Co-designing time to chat, to reflect, to get it right: Young designers learn from older adults co-creating toolkits for peer-to-peer information sessions.

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ABSTRACT Staying active later in life is considered important for our health. Government bodies create programs encouraging seniors to remain active and independent for maintaining quality of life. Typically, councils engage design studios to design active ageing programs where the designer/client interaction is paramount. Interest in co-designing with rather than for end-users is growing, yet some claim it takes too long or does not lead to the desired results. This is also a challenge when included in a one semester university course for design students. This study aimed to find out what happens when taking the time to co-design. Strategies were co-created across two cases with two local councils briefing the students on 1) personalized active ageing plans and 2) navigating the aged care system. Three co-design workshops were held with 22 seniors and 26 Master of Design students from an Australian university, over 12 weeks with time for design, analysis and reflection. The findings show mutual surprise from the design students and the older adults as they share stories from their own perspectives. First, the design students reflected on how time needs to be negotiated in co-design when older adults enjoy taking their time and chat and young designers are under time pressure. Second, the design students were surprised that is was these unplanned conversations that led to design ideas. The older adults were surprised at the effort invested in the co-design activities for them and how thought provoking and fun the activities were. We argue co-designing independent ageing solutions with designers and seniors is indeed a good investment of time. We conclude that also allowing the space for storytelling, and reflection, leads to empathy and mutual learning for young designers to understand older adults and for robust design responses to emerge.

Keywords: Co-design, design education, ageing-well, participatory design
Introduction

Remaining independent and healthy and making choices to live in one’s own home for as long as possible is not an option anymore, it is an important part of the Australian Government and local council’s agenda. Much information resources aim to support older adults plan for active aging and their own aged care. However, these resources - often Websites - are often fragmented, and difficult to navigate. Partly older adults do not know where to start, are unaware of available resources or avoid the topics around ageing altogether. This paper presents two cases with local council briefs: (1) Planning for aged care and navigating the aged care system and (2) active ageing which includes a range of offers such as creative, learning, and physical activities. Students were challenged to co-design toolkits for peer-to-peer sessions on individual active ageing and aged-care strategies. Similarities were to find out about older adults’ information needs and tools necessary to achieve these needs. Peer-to–peer support services are seen as one option to help people to access the right information and point to relevant resources. Research shows that peer educator programs leads to an increase in health literacy and health benefits, but their overall effectiveness is inconclusive (Peel and Warburton 2009; Seymour et al 2011). One early study suggests that the peer education model was providing nutrition information to a broader sector of the senior population than public health promotion (Lynde 1992). Reports on My Aged Care system recommend to explore peer-to-peer support to ensure people get support to navigate a complex system and achieve consumer directed care (Elliott et al. 2016). While research provides a positive picture of peer education models - in particular in breaking down communication barriers, reaching marginalized groups and being sustainable - it is critical to provide training and support to the volunteers (Peel and Warburton 2009). We suggest that tools to support volunteers in their role as peer educators needs careful consideration. Volunteers need to be equipped with the right toolkits to be able to inspire their peers to be actively engaged in their personal health. We believe co-design is a promising approach to create these types of toolkits.

Co-design is a design process, where all stakeholder are included in the design process to ensure user needs are met (Taffe 2015). The role of the user is no longer ‘user as subject’, but being in partnership with the designer (Sanders and Stappers 2008, p.1). Co-design is beneficial for designers, giving unique insights into user needs and preferences. The concept of co-designing with end-users can be challenging for both designers and end-users. However, when it is carefully organized and implemented, co-design workshops can result in a sustainable outcome and enhance quality of life (Sanders and Stappers 2008).

Study aims

Aged care project: The aim was to assist people needing aged care support to make informed choices about their future and to provide a trusted source of information, provided by people with empathy for the person’s situation and unconstrained by bureaucratic requirements.
Active ageing project: Besides the objective to provide information on health and wellbeing opportunities for older adults one aim was to increase the digital literacy of seniors for them to access an online hub. This hub is key to finding suitable local health and wellbeing information.

Both projects aim to (i) convey information on independent ageing an future planning, (ii) maintain an active lifestyle for the older person, (iii) tailor the mass of services offered into a personal journey and (iv) use peer-to-peer sessions to achieve these goals. While co-design is commonly used as a process to create appropriate solutions, in our study the final co-design activities constitute the solution to create the individual active ageing/aged care plans in the peer-to-peer sessions.

