

Designing Forums for People Art: Reflecting on CREST Media-Exprimo Project

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Abstract: This paper shows several arguments concerning with the information and service design research project that is to develop a participatory platform for people's expression on their everyday lives. It is called People Art in this project named Media-Exprimo. The platform consists of Cultural Programs and Technology Systems as a couple of design issue for not professional activities but people's expressive activities in the reality. The goal of the project is to position within the context of new place of dialogue the expressive voices of those brought up in this society, and to design forums through which to connect them to society. The findings of the project here are discussed in four sections addressing from place of art as fundamental thoughts, creating forums for expression as the central issue, moving from collaboration to a new discipline, and future work for developing a new school of design.

Key words: *Information Design, People's Expression, Participatory Platform, Activity Program*

1. Introduction: “Media-Exprimo” research project

This paper discusses the findings of the Media-Exprimo at the CREST national research project on people's expression mediates them to the society [1, 2, 3, 4]. The goal of the research is to position within the context of new place of dialogue the expressive voices of those brought up in this society, and to design forums through which to connect them to society. Exprimo is incorporating the Latin word for “to express” or “to represent.”

When people express themselves instead of simply taking in the expressions of experts, it generates moments of richly felt experience that is “quality of experience” mentioned by John Dewey [5]. Such moments are opportunities to look closely at one's own expressions, and the expressive self, to discover the meaning and value therein. Such expressions also bring an awareness of one's connection to society as “Marginal Art” [6]. Japanese philosopher Shunsuke Tsurumi discussed it as potential for desirable through connecting between art and society.

In the course of this research project a number of forums for expression were developed. A main objective of the research project was designing and developing Cultural Programs, integrated with Technology Systems, to support and promote the forums for people's expressive voices. It was important to us that the work of creating forums for expression should shift gradually from designers and researchers to the people who are the central players in practice. The next step is for them to begin working to create such forums for expression themselves.

The work mentioned here is neither something designers and researchers create from scratch nor something people initiate spontaneously. It is the cultural practice of collective work that people inherit, create, develop, and transform in the process of living and improving their lives [7]. We believe that respectfully accepting and participating in such practices, and contributing to their development, is a way for design research to contribute to

society. One of the important lessons we have learned in our research is the importance of placing the research process within the cultural practices that people continue to construct.

Looking back on five years of research, it was productive in many ways. There have been the findings of the project here in four sections addressing fundamental thoughts and the central issue extracted from latter discussions of the project, moving from collaboration to a new discipline, and next steps.

2. Fundamental Thoughts: From Art

Something you notice when you spend time with young people studying design at art schools is that at some point they shift from expressing themselves as individuals to expressing themselves as members of society. This occurs two or three years into the school, as they experience a wide range of creative work, appreciation, and exhibitions. What happens is that they begin to feel a sense of responsibility to be expressive within a social context [8, 9]. Classroom of design studies becomes a place for expression with hands on materials, various drawings and prototypes (Fig. 1).

This is a wonderful aspect of art education. By becoming expressive as members of society they come to realize that design is something that shapes society. Having come to this realization, the things they create are no longer personal works but designs plugged into society. This is the power that art student gain, a power I called “Wisdom of Expression” in the project.

It was expected to take this “Wisdom of Expression” beyond art schools, to work with people to create forums for expression where they, too, could gain this power. Engaging in expressive activity at such forums holds the promise of enabling people to experience being connected to society. It is certain that such experiences would enable people to begin shaping societies of their own. In the project we referred to these as “Communities of Expression.”

The research plan was developed in the context of the world six years ago. People were just beginning to release their own expressions out into society using computers and the Internet, early stage of blogs and SNS. It is believed that those who were expressing themselves in this way needed a sense of responsibility, as agents of expression, to make the world a better place. It becomes more strongly today, when net-space is overflowing due to the sharing and exchange of human expression.



Figure 1. Classroom of design as studio in art school

3. The Central Issue: Creating Forums for Expression

This research project was organized as a joint arts / humanities / and technology research project. Different disciplines were cyclically connected as Figure 2. The Media-Exprimo project was aiming to create forums for expression through diving into the social practices.

