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Prototyping Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design
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Prototyping Collaboration

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Interdisciplinary collaboration is critical to addressing systemic challenges. Given the importance of such partnerships, is it surprising that designers, academics, and practitioners are rarely given a chance to practice how they might work across disciplinary boundaries. In this workshop, participants will briefly share their research to explore potential connections and highlight the differences between transactional and relational interdisciplinary collaboration frameworks. Through structured activities, participants will explore constituent elements of partnerships, including collaborative foundations, power relationships, language and means of expression, approaches to risk, products of the collaboration, and the potential for transformative outcomes. These attributes help distinguish between transactional and relational interdisciplinary collaboration and offer participants language and frameworks that can be used to construct more effective cultures of collaboration.

Overview

The goal of this workshop is to give participants a chance to quickly practice two types of interdisciplinary collaboration. After a brief five-minute introduction, participants are divided into two groups, and each group is further divided into pairs. The participants will then answer a series of questions about their research that will serve as the foundation for potential collaborations. The questions will be structured in such a way as to help tease out transactional and relational elements of the participants' work. In

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addition, the framing will help keep the descriptions of projects concise and shareable. After the pairs have shared their answers, each group will be given separate instructions. One group will be asked to brainstorm collaborations based on a transactional approach to interdisciplinary collaboration, while the other group will be asked to brainstorm relational approaches. The output from these ideation sessions will be quickly shared and followed by a facilitated discussion.

Agenda

1. Opening, including introductions and scene setting (5 minutes)
2. Activity (20 minutes)
3. Discussion (5 minutes)

This workshop relates most closely to the Methods track. Interdisciplinary collaboration is often taken for granted, yet for all its ubiquity, the elements that make it up are rarely explored in depth. Systemic design requires that we devote attention to the latent elements of collaborations so that we can form healthy partnerships that offer the greatest generative potential.

The workshop is designed to be held in person. The benefit of this is that as the facilitator, I will more easily be able to scan the room and get a sense of how each pairing is interacting. The short time for the workshop would make that very difficult to do in an online setting. That said, it may be possible to have some online component, but that would need to be in addition to the in-person portion.

Workshop attributes

The table provides an overview of the attributes highlighted through the questions and exercises.

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TABLE: ATTRIBUTES

Attribute	Relational Interdisciplinary Collaboration	Transactional Interdisciplinary Collaboration
Collaborative Foundation – Basis for the collaboration	Common goals or values explored together, based in part on the relationship between collaborators	Transactions and transmissions (contractor and client)
Power Relationships	Collaborators share power and control	Client has authority over contractor
Language/Mean of Communication	Language of disciplines used with translation, enhanced by literary and narrative devices	Standards and specifications formalize communications
Approach to Risk	Risk of the undertaking is accepted as an element of participation. Undertakers may incur risk by working outside disciplinary bounds	Risk is reduced whenever possible and is managed in the terms and conditions of the contract
Product of the Collaboration	Deeper insight into the participant's own and the other discipline. Possibly new languages, concepts, and products	Device, system, or result as specified in contract
Potential for Transformative Outcomes	Potential may exist because of the process itself as well as any specific work products. Openness to different perspectives may lead to outcomes that surprise collaborators	Potential resides primarily in the product itself rather than the process by which it was built. Because collaborators seek to “retire” risk, unexpected outcomes may be much less likely