Co-design activities

The design students involved were from diverse discipline backgrounds including communication digital media, interior, and product design in mixed-disciplined groups of 3-5 students to create the following:

- Co-design toolkits to attract and engage older adults.
- Space designs for the sessions
- Branding the volunteer peer-to-peer program.

In total there were 26 students in 8 teams. Here we report on the outcomes of two teams. Across the workshops the students co-designed with 22 older adults – a combination of older adults from the community, future peer-to-peer volunteers and members of an ageing committee.

Students started to create motivational models with functional, quality and emotional goals based on the approach of Sterling and Taveter (2009) extended by Marshall (2014). They predicted what the final solution should ‘do’, how it should ‘be’ and make users ‘feel’. These prioritized goal tables were the basis for creating co-design activities. For example goals for the aged care domain included ‘provide clear information’, ‘be supportive’, ‘feel comfortable’. Figure 1 shows the co-design process followed by the students.

![Figure 1. Co-design process (student report 2)](image)

Workshop one took place in a university classroom. As the prospective peer-to-peer sessions were to take place in libraries and neighbourhood houses the second workshops were held in the local library and in a council community centre. The final reflections and presentations took place at the university.
Co-design Workshop 1. The materials included an ‘information session invitation’ worksheet to identify key problems people have navigating the aged care system. The students decided ‘it would get people thinking about what they wanted most from the service, conversing about issues and create useful information artefacts in the process’ [student report 1]. Another activity concerned information sources (e.g. internet versus phone).

Student Reflections on Outcomes. Responses were concerning trust and unscrupulous operators who seek to take advantage of elderly people. This suggests that trustworthiness and honesty needs to be a design consideration. Another response concerned the fragmented information from different sources (figure 2). Overall participants were savvy to use the internet, but it was not always their first preference. They explained that a phone call can be more efficient than internet searches as it navigates complexity. A weakness in the activities was not enough consideration of participants who knew nothing about the aged care system, thus making it difficult for them to engage.

Time was an issue for people wanting to share their experiences. Overall the activity was versatile creating rich conversations but could have been more fun. One student commented:

‘I was happy with my activity because it encouraged people to think and come up with ideas about problems and how to reach people and not just ask them about their preferences. […] A gentleman thanked me afterwards […] he felt he was actually involved in co-design and not just doing a random task.’ [Student report 1]

Co-design Workshop 2. Based on these results the team focused on supporting people obtain a Home Care Package. An opportunity was to incorporate different circumstances and how people feel at various stages of the process into a design solution that could identify and encourage support when it is most needed as well as inform. The aim was to create something where people would feel less ‘lost’ and more ‘comfortable’ and ‘trusting’ in the process. Journey Mapping is often used to understand how customers interact with services whilst accomplishing a goal (Rosenbaum et al 2017). Here it was important to capture segments in the journey where people encounter stress to
consider adding more support. To do this the students incorporated basic empathy mapping using written comments and emotions to get feedback on how older adults feel and what they would do as they progressed through the journeys’ stages.

![Image of journey map]

**Final Design Concept.** The idea started as a simple journey map to assist users but developed into a prototype for the volunteers and older adults to be used in the peer-to-peer session as it proved to be effective, identifying the difficult stages of the process. The conversations prompted by the map proved to be the most important. The final kit includes simplified user co-design activity materials as well as a detailed Home Care Package Journey Map template (figure 4) designed to guide the conversation and a leaflet for the person to take home as a record of the session.

**Home Care Package Journey Map**

![Image of detailed journey map]

**Figure 4. Prototype for Home Care Package Journey Map [student report 1]**
Co-design Workshop 1. One co-design activity called ‘the three monkeys’, invited participants to be immersed in being deaf, blind or mute to understand how information is conveyed in different scenarios. Three participants took part to pass along a ‘message’. Participant one (blindfolded) described an object to participant two (wearing a face mask), acting out to participant three to guess while listening to music (figure 5).