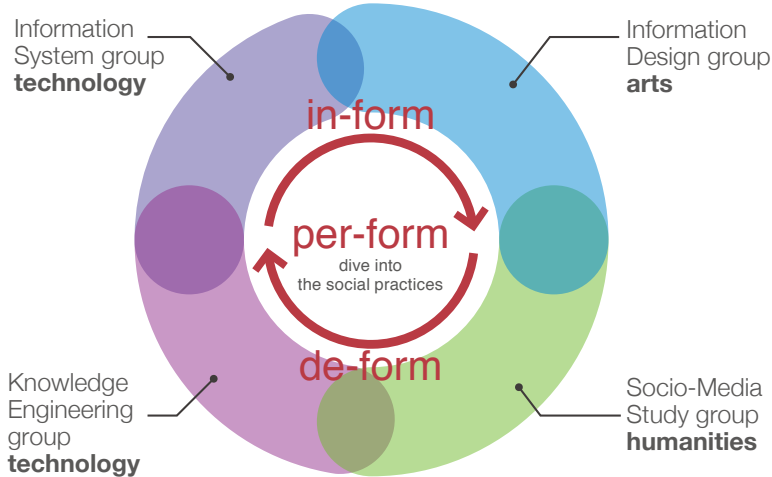


Figure 2. Cyclically connected Multidisciplinary groups at Media-Exprimo

In autumn 2006, our project was launched from locations at Tama Art University in Hashimoto and Kaminoge, the University of Tokyo in Hongo, and National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology in Akihabara, all in Tokyo metropolitan area. From these bases we travelled back and forth for five years to project fieldwork locations in prefectures of Hokkaido, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Toyama, Kyoto, Wakayama, Hyogo, Ehime, and Hiroshima, from north to west Japan.

The projects generated user environments that support and promote people's expressive activity by integrating "Cultural Programs and Technology Systems." Because people's participation in such an environment generates expression, we referred to it as a "Participatory Platform for People Art" [10]. A number of forums were created in which users of this platform could encounter the Wisdom of Expression, including the Zuzie workshop [12] (Fig. 3), A-I-U-E-O Gabun [12], Keitai Trail [13], and the Expression Nebula workshop [14] (Fig. 4).



Figure 3. Zuzie workshop, "Drawing science experience" at MIRAikan science museum, Tokyo, Nov., 2009



Figure 4. Expression Nebula workshop, “Art Space for Visitors’ Reflection” at MIRAIKAN science museum, Tokyo, Nov., 2011

Seeing these forums for expression lined up against one another, one realizes that they were organized around two forms of expressive activity: expression and “Meta-Expression.” Expression is the act of drawing a picture, taking a photograph, or writing an essay—something many people have done. Meta-Expression is the act of expressing something about one’s own expression, a new and important experience for many people. The activity emerging Meta-Expression through comprehensive view and re-composition was boosted by the advanced design of the Cultural Programs and Technology Systems.

It is important that fostering people’s Meta-Expression became the central concern of the project. This was an issue involving both the design of “Activity Programs” that led people to express something about their own expression and the design of tools that used digital media technology to stimulate such activity.

3-1. Activity Program

These activities combining Expression and Meta-Expression were each designed as a number of participatory and experiential expressive workshops that would inspire people to get interested and engaged. The basic structure of these activity programs as Cultural Program can be described as follows, made up of a sequence of four expressive actions and the participants’ experience during each. Figure 5 shows configuration of the actions.

1) Individual Expression:

It is expressing oneself instead of receiving the expressions of experts. Workshops include collaborators in expression. Facilitators demonstrate expression, and engage in expression together with participants.

Experience: Seeing the expressive activity performed, participants get the sense that there is nothing to it, that they can do it, too.

2) Collaborative Expression

Share the expression with someone else, then engage in the expression again collaboratively. Bringing together each other’s expressive works and composing those collection generates discussion of one’s own.

Experience: “Was able to talk about my own expression?” “Group members really listened to me.” “What he said was really interesting.” “It was fun to create something together.”

3) The Appreciation and Reflection of Expression (meta-cognition)

Begin to see the meaning and value of expression through collaborate with others. Expressions are presented to the group. Review the body of expressive works that was presented. This causes appreciation and reflection on one’s own expression, revealing its meaning and value. It is meta-cognition on the expression.

Experience: When preparing to present: “Right, that’s how I selected what to express, and how I did it,” or “That’s how I collaborated with other members of the group.”

4) The Re-composition of Expression (Meta-Expression)

Recognizing the meaning and value of one’s own expression leads to a consideration of its social significance. It facilitates the desire to re-compose and circulate one’s own expression as a composition of the meaning and value. This leads to re-composition of the expression for presentation to the world, or the generation of new expressive activity. It is named this stage “Meta-Expression.”

Experience: “I can see what a rewarding experience it is to express myself.” “I want to exhibit my expression.” “I want to participate again.” “Next time I’d like to run and present an expressive workshop to others by myself.”

