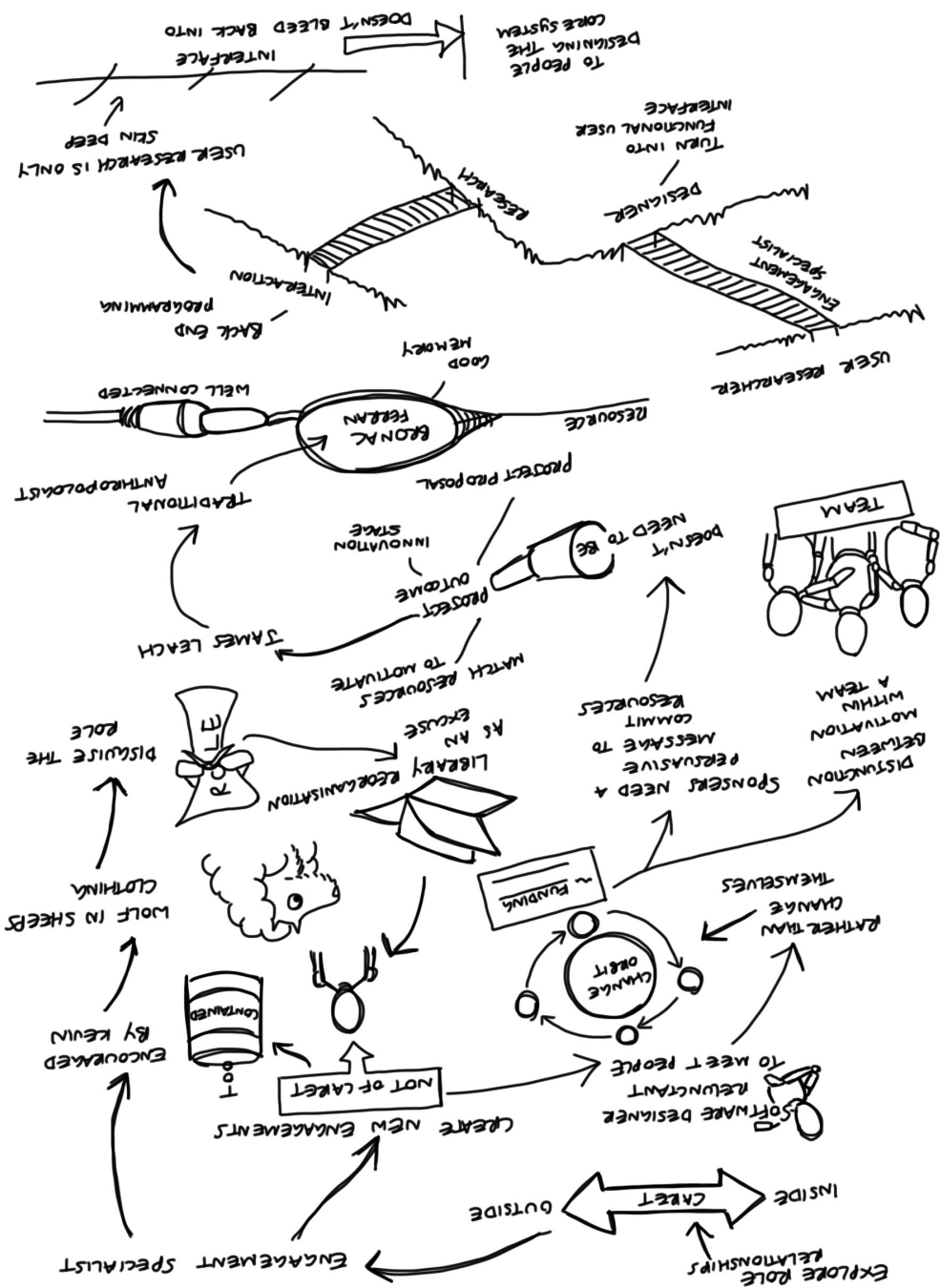


Handy Tang 26/09/2011 CATALYST REFLECTION MEETING 4/7 ∞ proboscis



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# Catalysing Agency

Giles Lane, Frederik Lesage and Hazem Tagiuri



The role of the Catalyst will perhaps be most effective in creating new opportunities to establish a dialogue with different stakeholders across the university and in *precipitating change*, using their ability to bring people into new configurations and inspiring them to explore unfamiliar or uncomfortable aspects of their work.