![Figure 5. Three monkeys exercise](image)

Student Reflections on Outcomes. The older generation seemed more comfortable learning exactly what needs to be done first before jumping to conclusions and were also patient and precise giving or receiving instructions - careful to not make any ‘errors’. This helped in giving conclusive data on two aspects - the method in which ageing individuals receive and interpret data is more composed and precise and the fact that peer-to-peer education is indeed a good idea as communication between peers seemed to take place more efficiently.

Co-design Workshop 2. The purpose of this tool was to attract people and their attention to a set of games (memory games, Rubik’s cube, mini golf) in order to deliver information about active ageing (figure 6).

![Figure 6. Game activities to engage people](image)

Final Design Concept. The final solution can be divided into two sections (i) attracting and engaging with the audience via spatial design and branding and (ii) providing and collecting information via a weekly preference and planning sheet. The branding ‘hello’ was designed around council
guidelines. The colours provide an energetic and positive vibe symbolising action and activity. The brand is used to announce the existence and relevance of the active ageing initiative and ways to participate, accompanied with fun activities, promising a pleasurable engagement.

Designing the space for the interaction is key. The space needed to be quickly and easily constructed, deconstructed and re-constructed. This was achieved through its modular structure.

The ‘calendar’ is an interactive tool which can be used by volunteers to understand individual older adults. A colour index symbolises the different categories of activities offered by the council. The volunteers ask participants to fill in the calendar with colours based on their activity preference on each day of the week. Based on this information, the volunteers can help tailor individual monthly or weekly schedules and point to the respective sections on the ageing website.

Findings

Older adults’ perspective. Overall the older adults enjoyed the interactions with students. In particular in the active ageing activities they played along although they did not always understand the purpose of the activities. They appreciated their invitation to be involved and the effort taken by the designers creating all these materials ‘for only one session’.

Students’ perspective. The main theme was finding the balance between time management and talking to the older participants. Time was on the one hand seen as a challenge: Timely set up as older participants tend to arrive early, keeping activities brief, not knowing how long activities take due lack of practice or inexperience and getting succinct information from the participants were common themes. However, where activities extended to longer conversations both students and older participants enjoyed these and it was then when the biggest insights were gained and empathy built. Hence some wished for more time to be planned in. Some of the student comments from the feedback questionnaires emphasise this:
I enjoyed chatting to some of the participants. I really felt and shared their frustrations about the aged care system and got a better picture of some issues. [...] They wanted an opportunity to talk.

I think better outcomes really can be achieved by better awareness, understanding of the system and sorting things out before crisis. I’d like to help somehow.

…more time. So, people don’t feel rushed, or worse interrupted when they’re expressing experiences, thoughts and ideas.

I really didn’t want to ask them things only then to not let them finish what they have to say, or not let them finish their activity.

Some students working with ageing committee members felt that this was not the right group for the co-design activity. While older adults themselves they did not seem to feel this topic was relevant for them and expected complete ‘solutions instead of activities’, which emphasizes again how important it is to carefully choose co-design participants, to manage expectations upfront, but also develop resilience in the innovative space. Overall students were surprised by: how much they learnt, the openness of the participants and how the process informed their solutions. They saw the co-design as crucial part of it. The learning included overcoming prejudices in regards to older adults and technology use, breadth of opinions and how a single incident can be life changing (e.g. a broken leg).

Conclusions

Students co-created toolkits for two local councils based around the peer education model. They trialled the peer support toolkit several times and refined it based on older adults’ needs and preferences. Co-design approach allowed time and space to motivate conversations. The co-created tools indeed were suitable for conversations – first as icebreakers, but also to explore preferences, build empathy and generate new ideas. Participants admired the students design skills, interest in the aging topic and investment of creating rich co-design materials. While the students were stand-ins for the future peer-to-peer educators, older participants particularly loved the intergenerational interactions and longer conversations. It was then when stereotypes were overcome in regards to perceptions about technology and ageing and unexpected things were learnt which sparked design ideas. We propose to plan for extended time commitment that leaves space between activities to talk seeing co-design activities as conversation starters allowing the complex issues around ageing to unfold. Two examples demonstrated that students devised solutions to tailor in a co-creative conversation the mass of service offers into a personal health journey. The design students also learnt that innovation processes need openness and a certain degree of resilience. In accordance with Sanders and Stappers (2008), we suggest that participants need to be chosen to exactly match future users and activities prepared and explained carefully so all involved understand their roles and benefits.
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References


