
Will it Work? Reality Check for Digital Social Innovation Research

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Abstract

Much of HCI research, even if in 'the wild', happens within relatively safe academic or organisational structures. This paper reflects on the challenges and opportunities of applying tools and lessons learned emerged from digital social innovation research outside academia and industry. We do so by introducing the *Officina Fare*' initiative as a case study. *Officina Fare*' is an emergent grass-roots initiative aimed at facilitating the social, cultural and economic revitalisation of a community in Northern Italy through the sharing of space, values, and traditional and innovative 'making'.

Author Keywords

Digital social innovation; shared space; makers culture.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

A recent trend in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) is to take research away from the safety of the labs and embed it in the 'real world'. This move towards 'research in the wild' (RIW) [2] has been motivated by the need to overcome the limitations of lab-based settings in handling real-world complexity. Attempts at RIW to date have been numerous [2] but they are still

Values	Principles
Equality	Work in partnership with all stakeholders as research peers
Mutual-help	Support team building by engaging in cross-cutting tasks
Independence, Responsibility	Promote self-direction, match responsibilities with skills
Freedom, Creativity	Be 'un-disciplined' with methods
Openness to change	Be opportunistic with the unpredictable
Broadmindedness	Attract a variety of views

Table 1. Speedplay six core principles, mapped onto Schwartz's universal values (Schwartz, S. H. (1992) in <http://valuesandframes.org/>)

research-centric: the research questions and methods tend to be defined by the researchers. Over the past few years our research team has been making a serious attempt to go 'beyond RIW' by working with charities and community groups as equal partners in digital social innovation (DSI) research [1]. In this paper we define as 'DSI' those projects whose primary research focus is social change: here, software, artefacts, and tools are viewed as vehicles for change and for exploring societal issues, rather than products or end-solutions [4]. Our research projects work across disciplines (e.g. design, computing, management, medicine) and in partnership with a range of community groups including the homeless, adults with autism, and small island communities [6].

To negotiate with these challenging research environments the team has developed and applied an innovation management framework, Speedplay [4], which integrates methods and principles drawn from participatory design, action research, management and agile development. Speedplay follows a technology mediated and values-based enquiry to facilitate equal participation by academics and non-academics in DSI research (see Table 1). This paper reports on the application of our framework outside academia and concludes with a brief reflection on computer mediated communication in community-based intergenerational initiatives. As a case study we present *Officina Fare*¹, a grass-roots initiative aimed at re-vitalising [5] the economic, social and cultural fibre of a Northern Italy community through space, skill and resource sharing.

¹ www.officinafare.org

Background

The *Officina* (Fig. 1) is a family-owned workshop based in a medium-sized town less than fifteen miles from Milan, Italy. The workshop consists of a 500mq open space with two annex studios and a terrace on the first floor. It was the site of a family business run by metalworkers and mechanical engineers who have recently retired. The workshop is part of a living space that includes a traditional residential building comprising eight apartments, two offices and a large garden with centenary trees right in the middle of an urban space. With historical records dating back to the 19th century, this site grew, part organically part by design (Figure 2), from a small dwelling with a working shed, a barn, and an orchard into a shared living and working place for families from various professional, cultural and ethnical backgrounds.

There are currently 20 people living in the residential building (3-85y.o.). The site is still family owned and some of the tenants have been living there for more than 50 years. Due to the economic and social 'change of climate', this place is now at a turning point: the house needs maintenance, the workshop needs repair and the owners – now all retired – are challenged by the pace of change, heavy taxes and age-related health issues. One of the authors was born into this family, but left Italy several years ago. Less than a year ago, in collaboration with her brother also no longer living in the area, she organised a family 'all-hands' meeting to gain a shared understanding of the situation and explore a way forward.

Work in Progress

The meeting, the first of this kind in the family, was attended by the five 'Elders', who own the place, and



Figure 1. Detail of the Officina roof structure built in the late 1940s. The workshop was the economic, productive 'engine' of the site till five years ago.

their offspring. The aim was to come up with a shared vision for the place. The objectives were, firstly, to highlight known facts and figures (e.g. money in-out), then to outline previously considered options, and finally to openly share ideas for the future.

Sharing Constraints and Creating a Common Vision

One thing is to facilitate discussion with members of an external community; another is to facilitate it with your own extended family. A few lessons learned from DIS research proved invaluable for facilitating a constructive debate: firstly, the importance of sharing and collectively understanding known constraints (e.g. facts and figures); secondly, the effectiveness of agreeing on simple discussion rules to ensure an equal say to everyone (e.g. a 3min of 'undisturbed speech' for each participant) and to promote creative problem solving (e.g. De Bono's rule of 'no rules' [3]). Most importantly, it had to be made clear that, given the complexity of the situation, the aim of the discussion was not to find a 'solution' but to come up with a shared vision for the future of the place.

