come to understand as such. When I read Sanders’ (2013) description of practising participatory design as a mindset (an established set of attitudes) and a worldview, with the aim of creating societal value by improving the quality of life of participants in an ongoing process over the long term, it helped me to understand the type of practice I was moving toward.

Practising participatory design as a mindset not only felt different but impenetrably complex. I had set out to solve what initially seemed like a relatively straightforward problem, poor inter-organisational communication, with a relatively straightforward solution: better communication resources. However as the problem was defined from multiple perspectives it became evident that the poor communication wasn’t caused by the lack of supporting resources, but by more complex problems such as interpersonal politics and being under-resourced, problems that my experience in the non-profit sector had shown to be common particularly in the outside-school-hours care industry. While exploring these problems, it became clear they were underpinned by more complex issues, such as the way outside-school-hours care providers, largely women with lower levels of education than other educational professionals, are viewed and treated by schools and by the Department of Education.

The skill set required to navigate this complex practice increased from technical competence and creativity to additionally demand a number of other capabilities such as empathy, leadership and negotiation skills, in addition to negative capability: the ability to be with uncertainty and ambiguity without attempting to solve it (French, 2001). The term negative capability was originally coined by the poet Keats to mean “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 1970, in French 2001, p. 481). This concept was adopted by French (2001), a psychologist, to mean the ability to contain—to diffuse within oneself—the pressure and fear inherent in the uncertainty and risk associated with change. Further, it required moving beyond the disciplinary boundaries of design (Akama, 2009) incorporating psychology, human resources and organisational change management.

I had to curb my designer’s tendency to want to fix everything and make things pixel perfect. I also had to expand my understanding of what could constitute a designed outcome beyond a focus on the material. I came to understand that designed outcomes can also include the
intangible, such as relationships and assemblies of people that collectively deal with matters of concern (Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2012). This was a significant and challenging conceptual shift.

**Rationales For Participatory design**

Greenbaum (1993A) offers three perspectives from which to justify use of participatory design approaches: pragmatic, theoretical and political. The pragmatic perspective suggests that involving those who do the work in the early stages of the design process will help create outcomes better suited to specific work practices and reduce errors. This acknowledges a designer’s lack of understanding and lack of experience of the problem and its context. The theoretical perspective suggests that we are unable to understand the experiences of those whose lives differ greatly from our own, and that the involvement of users and stakeholders in the design process also fosters their engagement with, and attachment to, the outcome.

I was initially drawn to a participatory design approach because I felt that my co-workers were the experts on their own jobs and therefore knew what was needed to help them get that job done more effectively. When my co-workers didn’t use the communication system I designed, I concluded that there were fundamental errors in my assumptions that meant I was unable to understand or render their needs into a designed outcome. It was searching for a way to avoid these errors that led me to undertake this research.

**Embracing The Political In Participatory design**

When I began the intervention central to this research at CFP, I did not think of it as politically motivated. According to Greenbaum (1993A) the political justification for participatory design comes from the belief that people should have the democratic right to influence their own life and work. This rationale was central to participatory design’s founding in Scandinavia in the 1970s upon a dedication to the democratisation of the design process and assimilation of technology in the workplace. It was a controversial process that raised issues of power and control (Ehn, 1993). As a result “democratic participation and skill enhancement—not only productivity and product quality—[were] themselves considered ends for the design” (Ehn 1993, p. 41). Although complex and challenging, this approach was supported by the socio-political conditions in Scandinavia at the time: a relatively homogenous workforce who were highly educated and members of strong trade unions—who actively supported the participatory design initiatives–plus strong social democratic parties and centralised regulation of the relations between unions and employers (Greenbaum, 1993B; Ehn, 1993).
In addition to democratic participation, participatory design is characterised by openness towards others and jointly learning and creating (Steen, 2011). One of the early projects that helped establish the participatory design movement was a collaboration called UTOPIA, between the Nordic Graphic Workers’ Union and researchers in the first generation of work-oriented design projects. Its aims were to design computer tools and environments for skilled workers while supporting democratisation of the design process. Participants learned about the possibilities and constraints of computer technology, while designers learned about the profession of the graphic workers, and the design situation (Ehn, 1993).

While the foundation of participatory design was value-driven, its adoption for different design contexts by diverse disciplines and cultures has led to diverse motives and methods of application. North American scholars Greenbaum (1993B) and Sanders (2013) point out the difficulty of cultivating and sustaining a participatory mindset outside of the supportive socio-political conditions of Scandinavia in the 1970s. A participatory mindset requires shifts in the way power is enacted that can be incompatible with consumption-driven societies, and democratic processes are more complex to achieve in societies with heterogeneous beliefs and values.

Participatory design has been co-opted by businesses to promote consumption by better tailoring the marketing of products to consumers (Sanders 2013). Participatory design is implemented as a set of methods or tools, separated from the values and mindset that underpins its implementation when societal value is the goal; here, the primary motive is to yield monetary value for companies. Buur and Larson (2010) go so far as to call participatory design a “mainstream method” (p. 121), arguing that conflict deriving from issues of power imbalance and the struggle between workers and management has now been downplayed, relegated to the “old days” (p. 121).

As a result, many scholars and practitioners of participatory design have called for a return to the understanding that the mindset of participatory design is central to its practice (Iversen, Halskov & Leong, 2010). They argue that the essence of participatory design, the ‘why’ and ‘how’ users are included as participants, has been lost and that there is now the misunderstanding that anyone can practice participatory design simply by choosing from a rich set of tools and techniques, resulting in the reification of method and the loss of what these tools and methods can offer, the reason they were developed in the first place. In addition, this method-centric way of thinking about participatory design ignores the performative aspect of practice (Light & Akama, 2012) – the messy relationship between a method and the factors that can impact its enactment and outcome, such as group dynamics and the designer’s relationship with, and to, the group. When I began this research, I was unwittingly reifying methods and de-situating design practice, a process Suchman (2002) argues ignores the obligation we have as designers to be personally and professionally accountable to the context and communities in which we operate. It was only when I found
that the tools and methods were impossible to put into practice in the context of CFP that I thought to question my thinking.

My motivation for using a participatory design approach changed through the course of the intervention. As this research progressed I realised I had underestimated the role that social politics had played in the workplace culture and communication at CFP. It was only then that I transitioned from focusing on tools and methods, to cultivating a participatory mindset, facilitating a holistic investigation of the problem and the generation of prototyped solutions.

The research documented in this Master’s project explored what it means to cultivate a participatory mindset in a non-profit organisation in the field of childcare in an Australian socio-political setting—characterised by a homogenous population of workers who operate without the support of powerful unions in a largely free-market, capitalist economy—that is far removed from Scandinavia in the 1970s.

Merging Disparate Practices

In 2005, seven years prior to commencing this research, I spent two years working in Latin America. This work was the catalyst for my search for the means to address wicked problems (Buchanan 1992; Rittel & Webber, 1973) - problems that are difficult to define and extremely difficult to solve – through my design practice. I chose to study participatory design, looking for a method of practice that was driven by a similar set of values to the work in Latin America, values such as community engagement and empowerment. I was also hoping to find a set of established tools and methods that would disentangle the messy complexity that typified the work in Latin America, which I had found emotionally overwhelming.
When I began this research I did not see much crossover between my practice in Latin America and at CFP. I saw my highly politicised work in education in Argentina as entirely distinct from my (then commercial) design practice. Because the politics here are far less binary than in Latin America—and less obvious to someone without a background in a field that deals with structures of control—I underestimated how much a (now participatory) design intervention at CFP would require negotiation of interpersonal, organisational and broader social politics.

But as I came up against the power structures within, and around CFP, and the need to increase the agency of the participants, I came to see the that there were more similarities between the two inventions than I had realised. As my understanding of human-centred design became less centred around methods and designed outcomes and more around relationships and equalising control, responsive to the participants, I began to recognise similarities. This helped me to feel that I was in somewhat familiar terrain, assuaging some of the dislocation I had felt as a result of moving away from user experience design. Experiencing similar critical incidents helped me to reflect on the time in Latin America, which as I mentioned had been so emotional and intense that it had previously felt opaque. I was able to cross pollinate between the two interventions, bringing to CFP some insights from the work in Latin America and applying the wealth of understanding I was gaining from this research back to the intervention in Argentina when we reinstated it in 2014. It was a pleasant surprise to me that I was able to merge the two practices so synergistically (Figure 4).

Fig. 4 Merging of Disparate Practices
**Embracing Failure**

Through this research I present an account of my messy “warts-and-all” (Akama, 2009, p.1) encounter with participatory design. After I began sharing the design process with other participatory design practitioners, I came to see commonalities with their experiences, particularly of those in the early stages of their careers. But this is not meant to be a how to guide. Each practitioner, participant, problem and context are different, and there is no one way to practice participatory design. I had to move away from plans and methods and cobble together a way to work with mess.

I consider the intervention at CFP to have been a failure, as the project I had planned was impossible to carry out and did not achieve the outcomes I had expected. Paradoxically, I also consider the intervention to have been a success because this failure gave me a great deal of insight into the uncertain and complex nature of participatory design. Furthermore, the failure provided insights specific to the intervention at CFP, such as the issues underpinning the working conditions and possible strategies to address them at their root.

While this suggests there is much to learn from failure, it is rare to read accounts of it in design literature (Akama & Light, 2012; Gaver et al., 2009). Researchers often ‘clean up’ the messy participatory design process in its reporting, in order to publicly present—in academic publications, funding proposals and ethics approval applications—a clearer methodology and outcome. Akama and Light (2012) argue that this results from the positivist, scientifically-minded legacy of the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI).

In contrast, a human-centred design approach necessitates a commitment to participants’ interests as its primary concern for both practical reasons and as an ethical choice (Akama and Light, 2012). Thus while my planned workshops failed, the messiness of allowing participants to dictate the format and scope of their participation was not only necessary to getting them to take part in the intervention, it also made the process - as well as the outcome - a participatory effort.
Research Questions

I undertook this research to explore the lived reality of a participatory design intervention. The questions guiding this research were:

1. What happens to my design practice when I share the design process, and its decision-making, with others through a participatory approach?

2. What are the principles, skills and processes of participatory design practice?

Methodology

Practice-led Research

The methodological approach for this research has been practice-led. Practice-led research is defined here as the study of the interplay between a researcher-practitioner and their creative work (Nimkulrat, 2007), where the roles of researcher and practitioner have become intertwined and are of equal importance. Enacted practice is integral to practice-led research and its goal is to lead to new insights or advanced knowledge about practice. According to Candy (2006), a commonly cited scholar in this emerging methodology, the material outcome of the practice e.g. a designed artefact, is not the sole focus. She contrasts this to practice-based research, for which the creative (artefact) outcome is the focus. I have used Nimkulrat and Candy’s definitions due to its clarity and common acceptance.

I came to this research as a digital communication design practitioner, undertaking this study in order to gain an applied and critical understanding of the complexities of participatory design. Participatory design, as human-centred work, is a relational activity. Due to the context-specific and practitioner-specific nature of participatory practice, it was necessary to gain this understanding experientially, rather than attempting to acquire it through reading others’ accounts. But I was also motivated by a need to learn to critically reflect on my own work, having returned from a number of years working in Latin America—on projects that closely resembled human-centred design—so emotionally charged that I couldn’t learn from the experience. I hoped to balance out the emotion with rational reflection.
The Research Project (An “Intervention”)

During this research project I transitioned from a user-experience design approach, which considers users’ needs, to a participatory design approach wherein users are included as active partners in the design process itself. This resulted in a shift from practising for a defined period of time with a predetermined goal, to practising in an iterative, responsive and ongoing way, with the goal of facilitating positive change, the substance of which can only be defined in-the-act. I differentiate these two forms of practice by referring to the former as a project and the latter as an intervention. This is why I have been referring to this research as intervention. My transition was influenced by accounts of design practice sourced from the literature, and has also been informed by theory from within the fields of feminist theory (Haraway 1988; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Suchman 1984, 2002; Wajcman, 1991), change theory (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974), and organisational change management (French, 2001). The Master’s research project documented here is the outcome of the first six-months of the intervention, which then continued, integrated into my ongoing role at CFP; informed by my newly acquired understanding of participatory design.

Reflection and Reflexivity

Developing my ability to critically reflect on my practice has been both essential to, and an inevitable consequence of, conducting this research from a participatory design approach. Notions of reflection and reflexivity have helped me to discover and understand layers of complexity to my own role in design practice and in the mindset I brought to it. They have helped me to negotiate difficult moments in the intervention, when things did not go as planned and decisions had to be made on behalf of others.