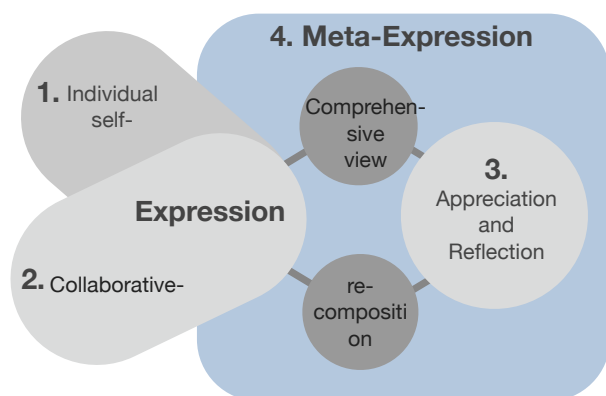


Figure 5. A model of the Activity Program consists of a sequence of four expressive actions

4. Digital Media Technology Features

In order to ensure that the meta-cognition and Meta-Expression that were at the core of the activity programs actually took place, it was necessary that participants take a broad view of and recompose their own expressions. The common thread linking the many tools we designed was the use of digital technology to promote this. Those achieved as digital media technology features including digitization, replication and arrangement, collection and collaboration, depiction of the meaning of expression, and the coexistence of expression. Figure 6 shows links that represent facilitations of each feature.

1) Digital media technology features that promote collaborative expression:

- a. **Digitization:** Digitization of analog expressive materials enables them to be used in new expressive works.
- b. **Replication and Arrangement:** Replication and arrangement of digitized expressive materials.

c. Collection and Collaboration: Generating spaces for collecting the works and promoting collaborative expression with others.

2) Digital media technology features that promote depiction of the meaning and coexistence of expression:

d. Depiction of the meaning of expression: Ability to visualize, through juxtaposition and movement, the differences between arrangements on compositions and re-compositions.

e. Coexistence of expression: Coexistence of expressions created by people and computer generated.

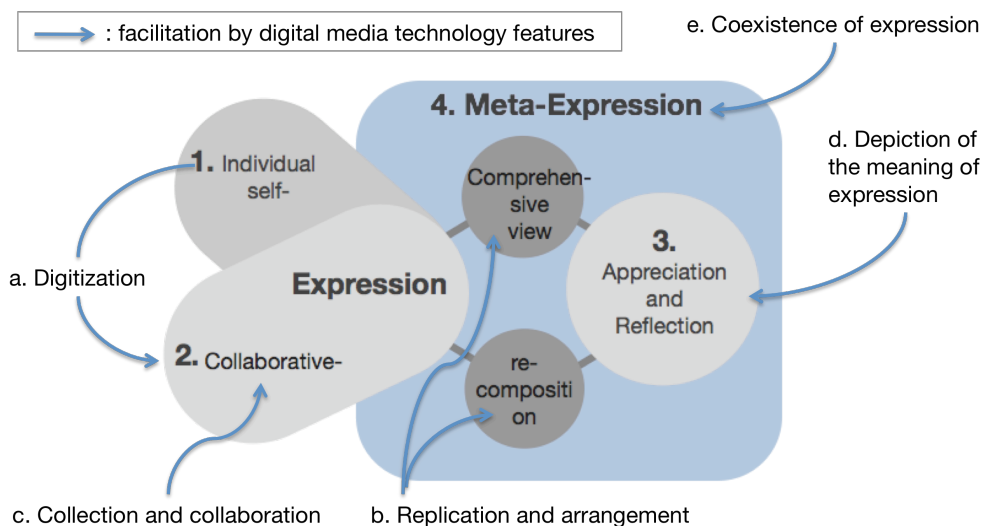


Figure 6. Digital Media Technology Features facilitate the sequence of activity program

5. Creating a New Discipline from Multidisciplinary Joint Research

Organized as multidisciplinary joint research, this project sought to produce results that would have true social grounding and societal use of the results. For this reason, research activities were built around a core of social practice.

About six months after our joint research began, it was recognized that each research group was taking its own unique approach: the “creative” approach of arts, the “critical” approach of humanities, and the “implementation” approach of technology. It is not easy to generate collaboration between research genres that adopt different approaches. Repeated dialogue sitting around the table only serves to make the differences that much clearer.

The important thing was that the researchers who had gathered together not only discussed things in the office but also actually worked together. What gave us the opportunity to do so was the practice of fieldwork. Putting things into practice meant taking our research out into the realm of real social activity and “setting up shop.” This was not easy to do. It meant that our respective research would be compared to and evaluated against the real world in which people live. From the perspective of interdisciplinary research, social practice in the real world has so many variables it can be hard to get a handle on.

