



Exploring designer's perceptions of professional facilitation in a user-centered design scenario

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Many activewear and outerwear designers and product developers recognize the value of incorporating end-users into the product development process to enhance product innovation (Bennett, 2006; Morris & Ashdown, 2018; Watkins & Dunne, 2015). For example, Barcellini, Prost, & Cerf (2015) found that users contribute to the functional and operational development of ideas and Kanstrup (2012) reported that users have, "a central design ability" to balance technological and creative ideas. However, some designers and product developers view collaborating with users as being difficult to manage because they already have to synthesize information from many sources while trying to create new and worthwhile product ideas (Englund, Filek, & Sermet, 2006). Therefore, the general goal of this research was to explore methods to improve the process of working with users in the apparel product development process. One method that has potential is to involve a professional facilitator in the design process to help designers to manage user interactions. Sibbet (2002) defined facilitation as "the art of moving people through processes to agreed-upon objectives in a manner that encourages participation, ownership, and creativity from all" (Sibbet, 2002). Previously, researchers have found that facilitated brainstorming sessions produced high-quality solutions because the techniques managed group communication and decision-making resulting in an environment that freed participants to concentrate on the design tasks (Santanen, Briggs, & de Vreede, 2004).

Considering that professional designers are increasingly called upon to work with a variety of stakeholders, including users, involving a professional facilitator in the product development process may be one way to enhance the idea exchange between designers and users (Light & Akama, 2010). Therefore, this study aimed to understand, from the designer's perspective, the impact of incorporating a professional facilitator into a collaborative design scenario with users.

#### Methods

In this exploratory study, the researcher asked groups of 3-5 users, a designer, and a professional facilitator to design a technical shirt for runners in a 60-minute collaborative design session. The purpose of the design sessions was to replicate idea-generation techniques employed by many activewear companies to gather user data (Morris & Ashdown, 2018; Watkins & Dunne, 2015). The study design was such that there were groups who had a facilitator and groups without a facilitator. There was a limited budget for this study so only three groups could be facilitated. All process variables, such as directions, task, length of time, location, and supplies were consistent across all groups. The author recruited the facilitator from an administrative unit on campus, and the designers in this study were a convenience sample of graduate students pursuing advanced degrees in apparel design. To qualify for the study, the designers had to have at least one year of professional design experience. The runners were recruited from community-organized running groups and qualified if they ran over 30 miles/week. The researcher randomly assigned the designers and users to the groups, and the facilitator was assigned to groups based on her availability. After the design sessions, the researcher interviewed the designers about their experience. Designers of the facilitated groups were also asked about the benefits and limitations of working with the facilitator. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, imported into Atlas.Ti, and inductively coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

#### Results and Discussion

The design sessions were repeated seven times with thirty runners, six designers, and one facilitator. The

average group had 4-5 runners in addition to the designer. The average age of the runners was  $M = 28.73$  ( $SD = 11.46$ ) years old, and on average they ran  $M = 41.94$  ( $SD = 13.43$ ) miles per week. The designer's average age was  $M = 28.83$  ( $SD = 4.22$ ) years old, and their average professional design experience averaged  $M = 4.50$  ( $SD = 3.25$ ) years. Except for one designer, all designers led one design session. The facilitator had three years of experience, and she was involved with three of the seven groups. Each design session lasted approximately 60 minutes, and all groups were able to come to a consensus on a design for a running shirt. The interviews with the designers occurred within one week of the design sessions and the duration of the interviews was between 28-46 minutes. Two significant themes, *roles* and *flow*, emerged from the interviews regarding the implications of facilitation on collaborative design scenarios.

*Roles.* In the first theme, the designers recognized that having the facilitator allowed the designer to remain engaged with the group, as one designer explained, "I found it very freeing to work with a facilitator so I could listen and take notes, and develop a clear picture...what she did was free up the brain space for me to be a better listener, which is ultimately the most important part of this exercise." However, it became evident that designers in facilitated groups felt the roles of designer and facilitator should be clearly defined. They felt their job was obsolete with a facilitator was present because they did not automatically assume different roles (e.g., creative lead vs. facilitator). The designers continued to manage the group process although a professional facilitator was present in the group as one designer explained, "I think facilitation is an important element. It is just a matter of it being blended correctly, knowing what each person's roles are. If the roles are clarified, I think designers and facilitators can be a great team to push forward." When both the designer and facilitator tried to manage the group activity, their roles overlapped and negatively impacted the designer's view of the value added by facilitation.

*Flow.* Time and again designers in facilitated groups felt that the techniques used by the facilitator, particularly the systematic allotment of time for specific tasks, disrupted the creative flow of the design sessions. The designers perceived this as adversely affecting the overall process, as one designer explained, "the runners are not designers, so you have to get them into that design space, which takes time." Another designer explained "The creative process is a space where you want to let them [users] be. I was more about the flow, but when you say OK, the time is up, that one idea that was just ready to come out was shut down. If we just waited an additional four minutes, we could have gotten that idea." Therefore, the designers in this study found that the facilitation process, particularly following a strict timeline, too inflexible for a creative process.

#### Implications and Conclusions

From the interviews with the designers, the researcher observed that although a professional facilitator may help manage group dynamics, she was viewed by designers as disruptive to the creative process and redundant to the role of the designer. Furthermore, the designers in this scenario automatically fell into a facilitator role, regardless if there was a facilitator in the group or not, leaving designers to feel like they had nothing to contribute to the group. One possible solution to the perceived conflicts of roles and flow is to train designers in facilitation techniques. Designers have the background to manage the creative process and can be trained to manage group dynamics and decision making like facilitators. Training design practitioners as facilitators has implications that extend beyond working with users. Facilitation skills are helpful in any group situation, and this insight may be useful in preparing students for their future careers, that may (or may not) involve working with users.

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