The key to identifying the right person for this role would be to choose someone whose practice *seems* unconventional rather than someone who purely seeks to practice unconventionality. They should also be willing and able to guide the process past the initial shock of the interdisciplinary exchange between different stakeholders and on towards productive forms of dialogue. But most importantly, the Catalyst should be able 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.

We believe that the Catalyst should not be a staff member so much as a collaborator – able to identify and work closely with CARET’s staff (and be appreciated and respected 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 become stale or there is an over-reliance on particular user groups for testing concepts and prototypes.

The concept of the engagement Catalyst is to bring a certain objective capability to an organisation such as CARET. The Catalyst would be someone who operates on the margins of CARET’s core activity yet is able to introduce new people and connections and to help facilitate new creative co-design processes into CARET’s working practice. This person is neither an ‘interaction designer’ nor a ‘user researcher’, but more likely to have a background in community engagement or social practice.

“Each droplet of water resting on the leaves of the plant is an individual held together by a skin of surface tension with no idea that other water droplets exist. It will eventually evaporate and return to the water cycle. But if a bit of energy 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 be the change agents that disturb the leaves.”

Chris Luebke, *Drivers of Change* (Arup Foresight 2006)

## Why a Catalyst?

## Introduction

*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 instrutures 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 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.

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Illustrated by Mandy Tang



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http://bkltr.it/voyFhE





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 not follow one or more of its established conventions.

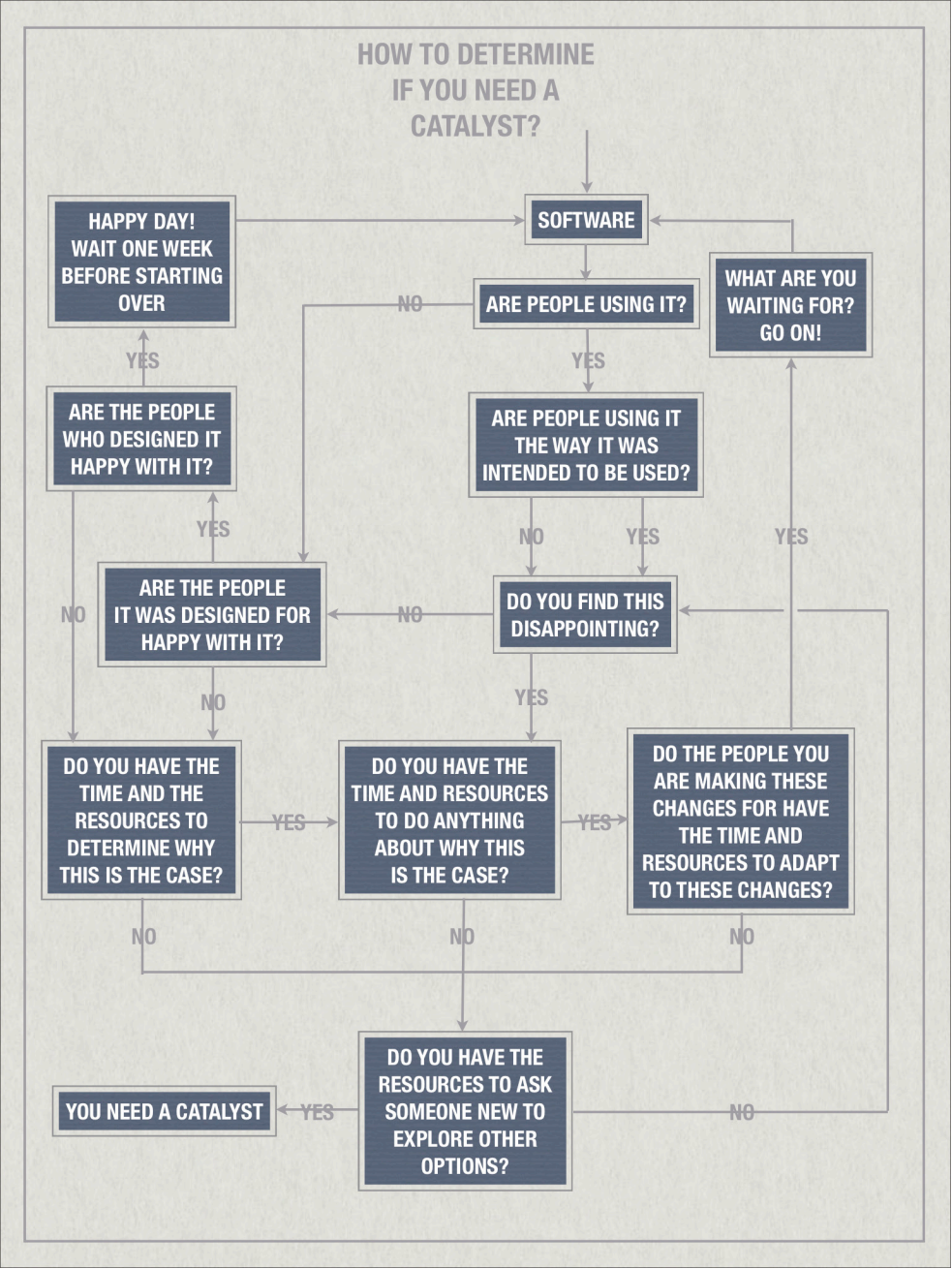
someone who works within one of these art worlds, be it prestigious or not, but who does prestigious by others. The third role is that of the maverick. For Becker, the maverick is someone who knows and uses conventions in an art world that is not recognised as being and uses conventions very well in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