Still, taking the plunge into the sea of variables we found that there is a great deal to be gained by engaging with those from research fields that take a difference approach. In the course of engaging in actual practice we recognized how fortunate we were to have those from other realms close at hand, found that things that had been

difficult to resolve through deskwork alone suddenly become clear, and came to understand the value of engaging the knowledge and skill's of other fields and how to do so.

These experiences were a kind of evolution for the researchers themselves. Our team, by placing the research process in the realm of social practice on so many occasions, helped nurture a number of such “highly-evolved” researchers. The doors to a new type of research are beginning to open in each of their respective fields. Through this project, each of the four research groups has changed their own research approach, thereby expanding the reach of their respective fields [15].

When science and technology begin to connect through digital media with art and culture, so often seen as being at the opposite end of the spectrum, it makes one realize they are actually neighbors who just weren't talking to one another. The new work that begins when they finally turn toward one another and join together may be the beginning of a new discipline characterized by the coexistence of different viewpoints—coexistence, not fusion. Practitioners of this discipline coexist, keeping an eye on each other and each other's work while refining on their own specialties, taking advantage of their differences to collaborate in creating something new [16].

6. Future Work

This project could be translated into the realm of education and learning to create a next-generation design school. What can be learned at this school is interdisciplinary design based on the creative approach offered by artistic design combined with criticism and implementation approaches—the knowledge and skills to shape societies. The order of things will be to do first and know later. In order to gain a facility with design, it is essential that one actually engage in design oneself. Reflecting on what one gains the ability to design develops into knowing design.

One characteristic of knowing design is the development of catalogs, something filled with the processes and results of designs executed by both design experts and students. Catalogs are generative, something in which learners can record their own design experiences. What is written there are not answers but a collection of the ways of thinking and acting that encompass finished designs and the creative processes, a record of what is enjoyableness and interesting.

There is no universally correct solution in the practice of design. That which is considered interesting or beneficial changes over time as society and culture change. What is important is to keep a record of the creative process, a behind-the-scenes look at how particular design solutions were generated by people living in a certain context at a certain time. Such records are sure to be seedbeds for the practical wisdom of next-generation design.

This school is not something that can be squeezed into conventional art education; it is a place for collaboration between multiple different realms. To develop programs that approach social practice—the experience of working in practice—requires the invention of a new learning framework combining the playroom, the school, and the workplace. Young people entering the school will become connected to society, tying together things that until now have scattered separately out in the world. It will be interesting to develop a school program that will produce people who create the solutions to make our world a truly richer place has been started.

Now explorations for the development have been started; those one is designing and implementing classroom management tool for teachers of elementary and junior high schools by teachers, local government and researchers

on engineering and design, second is designing a journal system for nursing at University Hospital by medical staffs and researchers on engineering and design.

7. Configuration of the project

The Information Design department program at Tama Art University, one of the author affiliates with, was started in 1998. Shortly thereafter came a major revolution in the field of design as a practical endeavor. Design began not only contributing to industry but also tying society together directly. Small experiments in which design tied communities together began here and there both in Japan and overseas. We came into contact with the Future Farmers Group in Tokachi, Hokkaido and there joined a number of farmers in initiating a project to explore the potential for applying information technology to food and agriculture in 2001. This developed into the design of local community dialogue, resulting in the Tokachi Agricultural Museum in spring 2006 [17]. This experience made us realize the need to reconstruct design practice and education from the ground up to rebuild the field of design to enable it to cooperate with society and to collaborate with other academic disciplines.

The Media-Exprimo project was first conceived in the autumn of 2006, amid the final stages of putting the museum system together. In this way, practical action in Tokachi formed the foundation for conceptualizing a new interdisciplinary joint research project. This time, our goal was to transform “expression” as cultivated in the world of art into social knowledge by creating expressive forums for people rather than experts.

Acknowledgement

Those who joined the research project that was inspired by this concept included the designers in our office as well as Shin Mizukoshi, Koichi Hori, Takuichi Nishimura, and the young researchers in their offices. Finding themselves engaged (unwillingly?) in a research project that was groping blindly from the start, the members of the CREST team, although struggling in the beginning, applied the vision and rich knowledge of their respective specialties to gradually nurture a true collaboration.

This project was also made possible with the support of many other people who are involved in various forms of social practice. We would like to express our gratitude to the museums, broadcasting stations and associations, educational institutions ranging from elementary schools to universities, boards of education, local organizations including people groups and government cultural bodies, and individuals who cooperated in providing us with a field to connect research with practice.

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