Catalysing Agency
Giles Lane, Frederik Lesage and Hazem Taguri
Why a Catalyst?

The role of the Catalyst will perhaps be most effective in creating new opportunities to explore unfamiliar or uncomfortable aspects of their work.

The concept of the engagement Catalyst is to bring a certain objective capability to establish a dialogue with different stakeholders across the university and in the margins of CARET's core activity yet is able to introduce new people and connections by them, bringing them into contact with new people, ideas and ways of working.

The Catalyst's view from the periphery of day-to-day activities could be a highly useful perspective for recognising and highlighting when, for instance, working practices need to coordinate the activities of groups of people. How can this tension be kept taut and productive without slackening and becoming unproductive? It seemed to us that the method (Method Stack, approach (Project Account), observations and insights (Drawing Insight) and final recommendation (Catalysing Agency), Agencies of Engagement) is introduced into the system the water droplets join together and flow down the furrow of the leaf to the roots, thus nourishing the plant. We have the opportunity to communicate her/his own insights to CARET rather than trying to deliver work that is catered towards any perceived notion of what the host organisation wants. But most importantly, the Catalyst should be able to identify and work closely with CARET's staff (and be appreciated and respected for their efforts). This is what we would characterise as slackness in the tension between unconventional rather than someone who purely seeks to practice change.

The Catalyst is therefore to initiate bi-directional fluid processes and infrastructural system. The role of the Catalyst is therefore to initiate co-creative co-design. To keep the tension taut.

Catalysing Agency proposes a novel process for engaging with users and groups to inform co-design practices in software development for collaboration tools and services. It is the culmination of a research project exploring groups and group behaviours within the context of the University of Cambridge and its institutional IT systems. The project has been a collaboration between Proboscis, the Centre for Applied Research in Education Technologies (CARET) and Crucible. It is one of four books by Proboscis outlining the methods (Method Stack), approach (Project Account), observations and insights (Drawing Insight) and final recommendation (Catalysing Agency). Agencies of Engagement - this series of four books is the project’s public output.

Catalysing Agency explores the opportunity and requisites for a new kind of resource that software development groups such as CARET could make use of to precipitate change in their working practices. This resource, described as a Catalyst, arises out of our observations and insights into interactions between people and systems garnered on this research project.

During the final Reflection phase of the research, it became apparent that the key issue at the heart of the question of understanding groups, group behaviours, IT systems, collaboration and software development was the tension between the fluid processes that people use to carry out activities in their everyday lives and the structures and systems needed to coordinate the activities of groups of people. How can this tension be kept taut and productive without slackening and becoming unproductive? It seemed to us that this too often in "user centred design" practices that the abstraction of people and situations into personas and stereotypes bleed out the depth and complexity of their needs and requirements. This is what we would characterise as slackness in the tension between fluid process and infrastructural system. The role of the Catalyst is therefore to initiate bi-directional agency in engagement between designers and the people who use, or could be using, their tools, stimulating the kind of rich dialogue for collaboration and co-creative co-design. To keep the tension taut.

This book is part discussion of the concept of the Catalyst and part recipe for making this concept actionable.

Giles Lane, Frederik Lesage and Hazem Tagiuri Illustrated by Mandy Tang
Catalyst Principles

• The Catalyst should be a person, not a process.
• The Catalyst should be a collaborator not a staff member.
• The Catalyst should be someone whose practice seems unconventional in relation to the role rather than someone who purely seeks to practice unconventionality.
• The Catalyst should be comfortable initiating explorations with CARET and their collaborators into unfamiliar or uncomfortable aspects of their work.
• The Catalyst should be willing and able to guide the process past the initial shock of interdisciplinary exchange between different stakeholders and on towards productive forms of dialogue.
• The Catalyst should be able to communicate her/his own insights rather than trying to deliver work that is catered towards CARET.

What Kind of Catalyst?

One of the underpinning assumptions informing our approach to this research is that using “personas” or “categories of users” to classify different potential collaborators for CARET can undermine the richness of possible engagements between the people who live or work at the University of Cambridge and the members of CARET. Such an approach can often lead to formulaic assumptions that constrain the experimental process and minimizes the significance of the process of discovery that is the very essence of collaborative exchanges.

The following pages critically examine two different conceptualisations of personas that might provide preliminary descriptions of a Catalyst and conclude with a discussion of how the problems identified with these roles are addressed in Proboscis’ conceptualisation of the Catalyst.