## The Maverick

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.

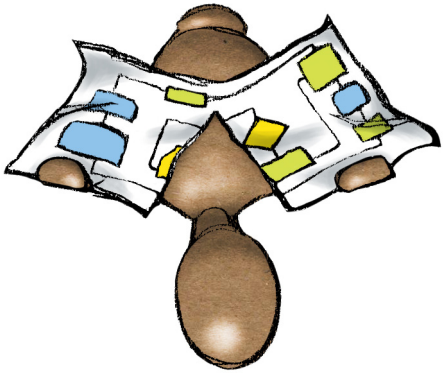
One of the underpinning assumptions informing our approach to this research is that using “personas” or “categories of users” to classify different potential collaborators for CARET can undermine the richness of possible engagements between the people who live or work at the University of Cambridge and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

## What kind of Catalyst?



An attempt to describe the process of determining whether you need an engagement catalyst, after Georges Perec’s *The Art & craft of approaching your head of department to submit a request for a raise* (1968, trans D. Bellos, Vintage Classics 2011)

## Catalyst Principles

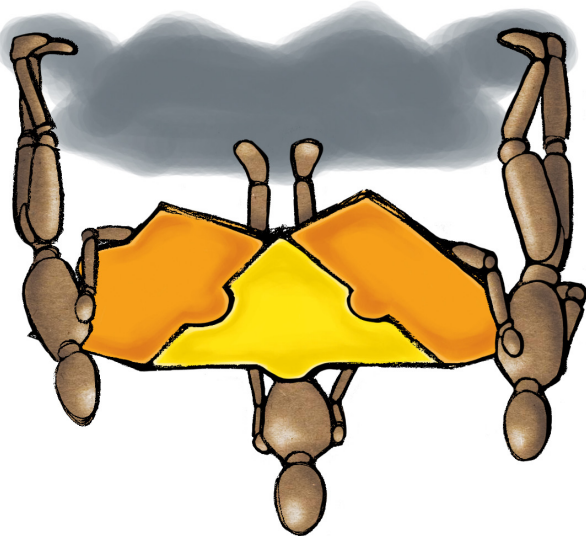


- The Catalyst should be a person, not a process.
- The Catalyst should be a collaborator not a staff member.
- The Catalyst should be someone whose practice *seems* unconventional in relation to the role rather than someone who purely *seeks to practice* unconventionality
- The Catalyst should be comfortable 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.

The above discussion has developed two different personas that may provide clues as to what kind of person would best suit a Catalyst role. Together, the maverick and the trickster cover a number of desirable traits: the maverick's strengths include the desire to discover new or unexpected tools and resources, an openness to testing out new ideas, as well as the confidence to work in counterintuitive ways and to question normative assumptions of "how things are usually done". The trickster is keen to "mix things up" by bringing together different disciplines, motivations and situations. This type of

"Noun – a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change.  
Figurative – a person or thing that precipitates an event"

## The Catalyst



ambivalent to the resulting arrangement. In our context, this suggests that by combining different people and objects from different social worlds, the trickster also runs the risk of producing unintended outcomes that are not fully under the control of the person who initiated the exchange in the first place. This risk can lead to both fortuitous outcomes and more challenging outcomes such as tensions or disagreements that may harm external (as well as internal) relationships. In such cases, the trickster candidate for the Catalyst may be more concerned with blurring boundaries and creating disjuncture than with finding ways to sift through the resulting mixture to achieve co-creative possibilities.