In a seminal work deconstructing the way professionals think, Schön (1983) defines ‘reflection-on-action’ as reflective and reflexive analysis of past practice, and ‘reflection-in-action’ as thinking on ones feet in the midst of practice. Through the course of this research I adopted various strategies to reflect-on-action. Regular discussions with my supervisors and biannual presentations of my research to RMIT’s Graduate Research Conference allowed me to gain the feedback of experienced scholars. Conversations with peers in both similar and different disciplines allowed me to gain a variety of perspectives on the research. And writing and creating visual representations and helped me to refine the critical insights that came from reflection. Then, by applying these critical insights—both in the planning stages and while thinking on my feet in the midst of a facilitation—in an iterative, ongoing process, I was able to improve my ability to reflect-in-action. This has laid the foundations for a lifelong learning process.
14 - *Quicksand* practiced as mindset (Sanders 2013)

UXD

*Hard, High Ground*

*UXD*

*PD in Theory*

*PD in Practice - Practical Motivation*

*Beginning of research project*

*PD Practiced as Mindset* (Sanders 2013)

*Swampy Lowland* (Schön, 1983)
CHAPTER 2 – THE INTERVENTION

The Context and The People

This research took place at Childcare for People (CFP), a non-profit provider of outside-school-hours care (OSHC) in schools across Melbourne. I began working at CFP as their resident designer in 2011, two years prior to commencing this research in 2013. Like many community organisations operating within a diverse setting such as Melbourne, CFP is complex. Their programs operate on school premises in 25 distant and disparate locations spanning the outer geographical reaches of Melbourne, with distances of up to 55 km between programs. Each program has its own community with its own demographic, resulting in differing needs and expectations of the role childcare plays for the families. This governs the relationships CFP staff will have with the children. For example, some schools are in a high-income area and staff will be expected to treat OSHC as extended learning time; other schools are in disadvantaged areas where high percentages of children are in-and-out of foster homes. In these programs OSHC staff perform a role similar to that of a social worker. Other than CFP staff being predominantly female, they are a heterogeneous group, made up of different cultures, ages and levels of education.

My Roles at CFP

Resident Designer

I began working at CFP as a freelance designer, creating the organisation’s website. It was the first time CFP had employed a designer and the role grew organically as the website developed, resulting in my continued employment to provide website maintenance.

I was assigned projects that I worked on mainly from home. I attended monthly staff meetings at Head Office and attended less formal meetings, held in cafes, with members of management. I had been working for over a year as the resident web and graphic designer at CFP prior to beginning the research project discussed in this document, and thus had some insight into the culture of the organisation.
But as my role shifted from designer to designer-researcher, I came to understand that being a designer in a workplace primarily concerned with activities other than design positioned me uniquely within the organisation, removing me from many of the conditions within which other staff members operated. How my unique positioning affected this research will be discussed in detail below.

**Community Projects Coordinator**

During the time I was undertaking this research project I took on an additional role at CFP of Community Projects Coordinator (See Timeline Fig. 5). My two roles began as separate and unrelated positions, but became intertwined since the Community Projects Coordinator role facilitated informal opportunities for communication with my co-workers, the participants, in which they volunteered feedback about communication at CFP.

**The Problems which led to the Intervention**

The intervention I refer to here is the participatory design intervention I undertook with fellow employees at CFP, which began as a research project and became an ongoing intervention in the workplace. Before this is discussed, I outline the problems that led to the research project:

1. Poor communication within CFP, and from CFP to stakeholders such as parents and schools
2. The web-based communication resource I had designed and created for CFP staff members was not being used
3. CFP as an organisation, and its staff, were struggling to cope with the increasingly demanding world of outside-school-hours care due to changes to OSHC legislation and increased competition.

Through the course of the project, my own, and my fellow participants’ understandings of these problems and their causes developed greatly. The problems described in this section are as we understood them at the outset of the project.

**Poor communication at CFP**

From the time I began working at CFP to the time I began the intervention (approximately 3 years), the issue of poor communication was raised in two broad contexts: Firstly, within CFP from management to staff, staff to management and between staff; and secondly, from CFP to stakeholders such as schools and parents. A number of issues were blamed on this poor communication but it was rarely specified exactly what poor communication meant and no formal analysis had been undertaken prior to this research.

**Learning the Limits of My Approach To Design**

Six months prior to beginning the design intervention at CFP, I had created a web-based communication resource to support communication and sharing between staff and management. It was housed in a separate section of the website I had designed and built for the organisation to service the parents of attendees of our programs, and consisted of a blog to facilitate the sharing of ideas for program planning, such as activities and excursions. This could be added to directly by the staff members, or in the case of staff members being time poor or uncomfortable with technology, they could ask me to add their contribution. In development was a discussion board for inter-staff communication, designed to support staff members (particularly the coordinators who manage the day-to-day running of each program) to comply with administrative requirements by housing a catalogue of the requisite documents such as official forms. Previously when a program location ran out of a form they would have to contact Head Office, where someone would photocopy the form, then drive to the program to deliver it by hand. With vast distances between the 26 program locations this process was extremely time consuming, inefficient and unreliable.

I had designed the web-based resource using an informal user-experience design approach. In the research phase prior to designing, I had consulted staff and management about any communication requirements they wished to be addressed by
the resource; I had attended staff meetings; worked as a member of support staff at a number of programs, observing the staff, their roles and procedures. When this resource failed to be used by staff I felt I had reached the limit of the user experience design approach.

Coping With A Changing World

During this study it was informally reported to me by staff and management at CFP that when the organisation was established, there was very little regulation of outside-school-hours care (OSHC). In the decades since then, OSHC has become highly and strictly legislated, with compliance enforced by random visits from the Victorian Department of Education. This has resulted from higher expectations on the part of schools and parents (OSHC staff are now expected to perform the role of educators) and increased competition from profit-driven providers. As a result of this drastically increased pressure on childcare providers, the informal, family-run workplace culture that functioned well a decade and a half ago was now disorderly. Much of the organisation’s time and resources were being taken up with crisis response and damage containment (Legg & Sweeny 2012) rather than program and relationship building.

The Intervention Narrative

The Initial Research Design - the planned workshops

I began this research with the hope of gaining experience with using established methods and tools. While this methods-centric way of thinking is common in human-centred design (Light & Akama 2012), I found the tools and methods impossible to apply in the context of CFP. While the design project I initially proposed was to consist of the following three workshops, I was never able to carry out any of them.

These workshops, described in detail below, were based on participatory design and human-centred design tools and methods: the future workshop, personas and playful triggers. The three workshops were to work with small groups of 5-8 volunteers, taking place during the monthly, organisation-wide, staff meetings, the only times the staff from across the various program locations assemble. The workshops were to take
place over three consecutive months, with time for reflection and revision in the month between each meeting. The workshops were designed to build iteratively, with the aim of collectively creating a prototype of, or brief for, the design of a new communication resource or changes to the existing resource. After months of failed attempts these planned workshops were abandoned as a modality of gaining the input of participants, in response to their wishes.

**Workshop 1 - The Future Workshop**

This workshop was planned to take the format of a future workshop (Jungk & Muellert, 1987, p. 5) consisting of four stages:

*Preparation phase* - the methods and rules of the future workshop are explained to the participants

*Critique phase* - participants are invited to critique the current system

*Fantasy phase* - participants are invited to explore a utopian view of the future, to get an idea of an ideal situation

*Implementation phase* - participants are invited to generate viable plans-of-action, that would make the current situation more like the fantasy.

The purpose of this workshop was to reflect critically and collectively on the current system of communication at CFP. I had hoped that we would gain multiple perspectives on the problem, generate a shared understanding of an ideal vision of the future, and outline a rough plan of action while gaining understanding of the perceived obstacles to the creation of this more ideal situation. The existing, rarely used, website-based communication system could have served to stimulate discussion, as either a prototype upon which to build, or as a provotype (Buur & Larson, 2010) to provoke conversation about what did not work and what staff did not want.

**Workshop 2 – Creating Personas Using Playful Triggers**

Stage 1 - *Reflection*. I had proposed that time would be allocated at the beginning of workshop 2 to critically reflect on workshop 1.

Stage 2 - *Creating Personas Around Communication Technology Use*. The purpose of this workshop was to create personas (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2003): profiles of archetypal users of the communication resource in our workplace community. This was to facilitate the discussion around technology adoption and help us to understand the values within this group of people that mediate their relationships with communication technology.
This workshop would have made use of playful triggers (Akama et al. 2007; Loi 2005, 2007). Playful triggers are everyday objects like Lego, coloured wool, or stickers, and so on, employed to stimulate reflective engagement in a ludic way and manifest tacit information visually (Loi, 2007). I hoped that this method could increase participant comfort by externalising the conversation about something that was negative in a playful way. I envisaged how playful triggers could be utilised to allow participants to represent interactions, people, and the flow of communication metaphorically, rather than directly, and to articulate this information anonymously (Akama et al. 2007; Loi 2007). This could be important when asking participants to reflect critically on their workplace and workmates.

Workshop 3 – Outlining A Concrete Plan of Action Based on Workshops 1 & 2

Workshop 3 was intended to further refine the ideas and/or prototypes generated in Workshops 1 and 2 with a view to producing one of the following outcomes:

- a list of the recommended changes needing to be made to the current system
- an outline of the areas to be addressed during a training program designed to ensure the current system would be utilised to its potential (e.g. a computer literacy training program)
- a draft design brief for a new resource
- any possible fourth option that might emerge through the workshops

The implementation of the outcome suggested by the workshops was to become a roadmap for my ongoing work at CFP, in partnership with the other staff, where applicable.

First Catalyst For Reflection

When I presented this research design at my first Graduate Research Conference (GRC), my supervisors and the review panel encouraged me to reflect critically on my solution-oriented and techno-centric mindset, telling me I was thinking like a designer looking to use participatory design to produce outcomes rather than a researcher seeking to understand participatory design. Reflecting on their feedback I began to question the assumptions and decisions I had made that led to the initial research design. In a process that was ongoing throughout this research, I asked myself three questions: Why was I being solution oriented? Why was I being techno-centric? Why shouldn’t I be? (I discuss these questions in detail on p. 35)
I felt it was necessary to let go of my focus on technology in favour of something more open, the parameters of which should be defined entirely by the participants. I decided to change the plan for Workshop 2 to a mapping exercise. Akama and Ivanka (2010) facilitated such an exercise with participants who lived in bushfire prone areas. Playful triggers (Akama et al. 2007; Loi 2005, 2007) were used to create a visual map of both the physical and conceptual reality of bushfire risks and available community supports. It helped participants to become aware of risks and supports they may not have thought of previously, and was a catalyst for communication and community building. I thought this method could work well to map communication at CFP, and so proposed that the purpose of Workshop 2 be to map the network of stakeholders and forms of communication that made up the context of the problems we were addressing, in order to gain a shared and holistic understanding of the complexity of the communication at CFP, and that additionally we could raise our awareness of the areas in which communication was and wasn’t working. These maps would be created using playful triggers: a variety of objects chosen to represent the different programs, stakeholders and forms of communication, including pushpins, stickers, wool, modeling clay, textas—all in different colours. The exact manner in which these objects would be used was to be determined by the participants on the day.

Challenges In Implementing The Workshops

The month before I was to begin the workshops I attended a staff meeting and explained their purpose and proposed format and content to all staff members present. I told them that they were all prospective participants and participation would be on a voluntary basis. Feedback from staff was positive, acknowledging that something was being done about the poor communication within CFP that was often complained about. I left that meeting feeling energised and optimistic.

I arrived the next month excited to hold Workshop 1, the future workshop. I had been promised that I could hold the workshop after we attended to the other matters that had arisen that month. I attempted this at three consecutive (monthly) staff meetings and each time the entire meeting was taken up with other matters, making me unable to hold the workshop.
I observed that there was very little constructive outcome from these meetings. Time was managed inefficiently, without an agenda, and the meetings did not address any of the serious issues that the staff and the organisation faced, instead attending to minor issues such as where to buy cleaning products, or issues that were only relevant to small groups of people. The meetings were led by a member of middle management, Lacey, and were poorly attended, with less than half of the staff present. There was no opportunity for staff to raise topics for discussion, and attendees spoke over each other and amongst themselves.

At the end of each meeting I asked if anyone would be willing to volunteer as participants and stay back for 45 minutes (for which they would be paid) to do the workshop. No one was willing to stay. Some would explain why they couldn’t attend, but most just walked out. I sensed a strong reluctance, even a frustration or hostility from some, in addition to those who were simply avoiding my invitation. Two of the staff members came up to me at the end of the third staff meeting as people were leaving. They apologised and explained why they couldn’t stay, but criticised those who were just walking out when I was attempting to do something about an issue that many of those who were leaving had expressed concern about.