The Maverick

The term maverick is often used in everyday speech to refer to people who do not follow conventional wisdom. The origin of the term is often attributed to an American rancher by the family name of Maverick who refused to brand his cattle. Other ranchers who would encounter these unbranded cattle would refer to them as mavericks. A more sociologically informed definition of maverick comes to us from Howard S. Becker’s Art Worlds (1982). For Becker, all social worlds that involve the production, distribution and appreciation of symbolic goods can be defined as art worlds. Many different people work in these social worlds and, in most cases, have little social contact with each other. What makes coordination of activities between all of these disparate people are sets of conventions – “a system… embodied in equipment, materials, training, available facilities and sites, systems of notation and the like…” (Becker 1982: 32). As part of his research, Becker also identifies a number of different roles that people play within these social worlds in relation to conventions. The first is the expert, someone who knows and uses conventions very well in a prestigious art world. The second is the craftsmen, someone who knows and uses conventions in an art world that is not recognised as being prestigious by others. The third role is that of the maverick. For Becker, the maverick is someone who works within one of these art worlds, be it prestigious or not, but who does not follow one or more of its established conventions.

Based on the above definition, a maverick may well fit the description of the Catalyst: someone who does not work with familiar conventions, seeks out alternative uses or...
of new ideas, people, methods, tools and services that could be of benefit to CARET.

These indicate the kind of qualities that a person would need to be able to keep abreast of the needs and networker of people. The ability to make new connections and associations with good communicators gives a keener barometer of new experiences and developments. Keen learners, interested in new things and experiences and, as such, be able to be a barometer for CARET indicating fruitful opportunities on the horizon.

The Catalyst role is personified as a Figurative – a person or thing that precipitates an event. In many disciplines, the catalyst is understood in the same way: a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change.

**The Trickster**

The symbol of the trickster or coyote has been used in technoculture literature to discuss alternative epistemologies that could challenge established technological and scientific practices. Inspired by the work of Donna Haraway (The Cyborg Manifesto, 1991), the trickster role is deployed as an ironic or playful figure to explore how people who are traditionally overlooked or oppressed by scientific disciplines can abandon the quest for mastery “but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while [they] will be hoodwinked” (Bart, 1991). The approach emphasises subverting the established order through hybridity or mutation. Its ties to mythology also emphasise a symbolic and aesthetic dimension: the trickster approach is about exploring the pleasures of free play. It has been used in a number of contexts from feminist interpretations of information technologies to alternative environmentalist movements.

designs, and therefore challenges the established notions of how an organisation such as CARET should conduct its research activities. But the problem with selecting a Catalyst based on the maverick persona is that this person’s practice and personality is de facto premised on an opposition to established sets of conventions. The maverick works at the periphery of her/his social world. She/he is therefore not the best candidate for bringing together two or more social worlds.

While the maverick may in some cases bring about innovation, Becker warns us that their work can more often than not lead to misunderstandings or isolation. With this in mind, a maverick candidate for the Catalyst may not produce outcomes that create the direct engagement with users and groups which has been identified as critical to the process of developing tools and services for collaboration.

The person would be a keen learner, willing to try out and explore methods, tools and services, interested in new things and experiences and, as such, be able to be a barometer for CARET indicating fruitful opportunities on the horizon.
Experience

The following are a list of key areas that a potential Catalyst should be able to demonstrate evidence of achievement in from their previous experience.

Networking
Being able to demonstrate a wide network of contacts across different disciplines and sectors.

Communications
Being able to demonstrate an ability to communicate effectively across disciplines and sectors.

Brokering relationships
Being able to demonstrate a prior example of initiating collaborations involving people from different disciplines and sectors.

Boundary crossing
Being able to show prior work that demonstrates a bringing together of influences from different disciplines and sectors.

Being people together
Being able to show evidence of an ability to organise and facilitate collaborative workshops, meetings, charettes and exercises.

Objective observation
Being able to show that they can report on activities from an objective perspective, for instance, using methods drawn from anthropology and ethnography.

Ability to cope with risk and uncertainty
Being able to demonstrate prior examples of projects involving risk and uncertainty, explaining how they coped with them.

Active research interest
Being able to show an informed enthusiasm for discovering new opportunities, methods and practices.

person is not afraid to risk crossing different disciplinary boundaries (even those that are unfamiliar) and to explore how different playful combinations of interests and ideas can produce unanticipated results. Just as suggested in the figurative definition of the term Catalyst written above, both are persons who could precipitate change. The common trait between the two that is significant for the Catalyst role is their ability to propel CARET and those they are working with to move forwards. The right person will need to bring people together, skirting multiple boundaries, whilst inspiring trust, assuring mutual gain, and tending to any conflicts that arise.

The challenge for CARET is therefore to design a process that creates the right conditions to nurture these kinds of personas while also ensuring that CARET is able to provide “uncommon insights” not normally revealed through current working practices, providing insights which inform the success and influence of community facilitation and practices.

The above discussion also points to potential difficulties that these types of personas face as part of their practice. Their very strengths are the source of their limitations: working on the boundaries often means staying on those boundaries, blurring boundaries can produce fortuitous connections but also complex conflicts.

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