From Vision to Roadmap

At the meeting we all agreed that quality of life comes before money, and that the site must offer a stimulating environment for the new generations and "a fulfilling and socially connected life" for those who built it. More specifically, the vision is for the Officina to become a shared production space for 'ingenious making', where traditional craftsmanship meets digital making and innovative thinking. In other words, the Officina is to bounce back as an economically viable and socially vibrant production engine. 'Plan A', is hence about injecting new energy into the workshop by opening it up to a variety of people and organisations

who share similar values of collaboration and freedom of experimentation. This vision is grounded in family values of openness, creativity and co-operation, but is constantly challenged by the current economic climate, heavy bureaucratic structures and aggressive tax regimes. One of the 'easy' options that had been considered in the past was indeed the sale of the property to a third party developer and "go to live somewhere else". This view still crops up but it is now acknowledged as 'Plan Z', a potentially valid plan if nothing else works out in the next two years.

Opening Roadmaps through Design

The next step involves communicating the vision and its roadmap to individuals and organisations that have the skills, interest and motivation to make it happen. In other words: the vision needs a visual identity and the roadmap needs a focal point to motivate action [4]. Through family connections we approached two sympathetic young typographers, who created the Officina's visual identity through a co-design process inspired by digital design and traditional typographic methods (Fig. 3). EXPO2105, the World Exposition to be held in Milan this year, is our first focal point and is being tackled along two parallel tracks. Firstly, a local track with the organization of a two-day 'makers event' in collaboration with artisans, innovators and makers; and second, an external track offering the workshop as an exhibition space during Expo. The outcome for both tracks is still open-ended and is supported by two design artefacts: the map of the current structure and a feasibility study of future options for the space.

Sustaining Relationships: The Community 'Curators'

The project pace is now ramping up as well as its challenges, which include: managing expectations,

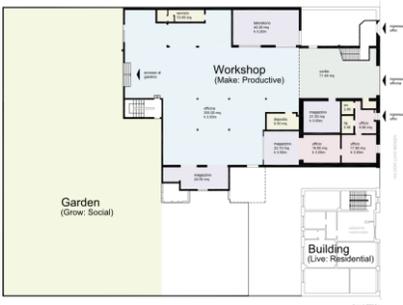


Figure 2. The site ground floor level and its 3 main components: workshop, residential building, and garden. The vision has always been for the site to be a place for people to 'live, grow, and make' together in the respect of their individuality. The structure was inspired by the architecture of the Arab courtyards and Italian 'Cascine'

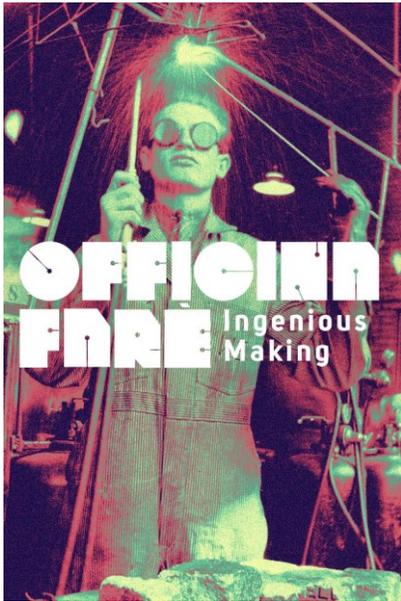


Figure 3. Officina Fare' visual identity co-designed by mixing digital design with traditional typography.



Figure 4. Our Elders explain their uses and frustrations of mobile phone communication.

pace-keeping, and sustaining geographically dispersed relationships. Our strategy is to take small steps at the time, accept setbacks and never take risks that can harm the most vulnerable. As in most socially transformative initiatives, no matter how flat the community structure is, there will be always a person whose primary task is to motivate the partnership, sharpen the vision, coordinate the efforts and create a space for all to make meaningful contributions. Holford-Lovell, founder of Fleet-Collective, a Scotland-based community of creative enterprises, poignantly refers to this role as a 'curator'.

Digital Technology and Human Communication

Finally, we share a reflection on the role of computer mediated communication for sustaining relationships and knowledge-sharing processes from the 'curator' perspective. Based on a nine-month observation and practice with the Officina community of approximately fifty people, it seems that age is one of the most important factors in determining the digital communication platform of choice: email has so far been the most effective and 'age-neutral' communication medium "*it's like writing a letter*". In addition, its asynchronous nature relieves from the instant-reply pressure typical of internet based and mobile messaging systems. Social network platforms, such as Facebook are seen as the default option for community 'websites', whilst younger generations prefer publishing on platforms such as Tumblr and, on less, on Instagram as it requires constant updates and engagement effort to retain audience interest. File sharing systems, such as Dropbox, are invaluable for working with young professionals, but some worry about intellectual property risks. The older generation feels at ease with Skype "*a modern intercom*", but finds

text messaging frustrating and smartphones impenetrable (Fig. 4).

Conclusions and Thanks

Officina Fare' is a civic initiative underpinned by an explicit collective desire to serve as a pilot and future exemplar for the re-generation of economies on the 'edge' of large urban centres such as Milan. The vision is to do so by supporting processes of 'ingenious making' through the design of a shared physical space and the creation of networks of highly skilled people from different backgrounds but with similar values. Many thanks to *PRR Architect Studio*, *Associazione Mani in Arte*, and *Quaderni di Carattere* for being so enthusiastically supportive of this vision.

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