It was a challenging time and I was unsure how to manage the situation. When I had discussed the workshops at previous meetings the response had been positive. I had received the impression that people were keen to attempt the workshops and I wasn’t sure how to understand the discrepancy between the enthusiasm expressed by staff when the workshops had been planned, and their reluctance to participate when I actually attempted to hold them. I was also confused by Lacey’s reluctance to prioritise the workshops within the staff meeting, since she often expressed concern and frustration about the poor communication and lack of attempts to rectify it. At CFP it was upper management who had the final say on whether any initiative would go ahead, including the intervention discussed here. I refer to them as the Gatekeeper. The Gatekeeper’s role was different to (and sometimes in conflict with) that of middle management such as Lacey, who controlled the day-to-day decisions and running of the programs and staff meetings. This structure had never been discussed explicitly before this intervention.

As the months progressed, I felt increasing pressure because half the time allocated to my research had passed and I hadn’t been able to carry out the first workshop. At that point I was still thinking of the workshops I had planned as the core component of my research, and of the conversations I was concurrently having with staff as background.

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2 Names have been changed for anonymity
or contextual research. Although I understood that the process of inquiry was as important as the outcome, I was worried that if I were unable to carry out any workshops I would be doing project-based design research with no project and no design. It felt like I was headed for failure. I was confused, disappointed and frustrated, and it was hard to stay positive about the project, my abilities as a design practitioner, the possibility of change at CFP, and the contribution my co-workers could make to that change.

Changes In Circumstances and A Shift In Approach

Getting Sick - a setback and an opportunity

It was at this point, midway through the research, that I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. I had been unwell for some time with symptoms that were increasingly debilitating. It made doing this research very difficult because I didn’t feel I had the necessary physical, mental and emotional capacity to motivate reluctant participants in order to make the intervention work, and I considered the possibility that I may have to end the intervention. However, as things progressed I came to understand that by forcing me to let go of control, being ill was helping me to develop negative capability: the ability to exist in a situation lacking in certainty without attempting to change or rationalise it (French, 2001).

Being sick was also helping me to accept my own humanness as well as that of others. Understanding how microscopic particles created within my own body had completely changed my life, robbing me of my agency and impacting the lives of many others around me, helped me to experience the interconnectedness of the ecosystem of which we are a part and which exists within us. These insights helped me to build relationships with my co-workers and to transition the research from its initial stage, in which I was exploring formal methods, to one in which I was connecting and communicating with participants and facilitating communication between them (I discuss this in more detail on p. 56).

Becoming Community Projects Coordinator

Another change that happened concurrently, and which helped me to build relationships with the participants, was that I had taken on the additional role of Community Projects
Coordinator within CFP. While the Community Projects role was unrelated to this research, it provided the opportunity to connect with the participants in a different environment. Although unplanned, this proved to be the breakthrough in opening up lines of communication and establishing relationships.

In the Community Projects Coordinator role I was responsible for projects in the wider community undertaken by CFP. One of those projects was raising funds for an education project for disadvantaged children in Argentina, a partnership with an Argentinian non-profit Educar Los Niños (ELN). This project was my initiative as I had worked with ELN on a similar project in Argentina five years prior. We had been forced to terminate the original project due to a lack of funding but had now obtained funding from Australia including sponsorship from CFP.

At CFP we decided to use the Argentina project as an opportunity for community service learning with the Australian students. In this capacity I was to go around and hold workshops at the schools about Argentina. This gave me the opportunity to visit the different programs on work unrelated to this research and to the communication issues at CFP. I found that in this circumstance staff members were keen to talk to me about their perspectives on the poor communication in our workplace, about why they were unwilling and unable to take part in the workshops, and about the complex contexts of their lives. I believe that three factors contributed to this willingness:

- I was on their turf. These visits allowed me to meet with staff at the programs where they regularly worked, spaces they controlled and were familiar with.

- I was occupying their students for a few hours, which gave them the opportunity to take a break from looking after the kids and to catch up with the paperwork required by the Department.

- I was there promoting a project for underprivileged children.

The Informal Approach – Opening the Floodgates

*October 2014 – Participants begin to open up*
Shortly after my third unsuccessful attempt to hold a workshop I was visiting one of CFP’s programs at a school campus in Melbourne’s South East, in my role as Community Projects Coordinator. While I was there I was chatting with one of the coordinators, Bec, and with the Assistant Coordinator, Kelly. I asked them if they were going to attend the following staff meeting, where I had been promised that I could stop the meeting half an hour before the end to hold Workshop 1. They rarely attended staff meetings and I was keen to have them there to contribute their points of view. Bec, supported by Kelly, spoke candidly about why she never attended the staff meetings. Her answers began to reveal a perspective on the communication problems, as well as the organisational culture at CFP. I made a spur of the moment decision to conduct an impromptu, informal interview with them both, with their consent, which was given eagerly. As I was unprepared for this I scribbled notes with a Texta on the back of scrap paper, both items borrowed from a table full of primary school students.

**Inspired by the Future Workshop**

The discussions I had were loosely based on the format of the future workshop. I asked about the problems, what an ideal scenario would be and about a plan of action to make the current scenario more ideal. We now had a space to talk openly about the problems at CFP, a space that I had tried unsuccessfully to open up at the staff meetings. While it was important to gain multiple perspectives on the problems, I thought it was of equal importance to gain multiple perspectives on what an ideal scenario would look like and their suggestions for how to make that ideal scenario happen. I discovered they were very clear about what was wrong and how they wanted the situation to improve, but I was unable to facilitate a discussion about a plan of action.

The interview went for more than half an hour, at which point we had to stop. During that time we covered numerous topics. At the end I asked them if I had their permission to discuss the issues raised with the Managing Director, to which they agreed. We wrote down in point form what they felt were the most important issues and what they wanted to express about those issues. Again, their consent was given eagerly.

**November 2014 - More participants open up**

In the following months I visited four more programs to hold classes with the kids about Argentina. During each visit I initiated an interview with staff about the communication issues. At each program I had the same experience I had had with
Bec and Kelly: an outpouring of their perspectives and insights about the problems at CFP. It was like opening a floodgate. In addition to the specific workplace-related concerns raised during the interviews, each person spoke about how the conditions of the job had deteriorated since the changes in legislation and how stressful their jobs had become. They also spoke about how their work fitted into the complex contexts of their lives, and how problems at work created or exacerbated problems at home and vice versa.

In each of these interviews, I found the same thing as in the initial interview with Bec and Kelly: that staff had a clear idea of what was wrong and a vision of how they wanted things to be, but they did not want to be involved in a discussion as to how these problems could be solved. When I asked one interviewee why that was, she said that she already had enough to worry about and did not consider solving those problems to be her job or responsibility.

**Working with upper management on behalf of the participants**

During those months I also had several informal interviews with upper management, to gain their perspective on the problems. As mentioned above, I refer to upper management as the Gatekeeper. In addition to discussing the issues within CFP, they spoke of how the organisation fitted into the political landscape of the education and childcare sectors and the pressures that this placed on the organisation and its upper management. It was at that point that I understood I had underestimated the problems we were attempting to solve with this intervention, in assuming that they were underpinned only by interpersonal politics when, in reality, they were also underpinned by broader socio-politics.

The Gatekeeper also spoke about how their work fitted into the complex context of her own life and how the considerable pressures that they were under outside of work decreased their agency at work. In addition to interviewing them, I relayed the points raised in the interviews with the staff. We conducted several brainstorming sessions, discussing potential plans of action to target the two main areas of concern, the staff meetings and issues with middle management. We decided to come up with prototypes of solutions which we would trial, and get feedback on, from the staff. These are described in the section *Changes To The Communication Infrastructure* p. 28.
Insights From The Participants

The conversations I had with staff revealed that the staff meetings and (some of) the middle managers—keystones of the communication infrastructure of the organisation—were not only failing to facilitate clear communication but were also in some instances actively hindering it. They also highlighted the increased demands put on outside school hours providers by the Department of Education; the authoritarian way that these were enforced; the stress this inflicted on the educators; and how this amplified the negative effects of the poor communication and workplace culture, and vice versa.

Staff Meetings

There were a number of issues raised about the staff meetings that were echoed in all of the interviews:

- Reluctance to attend staff meetings due to the difficulty of being honest about issues and concerns for fear of being judged by peers
- The perception that other staff members are not honest in public about concerns and grievances that they air in private
- That a small number of people monopolise the time, talking about details that are relevant only to them and not to the broader group
- The time and effort it takes to get there (45 mins driving each way plus one hour for the meeting means a two and a half hour commitment, but paid for only one hour).
- The lack of actionable change resulting from the meetings and organisational inertia

Management

A number of key areas of concern were consistently raised about the middle management:

- There was a perceived asymmetry between the staff’s expectations of their managers and their manager’s understanding of their own job description
- Misunderstanding and conflict was arising from communication breakdowns involving certain of these managers
- The perception that the Gatekeeper was difficult to get in touch with e.g. not answering their phone or returning calls
Changes to The Communication Infrastructure

The outcome of the six month timeframe documented in this Master’s project was the following changes to the communication infrastructure to be trialled, reviewed and improved upon or discarded in an iterative, ongoing fashion with as much input from the rest of the staff as possible. These changes were formulated by the Gatekeeper and I, during a number of brainstorming sessions based on the feedback received from the staff members during our conversations.

Changes To The Hiring, Job Description and Performance Reviews Of Managers

The staff from each program would co-author the job descriptions of their managers and help to carry out recruitment interviews for those who would go on to be their managers. Our thinking was influenced by Roddick’s (1991) account of the practice at the Body Shop, of which she was founder. Staff found this approach helped to emphasise the manager’s role as being a support for staff, dissuading a hierarchical view of the role, and promoted clarity and transparency about the expectations both parties had for the role.

We also felt that it would be beneficial to allow staff, if they wished, to be present at, and contribute to, their manager’s periodic performance reviews. This would provide a platform for matters of concern to be addressed in an open forum, mediated by external human resources consultant who is trained in mediation and conflict resolution.

Changes to the Staff Meetings

The Managing Director and I decided to trial substituting the CFP-wide monthly meetings with cluster meetings: meetings with a smaller group of programs in the same geographic zone conducted closer to their home location. Staff members from each program would have less distance to travel and more time to discuss their concerns. There would be more direct communication between the Managing Director and the various coordinators, avoiding the misunderstandings and distortion of messages when communication was mediated through third parties. Additionally, there would be quarterly CFP-wide staff meetings, which would address only the broadest of issues and would be structured to maximise constructive use of time.
I drafted the prototype structure for the meetings seen in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, with the aim of addressing each of the critiques raised in the interviews. This was to be handed over to the team for feedback. The structure includes:

**Meeting Agenda**

- **5-8 Mins: Brainstorming issues/items of importance.** Attendees should come prepared with the issues they wish to discuss, an idea of why they think this is happening and what they think will solve the problem. This shouldn’t be a time for swapping stories because it’s time-consuming and not constructive, we need to know how we can, together, make things better.

- **Or something they would like to share that’s positive, who they think it should be shared with and how and any action they think should happen as a result.** Positive things are just as important and need to be celebrated and built upon, we can learn from the positive too.

- **3 mins: Deciding on the most important issues to address**

- **5-10 mins (total of 30-35 mins ) – Discussing those issues in terms of the table above**

- If there is time left over (from the 30-35 mins) it can be used to talk go back to some of the more important issues or one of the brainstormed issues that hasn’t been discussed.

- **3-5 minutes**

  MOVE ON TO FOLLOW UP OF PREVIOUS MEETING/S

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**Fig. 6 Prototype Of Meeting Structure**

**Fig. 7 Prototype of Meeting Agenda**
out and discussed at the following CFP-wide meeting. If approved by the staff it was
to be trialled and revised with feedback garnered through interviews, via a suggestion
box and a question sheet provided at the end of each meeting, or via an anonymous
suggestion and feedback form provided on the website.

The Ongoing Intervention

I was unable to begin trialling the staff meeting agenda prototype, or the manager
hiring and performance review procedures, within the time allotted to this research
project. The generation of these prototypes thus marked the end of the formal
research project, but the design intervention is ongoing, through my being employed
at CFP. The feedback gathered will help inform either the refinement of this
prototype, or a change in approach–a process of iterative revision that will further our
understanding of communication at CFP.

