"Participation is not enough" – Towards Indigenous-led co-design

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ABSTRACT

Participatory design seeks to involve users as partners in the design process. However, for traditionally disenfranchised groups participation may not be enough. Over the past year, we've worked with Indigenous leaders and end-users to develop a process by which HCI practitioners can pass the reins to Indigenous people to lead their own technology projects with the support of designers as needed. We present a brief summary of our experience and reflections on this budding user leadership process so far. We describe key steps (ie. user-led recruitment, user-leader training, and user-led workshops) as well as some challenges and takeaways, in order to contribute to the advancement of processes for Indigenous-led co-design, and user-leadership for the empowerment of disenfranchised communities around the world.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing~Participatory design** • Human-centered computing~User centered design • Social and professional topics~Race and ethnicity

KEYWORDS

participatory design, co-design, user leadership, Indigenous, human-centered design, user-led design, empowerment.

1 Introduction

In 2018, Angie Abdilla, a Trawlwoolway Aboriginal woman and social enterprise CEO challenged designers to go beyond participatory design: "We have to get beyond participation. It immediately implies you're not leading and that's my biggest problem…It has to be Indigenous-led to ensure Indigenous knowledge is respected the whole way…Indigenous services have to be driven by Indigenous people." [1] As members of the Indigenous community have put it elsewhere: "We don't want to be consulted; we want to be at the table." [2]

Over the past year, the HCI practitioners within our team have had the opportunity to challenge and enrich their practice through work with Indigenous leaders (including two of our authors) and young Indigenous users, to develop a process by which HCI practitioners can pass the reins over to Indigenous community members to lead technology projects, not just participate in them.

In the process, we've experimented with ways to provide just the right amount of design knowledge and tools as needed. In so doing, we have learned from each other, and gained a deeper appreciation for how Indigenous ways of knowing stand to radically inform technology design. We present a brief summary of our experience with the "Indigenous thriving app project", in the hope that it may help shift a move toward more Indigenous-led co-design, and user-leadership more generally within disenfranchised communities around the world.

2 Background

Participatory design (PD) approaches are intended to establish a more equitable partnership with users in the design process [3]. Participants are viewed as experts of their experience and as team-members within a project. However, the design process is still led by designers who manage the involvement of users at various stages to inform the process. Researchers and designers run workshops and facilitate activities, as they have the design expertise to do so.

We are firm believers in the participatory process, however, moved by the call for Indigenous-led services, we sought to take the participatory approach further and experiment with ways to

scaffold leadership, not just participation, for an app intended to support Indigenous university student wellbeing.

In searching for previous studies to inform our work, an inconsistent use of terms posed some difficulty. For example, searches of terms such as "user-led" and "user-driven" within the ACM digital library turn up either: 1) studies related to user-generated content [4, 5] or studies in which user needs "led" or "drove" the research, but users themselves did not [6, 7, 8]. To differentiate the approach described herein from these, we will use the term "user leadership".

Significant work exists within HCI4D with the shared aim of reciprocal and democratic engagement with underrepresented groups, often as part of addressing the need for cultural tailoring. A number of studies look into advancing approaches of participatory action research and participatory design to this end. [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. Additionally, work advancing Indigenous-led design seeks to reflect Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in both design methods and outcomes. (e.g. [15, 16, 17])

A handful of initiatives outside of the technology context show instances of user leadership. For example, in healthcare and psychiatry, "Participant-led research" (PLR) refers to research initiated and conducted by citizens (e.g. individuals self-experimenting with their health) (e.g. [18,19]). While these examples best represent full user-leadership, they do not provide insight into process because they are entirely user-conducted. That is, they do not represent the use of design expertise or a process by which leadership is transferred to users systematically whilst allowing for professional support.

For the process we describe herein, we scaffolded a small group of leader-participants to drive the research process for the design of an app. User leadership began early and has persisted throughout the project. We believe this approach is, in many ways, novel and could be useful to others seeking to go beyond participation.