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 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” (Ibid: 199). 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.

As a potentially desirable personality trait in the context of the Catalyst, the trickster is someone who has the confidence and daring to question underlying assumptions and who playfully subverts the status quo by confusing the boundaries between the different social, cultural and technological arrangements. If the maverick is defined by how she/ he does things differently from the rest of one social world, the trickster is defined by how she/he is able to blend the properties of different social worlds in unexpected ways.

This is a significant distinction because this hybridity requires that the trickster works between different groups, that they reach out and find different people to produce the desired change. Stimulating such a hybrid exchange between CARET and other groups in and around Cambridge is a key aspect of the Catalyst role. But while there may be benefits to this hybrid epistemology, Haraway warns us that the trickster of myth is often

## Personal Qualities

We have grouped the kind of personal qualities that would be desirable in an engagement catalyst into three areas, receptive, inspiring and active. A suitable catalyst would ideally combine some, if not all, of these qualities in their personality and behaviour, balancing all three but not lacking qualities in any one area.

### Receptive

#### openness

#### good listener

#### self-effacing, humility

#### empathic

These indicate the kind of qualities a person would need to be receptive to the needs and concerns of others, both within and outside of CARET. Engaging others is a delicate process that is most effective when people feel that their concerns and interests are being included in any shared process. Openness to new ideas and directions requires being good at listening to others, as well as a sense of humility and empathy. Being self-effacing can also be an excellent way to encourage others to open up and share.

### Inspiring

#### charismatic

#### quietly confident

#### able to inspire trust

#### good communicator

These indicate the kind of qualities that a person would need to be an effective motivator and networker of people. The ability to make new connections and associations with people in different areas of the university is key to brokering new relationships that bring insight and value to the co-design process. To achieve this the ideal person would combine personal charisma with a quiet confidence that can inspire trust in others. They must also have good communication skills to be able to engage new people with the ideas and purpose behind any new collaborative processes.