Post Script

While the meeting agenda and prototype reflects my thinking at the time, I have come to
understand that the way I planned them in such a structured way reflects a throwback to my
more meticulous, planned practice. This reflects the complexity of integrating the learnings
about participatory design gained in this research back into my professional practice, which is
an ongoing learning process.

One way could be to focus on the overarching goal of the intervention - to improve the quality
of workplace life for the participants - and be driven by that, through cultivation of the
developing relationships with them. This could involve getting to know what each of their
individual life and career goals are, and looking to find ways to help enhance their agency to
achieve these goals through their time at this workplace.
UXD

Beginning of research project

Debunking own problem-solving, techno-centric tendencies

Sense of loss (Akama, 2009)

Couldn't use methods

Participants didn't want to participate in workshops

Existing ecosystem

Participation defined by participants

Something's gained

Get sick

Shifted p.o.v

Participation as 'negotiation'

Delegated control

Analysis paralysis

Being human with participants

Vascillating support of gatekeeper

Developing negative capability

PD IN PRACTICE- PRACTICAL MOTIVATION

Barriers/ resistance to participation

Politics/politics

Complex contexts of participants lives

Define problem multiple perspectives

Infrastructuring 'Things'

Politics/politics

Politics/politics

PD PRACTICED AS MINDSET (SANDERS 2013)

Politics/politics

Complex contexts of participants lives

Infrastructuring 'Things'

Politics/politics

Politics/politics

PD IN THEORY

HARD, HIGH GROUND (SCHON, 1983)

Beginning of research

PD IN PRACTICE- PRACTICAL MOTIVATION

PD IN THEORY

HARD, HIGH GROUND (SCHON, 1983)

Beginning of research

Sense of loss (Akama, 2009)

Couldn't use methods

Participants didn't want to participate in workshops

Existing ecosystem

Participation defined by participants

Something's gained

Get sick

Shifted p.o.v

Participation as 'negotiation'

Delegated control

Analysis paralysis

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Analysis paralysis

Being human with participants

Vascillating support of gatekeeper

Developing negative capability

PD PRACTICED AS MINDSET (SANDERS 2013)

Politics/politics

Complex contexts of participants lives

Infrastructuring 'Things'

Politics/politics

Politics/politics
CHAPTER 3 – DISCUSSION

This chapter reflects on the design research intervention that I undertook at Childcare For People (CFP), through the lens of two questions: What happens to my design practice when I share the design process and its decision-making with others through a participatory design approach? What are the principles, skills and processes of this participatory design practice?

I discuss two major transitions that took place through the course of this intervention:

1. A transition to a participatory design approach from a user-experience approach to design
2. A transition to a critically reflective and reflexive practice

These transitions took place together and are interconnected and overlapping; however, for clarity they will be discussed separately.

1. Transition to Participatory Design from User-Experience Design

I began looking to participatory design as an alternative to user experience design. I found in response to my research question What happens to my design practice when I share the design process and its decision-making with others through a participatory design approach? that when I shared my design practice with others, established methods alone were not enough to facilitate a successful intervention, as I had hoped. I had to completely reconfigure how I conceptualised and practiced design. The transition to participatory design was extremely complex, challenging and demanding of time, energy and dedication. At times it was overwhelmingly difficult and disorientating. However, it allowed the participants and I to gain a holistic understanding of the problem, based on multiple “partial perspectives” (Haraway, 1988, p.153), allowing us to address systemic change.

The transition entailed four shifts in my approach to design:
a. **Letting go of my expert mindset (Sanders, 2008).**

In debunking, through reflexive questioning, certain assumptions and biases I was carrying as a result of my design training and personality I let go of my problem-solving, techno-centric mindset.

b. **Letting go of predefined processes.**

In attempting to carry out a series of workshops based on established methods, and failing, I gained critical insight into a new perception of the problem and its context; the limits to a methods-centric approach to participatory design; the pre-conditions necessary for a participatory design intervention to be viable.

c. **A shift to participatory design as a mindset.**

In allowing the intervention to be driven by values that underpinned participatory design at its founding–democratic cooperation and empowerment (Steen, 2011); and an awareness of how control is exerted through the intervention (Light & Akama, 2014)–and with the goal of improving the quality of life of the participants on their own terms (Sanders, 2013), I had to let go of methods and reconfigure the way I view participation, to resemble Pihkala & Karasti’s (2016) concept of participation as a *negotiation* in which the participants set the terms of their participation. This precipitated the final shift.

d. **A shift from projects to interventions.**

In addressing my research question *What are the principles, skills and processes of this new, relational practice?* I discovered that a relational practice necessitated a new process for carrying out design work. I named this transition in process as a shift from practising design through a *project* to practising design through an *intervention* (I note that these two words are used interchangeably by other authors). I define *project* as being planned, over a set period of time, with specific goals and/or a predetermined problem to solve. I define *intervention* as a process that is open-ended, non-reductive, and encompassing of multiple perspectives. An intervention is integrated into a system itself - in this case the CFP workplace – with the goal of creating systemic change. Where *project* is a generic term, *intervention* suggests action to disrupt a specific system.

As a result of letting go of pre-determined goals and actions, and practise in a way that was situated, investigative and non-reductive, the process became “fuzzy” (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p.7)–characterised by ambiguity- and with a chaotic nature. Practising participatory design required an ongoing commitment from the organisation, the participants and the designer, to allow for the iterative approach necessary to create systemic change.
Participatory Design in Theory

I became aware of the limitations of my existing design practice when, prior to commencing this research, a website I had designed to help facilitate staff communication at CFP using a user-experience approach failed to serve its purpose—evidenced by a complete lack of use.

My understanding of user-experience design was limited to what I had learnt in my training as a digital media designer, with its focus on research directed to tailoring content to the user’s needs and an adherence to usability, information architecture principles and user testing (e.g. Neilson, 2000). The user-experience approach had positioned me as the expert in the communication needs of the people who worked at CFP. As I became aware that the website I had designed for CFP wasn’t fulfilling its intended purpose, I reconsidered my role. Disillusioned with a user-experience design approach, I chose to transition to a participatory design practice that would allow me to share the design process and its decision making with others.

A shift toward participatory design seemed easy in theory. I began this research full of optimism about how a toolbox full of established participatory design tools and methods and an understanding of established participatory design principles would allow me to work with participants, embracing their plurality, to co-create appealing, useful and usable solutions. However, my mindset, shaped by my training, proved to not be conducive to participatory design.

A - Letting Go of My Expert Mindset

In looking for a methodology that would help me to embrace complexity in my practice I was drawn to participatory design, but my thinking was still underpinned by problem-solving and techno-centric tendencies that fostered oversimplification. Thus an essential part of my shift toward participatory design was learning to question my own thinking and debunking the assumptions underpinning it. This helped me to be critically reflexive, a skill necessary to navigating the complex practice of participatory design (Steen, 2013).

I began a process of debunking that was ongoing throughout the course of this research. Embarking on this process signalled my departure from being attracted to the ideals of
participatory design while still remaining in my professional comfort zone of technical design practice. The resulting journey was at times uncomfortable and disorientating, rendered all the more more unsettling by the fact that my exact destination was as yet unknown.

Throughout this process of debunking via reflection I asked myself three questions:

*Why was I being solution oriented?*

*Why was I being techno-centric?*

*Why shouldn't I be?*

### Design Mindset vs Research Mindset

Fallman (2007) describes a tension in design research between the outcome-oriented culture of design and the inquiry-led culture of research. As a framework to think through this conflict, Fallman, himself a designer and theorist in the field of HCI, makes a distinction between design-oriented research and research-oriented design—while acknowledging that this dichotomy somewhat oversimplifies the reality.

In design-oriented research the goal is to produce knowledge and understanding, and design is used to propel the research. In research-oriented design the goal is to produce a designed outcome, and research is used to propel the design process. Actual practice exists on a continuum between these two ideals, but separating them in this way helped me, upon reflection, to conceptualise the roles I was playing, the different cultures behind each of them and their different goals.

When I began this research I was thinking like a design-oriented researcher. Design for me, was inextricably linked to the outcome of a design project. The research I had undertaken as a designer was always in service of creating a better-designed artefact. While being a design-oriented researcher was appropriate to the academic aspect of my research, to some extent I had to switch back to being a research-oriented designer while intervening on the ground. But for both perspectives it was, paradoxically, the letting go of an outcome orientation that was most decisive to designing an outcome that would be actionable in the *real world*.

As a design-oriented researcher, my outcome-orientation caused me to constrain the inquiry by directing it towards resolution. When I let go of my outcome-orientation and allowed the intervention to be inquiry-led, I learned that there are always more layers to a problem, and that the root of a problem is integrated into the social fabric at a macro level. As a research-
oriented designer, letting go of a solution-oriented and techno-centric mindset was essential to allowing the intervention to evolve in response to the participants and their context, rather than pre-determining the intervention’s format and its aim/s for them. My overall aspiration remained to bring about transformational change.

**Identity and disciplinary boundary crossing**

But changing the way I worked brought insecurity as to what I could offer as a for-hire professional designer. The feelings of insecurity I experienced in becoming aware of the limits to my expertise resemble those described by Akama (2009), with reference to communication design practitioners transitioning to service design practice—a transition that similarly reorients the goal of design from artefact to the changing of human behaviour.

I was moving beyond the defined disciplinary boundaries of digital media design, practiced as a field defined by technical competence – the hard high ground (Schön, 1983) of design – into the swampy lowland (ibid) of design, wherein lie the problems of greatest human concern, the confusing messes incapable of technical solutions—the wicked problems. Where as a designer I act as a facilitator in projects that require multiple skills outside of a professional design skillset.

In my past work as a professional designer I have found that every client of my digital design practice has wanted rapid, tidy solutions, sometimes to intractable problems. Professional confidence was tied, in my mind, to the tangible things I could create, such as websites, animations and other designed artefacts. Thus when I began this research I felt under the usual pressure from my client (CFP) to fulfil their expectations. Through the process of completing this research I have come to understand that this pressure is commonly felt and I am better able to negotiate a brief with clients by articulating (diplomatically) why such expectations may be impossible to fulfil, and redefining the brief by co-defining with the client what would be a more reasonable expectation.

**Letting Go Of Predefined Processes**

By asking the users about their needs prior to designing the web resource for CFP, and by conducting user testing of it after construction, I was already implementing a far more user-centred process than what I had been taught in my undergraduate degree. I started the job at CFP relatively soon after completing my undergraduate degree, in which the curriculum consisted of creating multimedia projects in response to a brief that resembled the type of
brief that would be issued in a commercial design studio. Marks were awarded according to how well a project filled the brief, with no extra marks for going above and beyond the brief. This determined my workflow in the professional world. At that time I never thought to engage critically with the brief or the definition of the problem. I never thought to question who wrote the brief or who defined the parameters of the problem, or whether the definition was broad enough to encompass the problem from multiple perspectives. I never questioned whether the commissioning client’s definition of the problem could be influenced by an agenda and, if so, Whose agenda? and Why? When I had questioned staff at CFP prior to designing the first, failed iteration of the communication resource, the scope of the questioning was limited to what resources could be included to help them perform their work more easily and effectively.

My undergraduate degree had taught me that meeting the brief as stated would ensure success. I fulfilled the brief for CFP -to the best of my ability- and, upon launch, it appeared to be met with approval by staff and management. Indeed, if I had been contracted only to create this resource, I would have delivered the solution and walked away thinking it had been a success. It was only by virtue of my ongoing work at CFP that I became aware that the resource was not actually being used. And as there had been no discussion in my training of implementation or legacy phases, I didn’t know where to begin to find out why or how to fix it.

In many cases of design interventions, there would be relevant human-resources professionals within the organisation—with expert skillsets such as negotiation and conflict resolution—to advise as to how to proceed. However, this was not the reality within a non-profit such as CFP, and nor did I possess professional experience or education in the workings of organisations. Instead, to further the intervention, I had to function as a jack-of-all-trades, in order to “guide, facilitate, critique, propose, listen, communicate and accelerate discussion among stakeholders...co-creating a shared understanding” (Akama, 2009, p. 6).

**Letting Go Of ‘Making’**

The gratification deriving from a creative process that I could control had been fundamental to my love of being a designer. The sense of achievement of seeing something, say an animation, that had only existed in my head at the start of a day become realised by the end of it was something I relished. But I had to relinquish my attachment to this aspect of my practice, as I let go of my focus on such outcomes. This loss was made all the more difficult by the fact that it was being replaced by the management of people and social dynamics, something I strongly dislike, am not trained in and don’t consider myself particularly adept at.