3 Context

The project mission (which itself was co-crafted with, and finalised by Indigenous users and researchers) was to "Digitally create a culturally sensitive service with First Nations Australian students engaged in university study, to empower a sense of belonging and 'whole-being'"

The project team, led by a senior Indigenous researcher in education, includes researchers in psychology and technology and design professionals from two Australian universities and a digital agency. Among the core project team were two Indigenous people from the Yuin nation. We recruited four Indigenous university students, two from the University of Sydney and two from the Australian Catholic University to join the team. These students became the user-leaders who would lead the co-design process.

4 Process

The overall project process thus far, can be summarised by the following milestone events (several of which are described below):

1. Launch workshop with research and development team
2. User-leader training workshop
3. User-leader training follow-up workshop
4. Participatory design workshops (x2)
5. Participatory design workshop part 2 (combined)
6. Concept analysis session (with leaders)
7. Debrief to larger academic team (leaders present)
8. Leader-conducted user prototype testing sessions
9. Testing debrief (leaders share prototype testing results)

4.1 Recruiting the recruiters

The research team's first step was to recruit 4 Indigenous students (2 male and 2 female from two universities) who would take the role of user-leaders within the project, including the recruitment of other student participants and facilitation of participatory workshops. Interview and selection of candidates was overseen by Indigenous and non-Indigenous research team members. Owing to the considerable amount of time and effort user-leaders would need to invest in the project, they were hired as project employees rather than volunteers.

Once hired and welcomed into the team, the user-leaders were able to begin recruiting participants via their peer networks. Even for peers, recruitment of workshop participants was a challenge and a shared feeling within the Australian Indigenous community of being "over-researched" and under-respected contributed. One student leader reported that her peers "said 'I've seen stuff like this happen before and it never works'…you don't want another non-Indigenous agenda pushed down an Indigenous throat."

A total of 9 participants were eventually recruited and involved in one or both participatory workshops together with the 4 student leaders. An additional 10 participated in the peer-led prototype testing sessions (23 total).

4.2 Facilitating the facilitators

The four student leaders recruited were students of medicine, architecture, law and history, and had limited experience with user research, participatory design or related methods. As such the project team arranged an exposure-based training session designed to allow them to experience a number of co-design activities first-hand with an introduction to the philosophy and theory of participatory design. The session also allowed the user-leaders to get to know the professional members of the team, each other, and the aims of the project. As part of this workshop, they worked together with other team members to iterate on the project mission statement and brainstorm ways for eliciting ideas from their peers.

Following the training session, student leaders expressed the need for more time to plan the participatory workshops they would run. In response, a follow-up session was scheduled on the fly for the following week. During this session, our user research experts prompted student leaders to consider how they might run their own co-design session with peers that would generate ideas for a technology that would support Indigenous student wellbeing. An initial workshop plan was drafted collaboratively by the student leaders with support, as needed, from designers.

While it was initially anticipated that each student would run one workshop with their respective recruited peers (a total of four workshops), after consideration, the student leaders opted to run

two sets of workshops (an initial and a follow-up) in pairs (we shall call them pair A and B). Pairing up allowed them to support each other during facilitation and allowed them to meet twice with the same group (over two workshops) allowing more time for trust-building and experience sharing before ideation.

In the week between the training session and the participatory workshops with peers, pair B redeveloped their workshop plan on their own. The result is that the two pairs had very different approaches to leading their respective workshops, which, while this may be viewed as challenging from a research methods perspective, we found helpful for the comparison this afforded from the perspective of a user-leadership process.

4.3 User-facilitated participatory workshops

The challenge of recruitment was most pronounced on the first day of participatory workshops. The two workshops were held simultaneously but at different universities. Six of the eight participants recruited by pair A attended the workshop. However, for pair B, only one of seven expected participants showed up. Five of the intended participants got in contact on the day with apologies. It's important to note that, although both lunch and compensation were provided ($50 gift card), workshops required students to attend for 3 hours and were held during an exam period, both of which likely contributed to poor turnout.

Despite a poor turnout for pair B, the student leaders conducted a very productive co-design session with their participant as many ideas were generated. Pair A also facilitated a highly successful session with their larger group and with little intervention from the professionals. For the follow-up workshop, both groups were combined and three of four student leaders facilitated collaboratively (the fourth was travelling overseas).