### Active

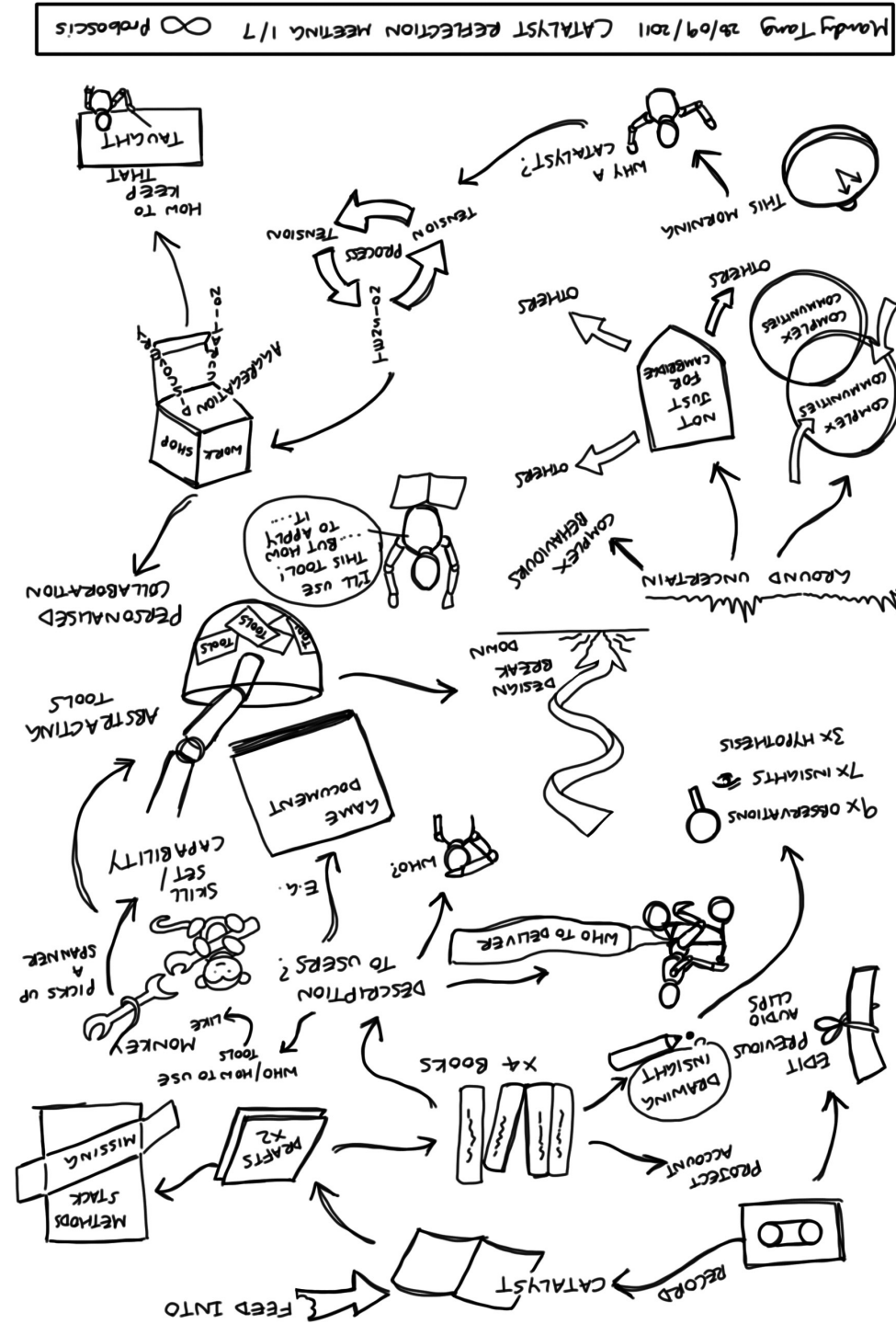
#### keen learner

#### interested in new experiences

#### keen barometer

These indicate the kind of qualities that a person would need to be able to keep abreast of new ideas, people, methods, tools and services that could be of benefit to CARET.





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 collaborate with to explore unfamiliar or uncomfortable aspects of their work.

But 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.

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 draw insights from the engagement and co-design practices initiated by the Catalyst. Part of the solution would be to choose someone whose practice seems unconventional in relation to the commission rather than someone who purely seeks to practice unconventionality. The potential candidate should also be willing and able to guide the process past the initial shock of the interdisciplinary exchange between different stakeholders and on towards productive forms of dialogue.

But most importantly, the Catalyst should be able to communicate her/his own insights rather than trying to deliver work that is catered towards CARET. And the host organisation should not try to harness the results of the works of the Catalyst so much as they should use their interventions as an opportunity to establish a dialogue with different stakeholders, not least the Catalyst himself.

## What Would a Catalyst do?

### Tasks

The primary tasks a Catalyst would need to perform can be categorised into three types of action.

#### Observing

- Identify needs and concerns of individuals and / or groups
- Review methods and practices to avoid reliance on usual suspects and isolating practices:
- Map relationships across university to reveal new opportunities

Providing insights which inform the success and influence of community facilitation and co-design, is an essential behaviour of a potential Catalyst. The right person will need to work with CARET, its individual members and the groups they are involved with, to provide “uncommon insights” not normally revealed through current working practices, using objective observation and evaluation of methods.

#### Discovery

- Seek out gatekeepers and champions, and network them together
- Build new links and relationships
- Discover emerging / suitable tools, services and methods

CARET is likely to be mostly engrossed in immediate projects, and therefore not able to constantly look for new points on an ever shifting horizon. A Catalyst would need to seek out new – and the most appropriate – tools, services, methods and working opportunities as they arise, as well as individuals that can serve to amplify CARET’s reach and standing, potentially escorting them into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory.

#### Brokering

- Gather people together and pull strands behind the scenes
- Act as a mediator, balancing multiple interests
- Create spaces for dialogue and co-discovery

A crucial function of the catalyst role is the act of mediating – soliciting and brokering relationships, as well as managing them, and securing resources and spaces that enable 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.

## 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.

### Bring 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