**Letting go of Fear and Embracing Tension**

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Over the course of this research I have come to understand that tensions and disputes are inherent to the meeting of a diversity of perspectives, concerns and interests and thus are a necessary and integral part of the process of transformation and innovation (Björgvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren 2012; Buur & Larson 2010; Foley 2012). CFP was an existing ecosystem (Nardi & O’Day, 1999), an interconnected and interdependent system of “people, practices, values and technologies” (p. 49). The CFP ecosystem evolved many years before I came to work there, and working as a designer within an existing ecosystem meant being an agent of change, problematising ‘the way things are’.

Before beginning this research I was aware that change can be confronting and that the people within the ecosystem that is the focus of an intervention can fiercely resist it. I was also aware of the dangers of disrupting an existing ecosystem, particularly one that was already under stress. I knew there were tensions bubbling under the surface at CFP (they were spoken about often in private but never openly), so I was wary of the possibility that an intervention that delved into these tensions and brought them out in the open could worsen them. Knowing that interpersonal tension has the potential to cause harm, I respected my limits as someone not trained nor experienced in conflict resolution and was thus not confident that I would be capable of diffusing any tensions that may arise. Yet through this research I have come to understand that creating tension is a necessary and constructive part of any transformative process or collaborative design project. Learning how to balance the necessity to create tension, with tension’s potential for harm is a topic I would like to pursue in further research.

In his thesis on co-creative publics in publication design, Foley (2012) identifies two facets of tension that can drive the design process: dissonance and misunderstanding. Dissonance is a quality of two or more musical notes sounded together that, through their instability, have an active, tense quality that demands resolution by return to a stable chord. Similarly, instability and tension in a design project—caused by different, and often conflicting, inputs representing different stakeholder needs, values and desires—drives a need for resolution to an agreement or compromise, which moves the project forward. Foley describes how, inherent in the dissonance arising from the meeting of people with different stakes and intentions, there will inevitably be some level of misunderstanding. But the conflict that results is crucial to the process of innovation, because it creates new topics of discussion and new searches for shared meaning.
My Relationship Status With Technology = ‘It’s complicated’

I began this research project as a tech optimist. I viewed technology simply as a tool that was useful to help people achieve a goal (if well designed). I also subscribed to a potentially more harmful assumption: that technology was something neutral that we control (Nardi & O’Day, 1999). That I had oversimplified the relationship we have with technology was evidenced by the fact that the digital tool I had designed to aid communication at CFP was not used. I had ignored the fact that, by introducing technology to CFP, I was introducing a new species into an existing ecosystem, risking potential harm to the ecosystem, or—as was the case with the communication website—the death of the introduced species through its obsolescence. Like the tech optimists described by Tonkinwise in a (2015) twitter post, I had erased the social from my consideration of technology, but through the course of this research I have come to understand Information Computer Technology (ICT), indeed any communication system, as a socio-technical phenomenon that is highly relational: No artefact, computer-based or otherwise, is a discrete entity, a standalone thing. Its development and use are defined by complex relationships (Nardi & O’Day, 1999, p. 253).

Overcoming My Designer Ego

I had been commissioned as a design professional to solve a problem of poor workplace communication. I felt external pressure from those who had invested their hope and money in my ability to provide a solution. This was coupled with the internal pressure of my professional ego: I wanted to be able to design the perfect remedy. As a result I was blinded to the magnitude of the challenge by the strength of my own desire to provide a discrete solution, and, subconsciously, artificially constrained the problem to fit the solutions my skill-set would be able to provide.

I had been attracted to participatory design by the ideal of participants being equal partners in the design process and by the human-centred principle that participants be considered as whole, complex human beings. In contrast, the view of participants in a user-centred approach was limited to their role as users of the designed outcome. But, ironically, the approach I was taking to participatory design was limiting the participants’ role to that of “empowered consumers” (Sanders, 2013, p.66) of the communication system. I was inviting staff to participate in a design project for which upper management and myself had predetermined the problem, the format of participation, and (to a degree) the form that the solution would take. Only as I began to let go of my solution-orientedness and techo-centrism, did I allow the research to become an open-ended process of inquiry.
When this intervention began I subscribed to a methods-centric view of participatory design. In the lived reality of the intervention, unable to implement any of the planned workshops based on established methods, I discovered that methods don’t always go exactly as planned—or go at all. This research has taught me to think of methods as a starting point for, rather than the backbone of, a participatory design intervention. The intervention is not dependent on methods, but methods can give an entry point. There are a lot of reasons beyond the practitioner’s control as to why methods fail; understanding how and why they failed can thus give important insight (Akama & Light, 2012) to the design problem itself, the context of the intervention and the people who are involved. In the end I found that many of the reasons why my methods hadn’t worked paralleled why the CFP workplace itself wasn’t working.

Even when it’s impossible to carry out methods the way they were designed and planned, they can still yield valuable information about the design context. Like a provotype (Boer, Donovan & Buur, 2013; Buur & Larsen, 2010; Mogensen, 1992)—a prototype that can provoke a conversation about what does not work and why—a method that is impossible to carry out can be approached as a provomethod.

**Challenges That Led To Letting Go Of Established Methods**

There were two central challenges that led to the need for letting go of established methods. First, the difficulty in winning participation in the workshops; and second, understanding the limits of my perception of the problem and its context.

As I usually have strong opinions about matters that affect me, it surprised me that my fellow staff members were unwilling to participate in the workshops, a process seeking their opinions. Although I came to understand their resistance later, I was at first surprised at the reluctance of the very people who had previously expressed their concern that something had to be done about the poor communication in the workplace. It was clear that, while participants were aware of the problems and wanted them to be solved, they didn’t want to be the ones to come up with the solutions.

After multiple failed attempts at holding the workshops, I began to realise how limited my insight into the workplace conditions and the communication problem had been. My role as a designer had positioned me uniquely in the workplace, shielding me from some of the pressures and frustrations that all other staff were experiencing: the disorder, the interpersonal politics and the way control was enacted. Acknowledging these gaps in my own perspective helped me realise, among other things, that there was somewhat of a contradictory relationship between my being embedded, and my being a user experience designer.
Through my role of resident designer, which I had held for a year, I had some insight into the culture of the organisation prior to the participatory design intervention. However, despite having been a member of the community of practice at CFP, I had been somewhat of an other in a community of practice made up of childcare educators and management, being a designer in a workplace that was concerned with practice other than design. My perspective of the workplace shifted as my role changed. As resident UX designer I observed the workplace conditions from within, but from a perspective of distance. My role was mostly autonomous. My main tasks were to develop and maintain the website and help the coordinators with communication design tasks. I was not subject to the same legislative requirements as the other staff, and unlike them I had no responsibility to the various stakeholders. Neither did I have to juggle these pressures with the task of keeping large groups of kids safe and entertained. Also, despite the fact that my job was less stressful, the award rate of pay is higher for a designer than for a childcare educator. I was also outside the normal chain-of-command and largely removed from the organisational politics and general disorder: while I could observe them, they didn’t affect my agency at work. This made it easy for me to underestimate how much these issues impacted the agency of the other staff, and to what extent these conditions would inhibit a participatory design intervention. As participatory design facilitator I began to work by integrating into the broader community of practice. My ability to achieve set goals was dependent on others; and as such, for the first time, I experienced first hand what it was like to be subject to the interpersonal and community politics and other aspects of the workplace culture and conditions at CFP. Shifting from UXD to participatory design made me realise how different and privileged my experience as a designer at CFP had been, in comparison to the experiences of other members of the community of practice. Gaining a better understanding of the lived reality of the participants helped me to develop a stronger sense of empathy with my co-workers, which in turn helped me to develop relationships with them. In future participatory design (and any design) projects, where possible I will attempt to gain real, equal experience to that of the participants; in order to be able to have an understanding of the challenges they face and their needs. Where it is not possible, I will be aware of how limited my experience and empathy may be, as a designer observing from the outside, for the normal constraints and pressures of a participant’s context.

C - Shifting To Participatory Design Practiced As A Mindset

When I attempted to hold the workshops, and couldn’t, I discovered that there were pre-conditions necessary for participatory design, and that these were not present at CFP. I discuss these in detail below. In order to make participatory design viable at CFP I had to realign the goal of the intervention toward facilitating these pre-conditions. Realigning the
goals of the intervention required a conceptual shift in my own mindset about what participation can and should entail in a participatory design intervention. I moved away from a hierarchical model to a more nuanced concept of participation that is mutable and responsive to the participants and the context of the intervention. This is described in detail on p. 48.

**Pre-Conditions For Participatory Design at CFP**

(i) **Support from the Gatekeeper**

The Gatekeeper is a name I use for the CFP staff member who controls access to the participants and to the resources necessary for the intervention. Use of this term allows me to keep the specifics of this person’s role anonymous while implying the control they had over my research intervention. Although I was already a member of staff at CFP, the research intervention relied on the Gatekeeper’s continued support, which could have been withdrawn at any time, in which case the intervention would have ended and I would have gone back to maintaining their website. In addition, I had to convince the Gatekeeper to allow the intervention to go ahead using a participatory approach. For such an approach to be a success it was necessary that the Gatekeeper divert significant resources over a protracted period of time, and that they relinquish some of the control over decision-making they were used to exercising.

The Gatekeeper role is one that I have observed in a number of other projects and interventions. The support of the Gatekeeper and the success of the intervention are mutually dependent: for the project to be successful, it would need the Gatekeeper’s prolonged support, but for them to continue to support the intervention, they had to perceive that it is, or was going to be, successful. So the success depends on the support and the support depends on the success. This ‘Catch 22’ situation was particularly difficult to navigate for a participatory design intervention, given that the measure of success was one that was being discovered as we went along.

It was the Gatekeeper’s wish that the organisation become an environment that motivated staff engagement and enabled staff to function with more agency. But while they affirmed the democratising values of participatory design, they found it difficult to sustain active support when faced with increasing pressures and responsibilities that arose over time. And I couldn’t give them any guarantee of whether the intervention would be successful and if it was, what that success might look like. I also observed that the Gatekeeper had another reason for allowing a participatory design intervention—one similar to that mentioned by Greenbaum
wishing to delegate responsibility to another because the people in positions of control were tired of being blamed for, and dealing with, a system that doesn’t work.

The Gatekeeper at CFP, like other Gatekeepers I have observed, has the largest amount of control in the organisation, something they and the other participants are fully aware of. While holding a position of significant control within the organisation, they are part of a broader network of actors (Latour, 2005), such as parents, schools, the Department of Education, competition from for-profit providers, and bear the responsibility of maintaining the financial viability of the organisation. The affects of this network of actors on the Gatekeeper’s agency influenced their ability to support the intervention. Ultimately, if the intervention had negative consequences, the Gatekeeper would have responsibility for repairing the damage. Similarly, if there was simply no positive outcome from the intervention the Gatekeeper would be responsible for the loss of scarce resources that could have been allocated to solving the problem in a different way. So the Gatekeeper is in both a powerful and a vulnerable position.

For participatory design to be democratic it necessitates that some control is transferred from those who have more to those who have less, but in practice this is complex and problematic. I believe that the Gatekeeper was genuinely aligned with the values of participatory design—empowered participants and a democratic workplace—but the level of support they offered and the control relinquished by them varied significantly over the course of the intervention. During periods of stability in the organisation the Gatekeeper’s support—letting go of control over decision making and offering time and resources—increased; and conversely, during periods of instability in the organisation—unrelated to the intervention—the Gatekeeper would want to take more control as a response to crisis, and would be less willing to allow access to the participants’ time and other resources.

The Gatekeeper exhibited problem solving tendencies, like I had. I believe this had a reciprocal relationship with the crisis-management culture at CFP. This was understandable, given the conflicting demands of answering to the numerous stakeholders, and operating under a tight budget. Thus it was crucial to the success of the intervention that the Gatekeeper, the other participants and I, displayed negative capability. Perhaps if I had been more prepared for the uncertainty myself—the pressures and the challenges that arose through this intervention—I could have prepared the Gatekeeper and the other participants better, and helped them to nurture negative capability. On the other hand, had they been forewarned of the pressures, concerns and challenges they would face, perhaps they would not have supported the intervention at all.

