Explaining what design research is and can achieve when communicating with people who haven’t been through design school (and with whom you’d like to collaborate)

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Those involved in teaching and facilitating design research in both the academic and private sectors are being increasingly challenged by potential collaborators, funders and stakeholder groups to explain, simply and succinctly, what we mean when we place the word “design” ahead of the word “research.” The need to be able to do this well has been fueled by the increasing numbers of design researchers and designers interested in pursuing research being presented with more opportunities to work with academicians, public policy makers, community groups and private sector researchers who have not been to design school. What is articulated below isn’t new—the ideas have been gleaned from Krippendorff, Bonsieppe, Norman, J.C. Jones, Archer, Jonas, Friedman and Stieppers, among others, in combination with the author’s firsthand experience at having to do this a few dozen times per year since 1998 in and around the University of North Texas, as well in many corporate, state and federal government grant applications.

Here are seven relatively concise but broadly framed means to meet two primary goals. Firstly, to provide ways to explain what, how and why design research processes can yield means to create more positive futures for particular groups living and working in specific “less-than-desirable” situations, and secondly, to render these explanations in ways that can motivate broadly constituted groups of people from outside design to work with designers and design researchers.

“Design research owes its highest level of responsibility to the audiences or users who will be affected by what designers make.” —Kathryn Bennett

01.

Design research tends to begin by examining situations as they might evolve in the future rather than situations that have already transpired. Design researchers and their collaborators attempt to analyze and interpret key social, cultural, economic, political, emotional and technological factors and issues that affect how particular groups live and work in a given situation, and then determine which of these factors and issues might need to be altered to affect positive changes on behalf of one or more of these groups. Design research operates from a position that is temporally flipped when compared to the research operations of many of the sciences—we 'begin at a desirable situation’ and work backwards from that. This makes our approaches to formulation, operation, analysis, interpretation and evaluation different from those often associated with many of the sciences.

02.

Because of the rationales and approaches described in .01, design research tends to be normative and biased. We're working to try improve situations that are currently evolving in ways that negatively affect specific aspects of particular peoples' lives, which means we tend to formulate research with particular objectives in mind. An example of this that design researchers at the University of North Texas are currently working on involves trying to improve how people in socio-economically advantaged situations can be persuaded to change their behavior re: freshwater consumption and conservation. Achieving this kind of outcome requires us—the design researchers involved—to examine WHY other attempts at persuading this population group to engage in these behaviors, particularly in Texas and the American southwest, have been unsuccessful in the past, and to fundamentally acknowledge the desirability of consuming less freshwater and conserving the reserves of it that we have. We also have to adopt these types of normative stances when we engage in research designed to prevent young people from using tobacco, or to improve the delivery of children's mental health information and services in a given community, or to help high school students in "at-risk" learning situations become more adept at identifying and solving problems as a means of preparing them for the academic rigors of college.

03.

Design researchers work in ways that very often lead to us using the EVIDENCE YIELDS we derive from our research to inform decision-making that leads to the INVENTION and implementation of new artifacts and systems, or new procedures and "ways of doing things" in settings as diverse as school systems, city governments, healthcare organizations, natural environments, large corporations, small businesses and among particular socio-cultural groups living in specific settings. Design researchers very often use the knowledge they gain or create as a result of our processes to guide initiatives that involve DOING, MAKING, DISTRIBUTING, and CONVEYING.

04.

Design researchers rely much less, and sometimes not at all, on empirical data to guide our processes—we tend to NOT be trying to validate or replicate a previous study or trial, especially if the primary goal of a particular project we've undertaken is to INVENT. To facilitate this way of working, we tend to seek meta-level descriptions of the factors and issues that are or could be affecting the situations we're trying to change BEFORE we undertake any "next steps."

05.

One of the ways that design research is akin to research formulated and operated in the social sciences is that our initial approaches tend to be informed heavily by case studies and secondary research. Like researchers in the social sciences, we recognize that what we do on the ‘front end’ during our research processes is as crucial as what we do on the ‘back end.’ BUT—(re-write) our back end involves taking action in the form of designing to meet human needs, so that new products, ways of doing things, experiences, services, etc. are developed and implemented.

06.

Design research operates from an ontological and philosophical perspective that allows designers who use it to operationalize diverse types of data and data sets that defy exact, quantitative measurement. We tend to be very much in agreement with Einstein's argument that (loosely stated) "…not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

07.

Design research is fueled by inquiries that are underpinned more by different types of argumentation and less by different types of assertion, although there are instances in the formulation and operation of design research where both approaches must be effectively deployed. Argumentation requires that claims be supported by data that is critically transformed into evidence that eventually fuels knowledge creation and sometimes even wise decision-making. Conversely, assertion relies on the effective operation of persuasive strategies and tactics, specific means and modalities of message delivery and distribution, and the need to specifically tailor the presentation and contextualization of data-cum-evidence in ways that are more likely to be well-received by particular audiences.

FIN.

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