During the first participatory workshop, activities focused on building trust and exploring the broader experience of being an Indigenous student at university. In the follow-up workshop, activities focused on the design of an app to support this experience. Overwhelmingly, participant responses focused on issues and ideas relating to building a supportive community of Indigenous peers.

While a qualitative analysis of workshop data is planned for future work, herein we limit our scope to describing the process, and our reflections on the challenges and successes of this first phase within the user-leadership process (as below).

5 Reflections on a user-leadership process

As a team of academic researchers and design professionals, we were consistently and unanimously impressed with the high level of enthusiasm, creativity and skillfulness each of the student leaders exhibited as part of their unique role. They were highly successful at quickly building rapport and creating a participation space in which their peers felt comfortable sharing, sometimes very personal, experiences. In fact, in one workshop, one participant shared a story he had never shared before.

Student leaders built trust by first sharing their own very personal stories in what felt more like a campfire chat than a research session, before asking for volunteers to share theirs. This method for creating a convivial space through storytelling aligns with the importance of "yarning" within Indigenous culture [20]. We believe that the Indigenous student user-leadership 'Indigenist' approach was essential to allowing for this naturalness and openness. As Wilson [21] reveals, Indigenist research is "necessary research that reflects an Indigenist view of reality, knowledge and the gaining of wisdom to shape the future of our communities."

Moreover, the student leaders rapidly learned and integrated the principles of PD and fluidly adapted the methods to their purpose, mixing them with their own knowledge and experiences of methods from other contexts. We strongly believe that the high level of leadership skills among the recruited student-leaders was essential to the resulting success of the workshops. Success relied on the leaders feeling comfortable and competent to lead a discussion, share personal stories, and guide participation in an open, flexible and humble way (without imposing their own ideas).

Essential attitudes and competencies were no less important for the professional team and lessons learned are outlined below as suggestions to others intending to explore a user-leadership model.

5.1 Stay *very* flexible

In addition to attempting a novel process, the portion of our project described herein was strictly time-limited in that the process of training leaders, peer recruitment, participatory workshops and follow-up design sessions was largely conducted within an intense period of eight weeks. As such, we rapidly learned how important it was to be incredibly flexible and creative. User-leadership will only be tokenistic if users are pressured to carry out everything according to well set out plans created in advance by the professional team. This meant locations, dates and methods were sometimes settled only shortly ahead of events (sometimes spontaneously) and with deference to leader decision-making and based on participant needs. Professional team members made themselves available on weekends, created resources, and maintained open communication with student leaders regarding what kinds of tools or assistance they preferred, providing more or less support as appropriate.

5.2 Relinquish the need to control

One challenge encountered by the professional team, was letting go of a need to eliminate risk and control details. In engaging in an experimental process, it's important to be comfortable with the notion that things may fail. We would argue that if the risk feels small, it is unlikely that power has been sufficiently transferred over to users. Of course, as designers and researchers accustomed to detail-attention and "getting things right" the need for constant self-awareness to avoid these tendencies is essential if leadership is genuinely to remain with the users.

By way of example, during one workshop, student leaders opted to skip a sticky-note based ideation activity in order to move straight into sharing in a large group. A professional team member recognised this would risk losing the opinions of quieter voices. In response, he shared this risk with the group in an autonomy-supportive way. The student leaders opted to take the risk. Instead of forcing them to take what he thought (as an expert) to be the safer approach, he honoured their rights to drive the process. This

showed respect, and as he put it afterward "it may be we have lost some quieter voices, but maybe we can pick up on those in some other way later, and in the end it's probably worth it because we've retained their trust – we haven't put anybody off."

Exactly how to strike the balance between when it's worth stepping in and when it's better to stand back will inevitably be a tricky path to navigate, but we found that the best general approach was to offer rather than direct. Offers of support, ideas and expertise, always in a neutral and autonomy-supportive communication style, allowed student leaders to feel supported and call for help when it was needed, while still feeling genuinely respected and trusted for their own expertise.