Previously, in another project unrelated to the research intervention at CFP, I made the mistake of not treating Gatekeepers as key stakeholders to an intervention. Instead I focused solely on the participants with whom I was directly working. I also did not consider Gatekeepers as empathetically as I could have, perhaps because of their elevated status and
greater power relative to the other participants. I was looking at power in a binary way, in terms of *haves* and *have nots* and *more* and *less*, which did not take into account the complexities of how each individual’s agency is affected by the network of actors (Latour, 2005) and relationships in which they all co-exist, and how these can change over time. This proved to be to the detriment of that project, when a small dispute between one of the project managers and the Gatekeeper escalated resulting in the project having to be terminated. That experience made me more aware of the vital and complex role Gatekeepers play within a community and hence within any intervention into it, and the importance of dedicating time and energy to cultivating and maintaining a good relationship with them.

My ability to empathise with the Gatekeeper has developed further through this research, as I have come to a more nuanced understanding of identity politics, one in which power relationships are enacted at the intersection of multiple characteristics such as gender, race and class (Crenshaw, 1991). Through this multifocal lens, a person can be viewed as empowered in one way, for example by being in a position of control in an organisation, yet disempowered in another, such as when the Gatekeeper is a woman without a university education—in contrast to the majority of decision-making stakeholders, who are tertiary educated (e.g. principals and staff at the Department of Education).

A perception of people who work in the outside school hours care industry as of low status, by schools, parents and the Department of Education, was one that was spoken about repeatedly by participants at CFP throughout the intervention. I believe this perceived lowly status increases the workload and pressure on outside school hours care providers, without any corresponding increase in support or remuneration. These complex understandings helped me to empathise with the Gatekeeper when listening to their fears and complaints about the pressures they were under. However, there were many factors that influenced their support (or otherwise) of the project that were outside my influence. Understanding and accepting this was part of cultivating my own negative capability (French 2001).

**(ii) Gaining and Retaining a High Level of Support From the Participants**

For the intervention to be able to catalyse positive change, it needed the dedicated, ongoing support of the participants. This was something that I found far more difficult to obtain than initially expected. In the Scandinavian tradition, increasing the agency of participants is one of the goals of participatory design. However, the will and ability to engage in high-level participation requires agency. Transformation requires active citizens, who are agents in the creation of their own personal and collective wellbeing (Sangiorgi, 2010). Thus paradoxically, participatory design requires the participants to already have the agency that the intervention will help them to gain. Like for the Gatekeeper, the design intervention could not commence or gain traction without the support of the participants, but to merit their dedicated support,
the participants needed to perceive that the outcome of the intervention would justify their investment of time and energy.

Within the six-month timeframe of the research intervention, I could only gain participation in the form of informal conversations in small groups of people who already worked together, and only at the location they worked. Within these conditions they were willing to talk about the problem from their perspective and what their vision of an ideal future would be, but not to discuss how those changes might be brought about. One interviewee told me that she considered that They (meaning management) or You (meaning me), should figure it out, that it did not come under her job description. When I tried to explain the potential benefits of her involvement, that the solution would better serve her needs, she told me that since recent changes to the childcare legislation had drastically increased her workload she felt she was already overworked and under resourced.

The legislative changes had increased her responsibility, yet she had not received a corresponding pay increase. While changes to the legislation had increased demands on outside school hours care providers, they had not placed any obligation on schools or parents to pay increased fees, which they were unwilling to do. Increased competition between outside school hours care providers makes it difficult for providers to put pressure on schools and parents, for threat of being replaced. Thus the burden falls, unrewarded, on the childcare workers, contributing to their unwillingness to engage in any additional work. Bodker, Gronbaek and Kyng (1993) suggest the allocation of a significant amount of resources like time, money, education and assistance from a variety of experts, in order to allow a reduction in workload, is a necessity in providing an incentive to participate in a participatory design intervention, but this was an insurmountable hurdle in a resource scarce non-profit organisation like CFP.

Another significant obstacle to winning the participation of the staff, as explained to me by another interviewee, was that most of the employees worked part-time. She told me that she would be leaving CFP as soon as she got her degree and wanted to devote her energy to her studies and her future career, not to her job at CFP. Still another barrier was the disillusionment of the staff with the ability of the organisation to change. One told me “nothing ever changes anyway”. Organisational inertia was one of the issues that was often complained about before the intervention, though (to my knowledge) the causes were never analysed and a solution was never discussed.

Given the barriers that prevented or dissuaded my fellow staff members from participating, their resistance was understandable. They didn’t see that actively participating in the intervention would personally benefit them enough to justify their investment of time and energy, something Grudin (1993) observes as a common and critical barrier to participatory design. This was a difficult hurdle to overcome as facilitator because I was cautious not to overstate what the intervention could offer them, when it was a matter of uncertainty whether
we could realise an outcome and what it would be. Understanding the complexity and multitude of the factors outside of my control that influenced the participants’ support of the intervention, helped me to develop my negative capability. I was able to stop feeling the need to try so hard to make the intervention work, accept the limitations, and work within the current conditions.

**A Conceptual Shift About What Participation Can and Should Be**

**Participation As A Negotiation**

Over the course of this research I discovered that participation can’t be taken for granted and I had to depart from the models of participation suggested by participatory design methods. My understanding came to correspond to Pihkala and Karasti’s (2016) description of participation as an ongoing negotiation, which is fluid and made up of the multiple, constantly changing relationships between the participants, the stakeholders, the facilitator, their methods, the context, and the barriers to participation. This negotiation spanned every element of the intervention—including our roles and the extent of control we were to assume; the goals of the intervention; the problem we were to address; and where and what form participation was to take place. Some of this negotiation was explicit, such as when the participants and I discussed how to communicate their definitions of the problem to the Gatekeeper, who would come up with solutions and decide which solutions to pursue. Other negotiations happened unintentionally, such as when I discovered that my going to the program locations where they worked facilitated the willingness of staff to talk to me. There were many such barriers to participation identified, most of which were impossible for me to control, especially given the lack of resources dedicated to the intervention. Thus it was necessary to find a modality for participation that limited the effort required from my co-workers as much as possible, while still allowing them to make crucial decisions about those issues that affected them, if they wished. We assumed a model of participation in which participants defined the problem from their perspective and presented their ideal version, but delegated the task of devising and implementing solutions to upper management and me—while retaining the power to veto any decision they didn’t like or find appropriate. The adoption of a more fluid, improvised, intuitive method of practice allowed us to build more trusting relationships and made staff more open to speaking with me.

**My Experience Of The Responsibility, And Burden, Of Participation**

When I began the intervention I was unconsciously thinking of my participatory design facilitator role as that of an “apolitical doula to people helping themselves” (Tonkinwise, 2010,
However, the mode of participation established as a result of negotiation instead placed me in the role of proxy agent. Being a proxy agent was a position that I felt was somewhat contradictory to the ideals of a participatory intervention and one that I struggled with. I was constantly cautious to not overextend my role—owing to my drive to ‘improve things’—and end up projecting my agenda onto participants. I did not feel that acting as proxy agent was ideal but could not think of another way.

Speaking about the possibility of service design projects to function as an “engine for wider societal transformations” (Sangiorgi, 2010, p.2), Sangiorgi states that when citizens are agents in the creation of their own wellbeing, rather than passive recipients of services, they can become empowered and that participation itself has the potential to be transformative. Sangiorgi identifies seven key principles, which she represents sequentially: “1) Active citizens; 2) Intervention at community scale; 3) Building capacities and project partnerships; 4) Redistributing power; 5) Designing infrastructures and enabling platforms; 6) Enhancing imagination and hope; 7) Evaluating success and impact” (2011, p. 33).

However, Akama (2014) uses her experience of facilitating participatory design workshops with communities in bushfire prone areas in Victoria, to question Sangiorgi’s assumption that transformation begins with Active Citizens as the primary and central condition. Akama argues that viewing Active Citizens as the first stage can be problematic in situations when communities are experiencing “fear, confusion and disempowerment” (2014, p. 174). When Akama arrived in the community to undertake workshops around bushfire preparedness she was not greeted by Active Citizens, but by scepticism and doubt and a community that was far from cohesive for a number of reasons (Akama and Ivanka, 2010; Light and Akama 2012). As a result, Akama (2014) argues that a reflexive and dexterous approach is needed in order to first overcome obstacles and enable participants to become ‘Active’.

I considered implementing one of the methods that Akama and her colleagues had used to achieve this in the bushfire preparedness workshops. They showed videos of bushfire survivors’ testimonials to participants to “help make the risk of fire real to the participants” (Light and Akama 2012, p. 66). I contemplated likewise communicating with the participants at CFP about the potential negative consequences to the organisation, and our jobs, if we were not able to improve the communication. I wondered whether this would help to make the need for improvement more real to them. While I felt that this would be an effective way to increase their motivation to participate, I was aware that I was disrupting an existing ecosystem and that a discussion like that could easily have unintended negative consequences in a workplace. Akama and Ivanka were holding workshops that were short-term, with potentially life-threatening consequences for participants who missed them. But the consequences of inaction at CFP were not comparable and my ongoing role in the organisation allowed me to take a slower, longer-term approach. It afforded me the time necessary to explore another approach implemented by Akama and Ivanka (2010), which was to take on as the first step what Sangiorgi (2010) identifies as step 4: Redistributing Power.
A More Nuanced Understanding Of Participation

When I began this research, my understanding of participation was hierarchical, influenced by notions of a ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969; Hart 1992) (see Fig. 8), a model that continues to be popular, for example forming the basis of the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2, 2014) Based on this model, as an inexperienced participatory design practitioner I was deeply concerned that I would unwittingly be manipulating powerless participants into a situation of tokenism or nonparticipation (Arnstein, 1969), on behalf of more powerful groups, such as upper management.

Fig. 8 Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969, p. 217)

However, over the course of this research intervention I gained a more nuanced understanding of the challenges of participatory design, which enabled me to engage critically with the limits of the ladder model as a representation of that process in real-world scenarios. The ladder model represents power in a simplistic, linear and binary way, ignoring the heterogeneity within the juxtaposed groups of the powerful and the powerless, and the complex and mutable way power is enacted between them.

The ladder thus oversimplifies the many different ways participation can be enacted. The language Arnstein uses, such as manipulation tokenism and placation, insinuates that
participation is intentionally hindered or manipulated by those above. Although she acknowledges that there are more like 150 less sharply defined rungs than those defined in her ladder, I argue that there are endless rungs, based on endless permutations of how participation can be enacted. I now find it more useful to adopt negotiation rather than ladder as the model for participation.

**Making Decisions on Behalf of Others**

I had expected the important decisions in this intervention to be made by the participants, and therefore the exercise of power, while shared with me, to be predominantly resting with them. But for a number of reasons already discussed the participants were unwilling to devote their energy and time to sharing the decision-making processes necessary throughout this intervention. By virtue of their reluctance to make decisions, they vested that power in me. My experience is well captured by Steen’s (2011) description of human-centred design as “a series of decisions, in which certain knowledge of certain people is privileged over other knowledge of other people, [and] with each decision, power is exercised” (p. 47). Over time this concentrated far more power with me than I expected or wanted.

With this power came the responsibility to reflect critically on my methods, assumptions, values and intentions, to uncover their complexity (Pihkala & Karasti, 2016; Steen, 2011). Pihkala and Karasti (2016) call this an “uncomfortable reflexivity” (p.23). Each decision brought agonizing responsibility. I would critically reflect on the decision, attempting to see all perspectives and look at all the possible immediate and second-order (Tonkinwise, in Shwab, 2015) consequences. I would try to reflexively analyse why I felt I needed to make a decision, if there was another way, and whether I was bringing any of my own baggage to that decision. It was an endless train of reflection and reflexivity. Since there could be no clear right decision, this questioning often ended in my having analysis paralysis (Nardi & O’Day, 1999).

At the time I found the effort exhausting and the process disillusioning. But experiencing first-hand how time, energy and resource consuming it was to fully engage with the complexity of reflecting on decisions made on behalf of others, helped me to understand the resistance of my colleagues to the approach to participation I had proposed in the initial workshops. By requiring that they assume control over the decision making process, I had placed them in precisely this uncomfortable position.
**Shifting To A Non-Reductive Practice**

Over the course of this research I came to understand the importance of practicing non-reductively: viewing the problem as messy and uncertain as made up of complex, entangled layers that are different when viewed from different perspectives.

Practising non-reductively was initiated by two central shifts. First, the introduction of heterogeneous perspectives on the problem and its context, through user and stakeholder inclusion in the design process via a participatory design approach; Second, through the human-centred perception of participants as complex people living complex lives, this complexity being inseparable from their role as participants and from the design problem.

Seeking to establish a more objective view of the problem, one made up of multiple partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988), it became apparent that these perspectives were not only heterogeneous but in some cases conflicting or contradictory. This brought a level of tension to the process that is not present in a project serving only one agenda (as discussed in Letting go of Fear and Embracing Tension p. 38).

As the research went on, practising non-reductively became daunting. What had initially appeared to be a manageable problem—a lack of up-to-date communication tools to help staff keep up with current communication needs that could be solved by a technical solution—revealed itself to be a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973) underpinned by an interdependent, interrelated, inextricable mess of other more complex problems, such as: interpersonal, organisational and state politics; lack of resources; individual and organisational resistance to change; and poorly established organisational infrastructure (Star and Rhuleder, 1996; Star and Bowker, 2010). It was like opening a Pandora’s box to find inside another larger Pandora’s box—and inside that, still another. For each participant, the problems at work meshed with personal issues in the complex contexts of their lives. Transitioning to non-reductive practice necessitated accepting that there is an infinite level of complexity and no perfect way to manoeuvre within it.

Through the multiple partial perspectives of the participants and stakeholders, we came to have a holistic definition of what constituted the problem of poor communication in our workplace, encompassing multiple, inextricably interrelated causes and effects. Along with its proposed solutions, it looked very different to those with which I, and upper management, had started. We were clearly traversing the swampy lowlands of practice (Schön, 1983) (that I mentioned on page 36).
Participatory Design As A Mindset

Sanders’ (2013) definition of the goal of practising participatory design as mindset is to improve the quality of life of participants. According to fundamental principles of participatory design such as those defined by Kensing and Greenbaum (2013), this involves “equalizing power relationships” (p. 33) and “democratizing practices” (p. 33), inferring that it is the participants who should define in what area their qualities of life should be improved, and how. Echoing Kensing and Geenbaum, in my case the goal of the intervention was to create social value by improving the working lives of the staff at CFP by making the decision-making processes and communication infrastructure more democratic and transparent.

However, for reasons outlined throughout this Master’s project I found the goal of equalising power relationships both problematically lofty and too binary in the context of a non-profit organisation in an under-resourced sector, in Melbourne.

Practising participatory design as a mindset and a worldview is a departure from the object, or artifact-oriented design of my commercial practice. It is practiced as situated action (Suchman, 1984), in response to the context and to the participants (Sanders, 2013). It is a way of thinking and practising design that is highly relational, “favouring personal interactions and conversations” (Sanders, 2013, p. 67) between participants, experts, practitioners and stakeholders. It is a process that is ongoing, and must be practiced over the very long-term if it is to create systemic change. It can take years, decades and even generations (Sanders, 2013).

Put this way, practising participatory design as a mindset echoed the advice I was given by a founder of the project I worked with in Guatemala, on a day I was disillusioned by the enormity of the task of working in an education project with children who had suffered trauma and extreme disadvantage, both personal and intergenerational. That advice was to think in the long term, as the full impact of our work might not be felt in this generation, but in the next. I discovered through this research that practising participatory design as a mindset resonates with the way I want to relate to others and to the world, as a designer and as a person. Thus it is an intensely personal process that blurs the boundary between practice and life.

D - A Shift To Embracing Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Through the course of this research, in order to share my design process with others, I had to undergo a major transition in the way that design process was conceptualised and structured. I name this as a transition from projects to interventions. I define projects here as structured and pre-planned, with specific goals and intended outcomes over a limited timeframe. I
define intervention as a process of non-reductive, situated action (Suchman, 1984), responsive to the context and participants. Interventions are open-ended and integrated into a system—in this case the CFP workplace—with the goal of creating transformational change to the system itself (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch 1974).

When I began this research I had planned a project, the format and scope of which were three pre-determined workshops based on participatory design methods. In this project, participatory design was merely a way of including users in the process of designing an outcome they would use. The problem (poor communication at CFP) was predetermined, as was the goal—to come up with a designed solution to that poor communication (or brief for a designed solution). When my planned project proved impossible to carry out, I had to abandon it in favour of situated action (Suchman, 1984), responding to the needs and constraints of participants within a context.

The initial phase of the intervention was investigative, to reveal exactly what problem the intervention was to address. This process was not planned and deliberate but a matter of trial and error, of learning through action. As a consequence of this process the goal of the intervention became to make systemic changes to the organisation that promoted better working conditions; specifically, more democratic decision-making processes and a more inclusive and transparent communication infrastructure (Star & Rhuleder, 1996). Over the six-month duration of the research intervention documented here, we were able to identify areas that needed improvement, and to draft concept prototypes for possible changes. However this was seen as only the beginning to an ongoing process of change, reflection and either further refinement or beginning anew.

The Fuzzy Intervention

When I began this research I envisaged a project that would run in cycles, informed by participatory action research models (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998) see Figure 9, with time scheduled for exploration, ideation and reflection. But my experience of the initial phase of the intervention was more akin to what Sanders and Stappers (2008) describe as the fuzzy front end of the co-design process, “fuzzy because of the ambiguity and chaotic nature that characterise it” (p. 7) see Figure 10. Sanders and Stappers identify this as a critical phase for gaining understanding of users and of contexts of use (see Figure 11. The Fuzzy Intervention). However, in their example a traditional design process follows the fuzzy front end, but I found the whole process to be chaotic and characterised by ambiguity. While the steepest growth in my understanding indeed occurred in the front end, my understanding deepened immensely the longer the intervention went on. As my relationships with the participants grew stronger, they in turn spoke more openly. Different phases of the design process, or simply external
factors, generated different challenges, each of which brought to light some information that would have been impossible to gain pre-emptively.

Fig. 9 The self-reflective spiral of action research (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 22)

As I shifted from a project planned around participatory design methods, I moved away from thinking of, and practising, participatory design as an “approach to design” (Sanders, 2013, p. 73) and as a “collection of tools and techniques” (p. 73) with the goal of creating experience value for the user. The fuzzy intervention was, instead, improvised and negotiated—between the participants, the context, and myself. The goal did not become clear until late in the intervention. I found myself asking if what I was doing was even design, since my understanding of what constituted design was based on methods and artefacts. When I discovered Sanders’ (2013) concept of practising participatory design as a mindset (a set of values or attitudes) and worldview (a philosophy that recasts the concept and process of design), it encapsulated for me the new way of thinking of and practising participatory design, which I acquired through this research.

Fig 10. The Fuzzy Front End of Co-design (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 6)
Fig. 11 The Fuzzy Intervention

The Fuzzy Intervention = 6 Month Duration of Masters Research

Re-Defining the Problem/s from Multiple Perspectives

Attempting to Come Up with Ideas Collectively

Negotiating Terms, Format, Goals of Participation, Explicitly and Unconsciously

Enormity of Problem Reveals Itself Understanding of Problem Grows

Placing the Problem in its Broader Social Context

Re-defining the Problems from Multiple Perspectives

Critically Reflectioning on Modality for Participation Established through Negotiation

Weathering Changes/Pressures, Financial, from External Stakeholders etc.

Great Mystery: Implementation Could Run Successfully or Not. Could Require Iterative Revision or Complete Revisit of Previous Steps

Project as Distinct from Intervention

My Individual Reflection/Planning

Masters Research Project

Workshop 1 - Reflection - Understand Problem, Ideation, Concept Generation

Workshop 2 - Reflection - Understand Context, Ideation, Concept/Prototype Generation/Refinement

Workshop 3 - Reflection - Concept Refinement, Prototype Generation/Refinement

Intervention Continues, Integrated into Organisation
2. A Transition To A Critically Reflective and Reflexive Practice

I found that developing the skills to critically reflect on practice, and on my role and positioning in practice (i.e. reflexivity) were master skills—skills that guide how I think about and carry out all aspects of my practice—allowing me to navigate the complex and uncertain terrain of a shared design process. These skills allowed me to control my positioning with respect to my practice, allowing me to zoom in and out at will.

When I zoom in to practice, I am emotionally present within the work, empathising with the participants and responding based on my own relationship with the participants and the practice. Recognising my own barriers to empathy allowed me to develop trustful relationships with the participants, and these relationships proved to be essential to enabling the intervention to progress. When I zoom out, although listening to and focused on the participants, I am somewhat distanced, in order to reflect on, and gain insight into, the practice and my place within it. To be able to zoom out I had to lay aside a good deal of my own personal emotional baggage, which was affecting the way I thought and behaved. Developing negative capability (French, 2001)—the ability to do nothing when faced with this messiness—was key to enabling me to zoom out of practice. I found it as important as any ability I needed to draw on during this research intervention, as it allowed me to practice non-reductively—viewing the problem and context with all their layers of entangled complexity, uncertainty and messiness, while accepting that much of it was out of my control.

Developing the ability to zoom in and out was a result of both researching the concepts of reflection (Schön, 1983), reflexivity (Pihkala & Karasti, 2016; Steen, 2013) and negative capability (French, 2001), and of gaining applied experience in their use by consciously practising them through the course of the research. My quest to develop these qualities was helped by a significant personal transition that happened at the time: becoming so ill with an autoimmune disease that it changed me, and my life, completely. Being ill made carrying out this research difficult on a practical, physical level; however, it also allowed me to gain significant insight into the baggage I was bringing into the research—my habitual patterns of thinking, believing and behaving—and how that baggage was creating barriers to empathy between the participants and myself.
Reflection From A New Perspective

I came to realise that I was struggling to transition from working in the developing world to working in the developed world, which was negatively affecting my perspective on the participants and their problems. When practising as a facilitator and teacher in Guatemala and Argentina, I witnessed so much suffering by people who had little opportunity that I had to build an armour. But I also witnessed the resilience of the children I worked with, and of their families, as they bravely battled extreme disadvantage. As a result, I experienced a kind of jadedness which made it hard to empathise with the problems people would complain of in Australia, so-called first world problems. I became aware over the course of this research that subconsciously I had been comparing other people’s (and my own) problems and opportunities to those of the people I had known in Latin America. As a result I was unfairly judging the worthiness of other people’s complaints and was holding others, and myself, to unreachable standards. Operating unawares, it made me frustrated with people, which stopped me from gaining a genuine understanding of their problems and developing real empathy.

Being sick dissolved the armour I had developed in Latin America, forcing me to acknowledge my own humanness and vulnerability. This helped me to empathise with the humanness and vulnerability of others. Being more patient and asking more questions helped build better, more trustful relationships with my fellow staff members, who then confided in me about their perspectives on the problems at CFP, and what was affecting their ability and desire to participate in the intervention. It also helped me to learn about who they were as people beyond being employees at CFP.

I also became aware of the intangible and unseen barriers to participation. I was going through a difficult and debilitating time that no one knew about, but one that left clues: I was often late, or couldn’t get tasks done by the deadlines I had set. I would make excuses but never talk about the real problem because I didn’t want to admit (to myself and others) how sick I was. This made me wonder what other participants may be going through in their lives that the rest of us didn’t know about. What were the complex contexts of their lives? I began to understand that I could never understand what each of the other participants was going through.

Becoming sick also helped me to conceptualise the interconnectedness of the ecosystem that exists within us, extending out into the greater ecosystem of which we are all a part.

Something so tiny and intangible—a molecule that my own body had created—had completely changed every aspect of my life, my partner’s and my family’s. In addition to the physical symptoms there was also financial and time stress. I came to understand that it might not be one big thing that influences a person’s ability to participate but a combination of many smaller things.
In addition to helping me to develop empathy and trustful relationships with my co-worker participants my illness helped me to develop negative capability in two ways. First, because I didn’t have the physical and mental energy to think about and try to change things, as would be my habitual way—I had to accept that much I could not change. Second, was that the illness I developed is chronic. There is no cure. I had no choice but to accept it and accept the limits of what I could change. Exercising negative capability on a level with so much personal impact helped me to practice it in other areas of life. While I would never have wished to become ill, by forcing upon me a new perspective, it allowed me to become more aware of the habitual ways of thinking and behaving that were affecting my interaction with the participants and my view of the intervention, and helped to alter those patterns.
Quicksand practiced as mindset (Sanders 2013)

Hard, high ground (Schön, 1983)

Swampy lowland (Schön, 1983)

PD practiced as mindset (Sanders 2013)

Compass

Gumboots

Boat

Me
CHAPTER 4 - CONCLUSION

I carried out this research in order to explore, through the lived reality of a participatory design intervention, the following research questions:

1. **What happens to my design practice when I share the design process, and its decision-making, with others through a participatory approach?**
2. **What are the principles, skills and processes of this new, relational practice?**

Through this exploration I have come to understand and consciously embrace in my practice concepts of which I previously had only the merest sense. Over the course of this study I had to re-conceptualise what can constitute design practice – partly in response to an understanding gained from the literature, but mostly due to the contact I have had with the participants in the lived reality of the intervention. I have shifted my understanding of design away from a reductive, techno-centric, problem-solving orientation. I have discovered in its place a practice that is rich in humanity. This practice is fluid, constantly changing and evolving in response to the participants and the context. I have come to understand that design can be a process that deals with the intangible; that both the materials of this design process and its designed outcome can be relationships and understandings.