Researchers and designers, accustomed to the role of expert, can find it difficult to allow user-leaders to do things in their own ways (we certainly did at times). Handing over the reins genuinely and humbly (while always being available as support) is a new experience but critical to earning trust and practicing the participant-led philosophy genuinely. As Blake, Galser & Freudenthal [22] put it in the context of community-based co-design (CBCD), "Designers simply have to tolerate the tension of uncertainty; to do otherwise is to jump to incorrect conclusions and to damage the reciprocal trust between participants by appearing arrogant and disrespectful."

5.3 Think of it as an apprenticeship

In our experience, instilling trust is just as much about providing the right amount of support when it's needed as it is about relinquishing control. As practitioners, we will naturally fear that in handing over the reins, they get left dangling in mid-air without direction. For us this meant providing guidance and advice when our student leaders asked for it, but also when they wouldn't have known to ask for it, but we identified it might be helpful.

As mentioned previously, providing support in an autonomy-supportive way prevented an offer of support from becoming a covert act of coercion. For example, phrasing recommendations in terms like: "one option is…" or "This potentially has the advantage of X, but it's up to you," rather than "it's better if you…" provided tools and options rather than control. We found the difference to be subtle but absolutely critical – particularly in a situation where younger participants might otherwise unconsciously defer to "authority". It would be an easy pitfall, indeed, to ask participants to lead and then unconsciously persuade them into letting the professionals make all the decisions.

5.4 Stay humble

One critical lesson learnt by our team is that, if embracing user leadership, you will need to check your ego at the door. Like any good teacher, mentor or parent, if you do your job well, there will come a time when your leaders no longer need you (or not as much of you). A few of us found ourselves taken aback at first, but then celebrated what were actually signs of an effective process.

When one designer appropriately asked a student leader if he thought it was better for her to remain in the workshop or stay out of it, he suggested she might be one too many in the room, and she found herself (in spite of herself) feeling slightly caught off guard.

After a debrief it became clear that the other designers had similarly experienced initial discomfort as student leaders gained confidence, needed less support or openly expressed their preference that professionals not always be involved. We found it was helpful to debrief openly among the team and remind each other that when users need you less, the process is working. As one user experience specialist put it:

> "It's easy to feel like you've done something wrong when someone doesn't want your help. But I realised that's exactly what we're aiming for. The fact that our leaders feel comfortable telling us what they do (or don't) need is a reflection of the trusting environment we've created together, and of their settling into a leadership role."

5.5 Budget more time

One challenge to the process is that recruiting, preparing and supporting user-leaders is necessarily significantly more time consuming then sending professionals in to do the job. While time is possibly saved in the longer term (owing to increased quality of outcomes) time required is easily double that of a traditional participatory process.

6   Conclusion and next steps

There is much more that could be said about the user leadership process touched on herein, and we are engaged in a follow-up study involving interviews with our user leaders, analysis of co-design workshops and a more detailed investigation. However, we felt that reflecting on the experience of conducting such a process from the practitioner perspective may help others in HCI consider taking on a similar challenge.

In addition to the moral obligation to support Indigenist and Indigenous-led approaches, we see many HCI-focused benefits to a user-leadership process. As mentioned previously, the approach allowed for a culturally-tailored, culturally-enriched and trustworthy environment for participation. As one leader put it: "when it's student to student it can be a bit more uncensored." Moreover, the approach allowed Indigenous ways of knowing and engaging to naturally shape the process. This indicates that user-leadership as a co-design process is promising as part of a solution to the "array of theoretical and methodological limitations that have plagued Indigenous Australian research" [23].

While the outcomes of user workshops included detailed design specifications for an app, we are adamant that user-leadership not end with a handover of design preferences. Our user leaders are continuing to drive the iterative development of the app and will act as the first members of an app ownership group. Discussion of innovative ways to maintain and increase user-ownership remain at the heart of our process. Our vision is for a technology-community system that is entirely and sustainably in the hands of its users – empowered by and empowering Indigenous youth.

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