This new practice is messy, complex and often frustrating, encompassing intractable factors such as social politics. It is also intimate, relational and intuitive, necessitating empathy and sensitivity. While I find it demanding and difficult, it is a way of working that resonates with my personality. I believe it is an effective way to use design to approach wicked problems, not with the expectation of finding tidy, rapid solutions, but as a way to begin the long, painstaking process of transformational change. Rather than my practice being driven by alternating states of optimism and disappointment, as it was in the past, I am now driven by a tragicomic hope, a concept I owe to the philosopher West (2004). A tragicomic commitment to hope is a way to persevere with joy in the face of uncomfortable truths, but without naivety or cynicism. In the case of the intervention documented here: by acknowledgement of the magnitudes of difficulty facing participatory-design interventions that aim to create social value. What follows are the key findings made through pursuing my research questions:
What happens to my design practice when I share the design process, and its decision-making, with others through a participatory approach?

Sharing the design process and its decision making with others involved a transition from my previous commercial, user experience design practice, to a participatory design practice that is non-reductive and human-centred. For this to happen in the lived reality of the intervention was messy and infinitely complex, uncertain and demanding of time and resources. It was also demanding of the participants and of me as facilitator.

I learnt that when sharing the design process with people, their heterogeneous needs and desires must be the driver of the process. Initially, I had a practical motivation for pursuing a participatory design approach. I hoped that sharing the design process would create an outcome that better suited the needs of its future users and I hoped we could achieve this through adherence to established participatory design methods. When my initial approach failed I became aware that taking a methods-centric, outcome oriented approach had reduced the participants' role in the design process to that of 'empowered consumers' (Sanders, 2013)– by assuming their compliance in participating in a predefined manner to address a problem that has been predefined from a single perspective.

Instead of following established methods in order to achieve an outcome that was largely predetermined, it was necessary for me to improvise a process of shared investigation of the problem with the participants. My intuition was guided by a participatory design mindset, cultivated through this research, which focused on enabling trustful relationships with and between participants, on increasing their agency, and on removing barriers to participation as they were identified.

Transitioning to a human-centred approach to design allowed me to see parallels between my participatory design practice and my previous work in education and community development with underprivileged children in Latin America. This was significant to mitigating the sense of professional loss and dislocation I felt due to the fact that my participatory design practice shared little resemblance to the user experience design practice I had trained and practiced in. It also allowed for insights gained through the work in Latin America to inform the present study, and insights from the study to inform the work in Latin America.
When I began this study I hoped to gain experience with the suite of established participatory design methods that were intended to facilitate sharing a design process. When I was unable to implement the methods I had chosen due to circumstances beyond my control, I learnt that a relational practice is far more complex than I had understood. As participatory design has been taken up by cultures and industries with motivations and values different to those in which it originated, there has been the hope that it can be successfully implemented using methods and tools (Iversen, Halskov & Leong, 2010) established in the context of its Scandinavian, social-democratic roots (Bjögvinsson, Ehn, Hillgren, 2012; Ehn 1993; Greenbaum 1993b). My experience of transitioning to a participatory design approach suggests this optimism is misplaced, as does the work of participatory design scholars (Akama & Light, 2012; Ehn, 1993; Light & Akama, 2012; Pihkala and Kerasti, 2016; Steen, 2008).

Instead of seeing design as defined by methods and tools, I discovered that I can approach my design practice as a mindset, following Sanders (2013), as a philosophy of life. The goal of practising participatory design as a mindset is to increase the agency of participants to positively affect their own quality of life, in an ongoing process over the long term. Understanding that a design intervention is a political act that cannot eschew the politics that underpin it, is now an integral part of my participatory design mindset.

Awareness of such political dimensions brings to light a series of Catch 22s in which the intervention requires for its success the very thing its success promises to deliver. For example, the intervention could not be successful without the support of the Gatekeeper, who controls access to the participants and allocates resources to the intervention, but to sustain the support of the Gatekeeper the intervention needed to promise success. Similarly, it needed the commitment of the participants, but to win their dedicated participation it needed to persuade them it would be successful. In both cases support was particularly difficult to obtain and sustain given the uncertainty of what the outcome of the intervention would be (and the fact that I was wary of promising an outcome that we may or may not be able to deliver).

Practising participatory human-centred design as a mindset was an iterative process that became integrated into my day-to-day professional practice. Practising participatory design as an ongoing, iterative, process allowed me the flexibility for situated action (Suchman, 1984)–action that responds to the context and to the needs and wants of the participants–in both the process of defining the problem as well as how it would be addressed. The long-term approach characteristic of this mindset allowed for the time necessary to establishing a holistic definition of the design.
problem from multiple, partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988). It also allowed for the time necessary to generating proposals aimed at transformative change (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch 1974)—qualitative structural shifts to the organisation itself.

**What are the principles, skills and processes of this new, relational practice?**

**Process**

*Letting Go Of A Problem-Solving, Techno-Centric Mindset*

Making the transition to a relational practice necessitated letting go of the techno-centric, problem-solving tendencies that characterised my approach at the start. I came to be aware of, and then let go of, my established mindset through a process of debunking. I became aware of how much my thinking in my previous design practice was oversimplified. For example, I had never engaged critically with the nuanced way societal values are manifested in design processes and artefacts, and I had always followed briefs without questioning whose perspective on a problem they represented. I also became aware of my own sense of fear and loss at changing my practice from one measured by what I could create, to one measured by what I could enable (Akama 2009).

*Learning from failures*

While it is rare to read accounts of failed interventions (Akama and Light, 2012; Gaver et al., 2009), how and why methods or approaches fail can lead to important insight both about a particular intervention and more broadly about practice. My study highlights that the role failure can play in helping to understand a design problem is particularly important in a shared design process where things can’t be controlled and success can’t be guaranteed. Through failure, I gained insights into three areas: the complex conditions of the workplace; my practice and how it transitioned; and my own habitual assumptions and behaviours. Indeed, the insights gained from failure were key to the learning—both mine and the organisation’s—that I would categorise as the success of the intervention.

In response to the failure of my planned workshops I moved away from structuring my method of practice as design projects and transitioned to one of design interventions. I understood projects as being planned, using established tools and
methods to achieve a defined purpose, over a defined period of time; and interventions as being open-ended, non-reductive, ongoing, iterative, and integrated into a system. I found this definition of an intervention to be complementary to practising participatory design as a mindset.

• *Understanding the notion of agency*

In order to overcome the staff’s initial resistance to taking an active role in the intervention, I acted (with consent) as their proxy agent, in order to catalyse some initial positive change within the organisation. I was critically aware that this was not ideal in a participatory intervention, one of the goals of which is to increase the agency of the participants. Certainly, I had not planned or wished to be acting on behalf of the participants, and it raised dilemmas as to how I could minimise my own control and maximise theirs. I agonised over every decision, which led me into *analysis paralysis*. I came to understand just how much of a responsibility participation can be and how it can therefore be a burden. This understanding made me empathise with the reluctance of staff to fulfil the role of participant I had asked of them.

Recognising that participation can be a burden made me understand how nuanced the act of exercising agency can be and raised the question of whether in some cases *not* participating can be the more empowered act. This added to the complexity of what the roles of facilitator and participant should mean in a participatory design project. Becoming aware of the burden of participation and of the nuances of exercising agency reinscribed for me the importance of participants dictating the terms of their own participation, within a spectrum of possible modes of participation.

*Principles*

• *Non-reductive practice*

Initially I understood the goal of this intervention to be to address a relatively simple problem: poor inter-staff communication at CFP, caused by a lack of communication resources. However, over the course of this research, the participants and I came to understand the problem from multiple partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988), which revealed that the issue of poor communication was but a symptom of a network of interdependent, interrelated problems within the CFP workplace, themselves interrelated with even more complex problems in society and in the participants’ lives outside of work. Redefined from multiple perspectives, the issue of poor inter-staff communication becomes a *wicked problem* (Rittel & Webber, 1973)—difficult to define and impossible to solve definitively. As a result I was unable to offer the tidy,
timely solution that my employers and my designer ego wished for, but instead began the slower, more painstaking process of taking steps to address the causes of the problem.

• **Participation as Negotiation**

Over the course of this research I discovered that participation can’t be taken for granted. When participants resisted the workshop modality I had chosen and when conditions in our workplace did not support that modality, I adopted an approach in which the modes of participation are established via negotiation (Pihkala and Kerasti 2016) rather than dictated by a facilitator armed with established tools and methods. This negotiation was ongoing between people, relationships and circumstances, continuously redefining the problems we were to address and what our roles in the intervention would be. Participants had an active role in this process of redefinition, which helped build trustful relationships between them and myself and make the intervention a truly participatory endeavour.

• **Methods as ‘starting point’ rather than ‘backbone’**

I discovered through this research that a methods-centric view of participatory design vastly oversimplifies the messy, and sometimes confronting, reality, of transitioning to a shared design process. This research has taught me to think of methods as a starting point for (rather than as the backbone of) a participatory design intervention. Inspired by the concept of provotypes (Buur & Larson 2010), when it was impossible to carry out a method in the way it was planned, I came to understand it as a provomethod—a method which can provoke conversation about what does not work and why.

**Skills**

• **Reflection and Reflexivity**

Throughout this research I found that my ability to critically reflect on my practice and to reflexively analyse my own role in that practice, were like master skills in this new shared design practice—the overarching skills that make sense of all the other elements. These skills allowed me to regulate my own positioning through different stages of the work, by zooming in and out. Zooming in refers to being present.
attentively and emotionally with the participants. *Zooming out* refers to reflecting on the practice, and on my own role within it, with enough distance to gain a critical perspective.

• **Negative Capability**

Developing *negative capability*—the ability to be with, and accept, uncertainty and contradiction—was essential to this repositioning. It helped me to zoom out of practice by helping me to set aside the difficult feelings that arose through the course of the intervention. Negative capability was also essential to the participants as the change resulting from the intervention brought up emotions relating to insecurity, such as fear and anxiety. Thus while the aim of the intervention was to provoke change, provoking change also produced an insecurity that might have curtailed their participation in the intervention. I observed that these emotions contributed to people reverting to habitual behaviours even after they had acknowledged those behaviours as unhelpful, which is why I consider negative capability to be a master skill in any design intervention that hopes to facilitate change.

**Moving Forward**

This research has significantly shifted my practice. I gained far broader and deeper understandings through this research than I had hoped for when I began. The participatory design mindset continues to inform everything I do, from the way I define problems and engage with others through the process, to my awareness of the politics that underpin any design project. I am excited for what the future holds for my practice and feel confident in what I can offer an intervention, now that I can handle challenging and emotive situations in a balanced way. Most importantly I believe, in a cautious and qualified way, in the potential of participatory design as a medium for catalysing positive transformative change in a range of contexts in partnership with a range of people. I’m looking forward to exploring and honouring more of these partnerships. In saying that I argue against a methods-centric way of approaching participatory design, in favour of practicing participatory design as a mindset (Sanders, 2013) because this allows for a holistic exploration of a problem from multiple, “partial perspectives” (Haraway, 1988, p.153) and allows both the *process* as well as the *outcome* to be truely participatory.

Looking towards the future I hope to continue exploring how the insights and mindset acquired through this study can continue to shape my practice, especially
work I am undertaking with Indigenous communities to help to facilitate Indigenous-led language renewal as a component of increasing the agency of Aboriginal people. How might a participatory design mindset work alongside Indigenous worldviews? What other skills-sets will I need and what will I learn, beyond negative capability, reflection and reflexivity, as a facilitator and designer when collaborating with Indigenous partners? Thanks to what I have learned during this research process, new and challenging contexts represent an exciting opportunity for my practice to further evolve.

I am also interested to see whether and how I can integrate the participatory mindset I gained through this research back into my digital design practice. I still hold the belief that motivated me to study digital media design - that digital communication technology is a powerful tool and holds great importance for those who use, or struggle to use it. While outside the scope of this master’s research I am interested to explore through my research and practice in the future how the two branches of my design practice, which during this research felt for me to be so different, can come together, and what I can offer participants with this new integrated practice.
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The image of Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation pg. 53, was retrieved from:
https://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/resources/ladder-of-citizen-participation.gif