

Context mapping: A look at the advantages of applying generative tools *in situ*

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of the author while using certain *Context Mapping* techniques are discussed through the example of a practical application. The advantages he found of *in situ* use of generative techniques and how this practice can be a way of sensitizing the user in order to obtain deeper knowledge into the subject being researched, when other techniques are not possible.

Keywords

Context mapping, generative techniques, *in situ*.

Topic nr

[1.1: Generative Tools]

INTRODUCTION

As a first year Design for Interaction (DFI) Master student it became clear to me from the very start of the Context and Conceptualization (C&C) course that I had to find a way to put in practice as soon as possible the context mapping techniques we were acquiring, while they were still fresh in mind. This, in order to make a long lasting impression on me that would help me better get acquainted with the theory, and to convince me that these are the tools I need in future projects.

Luckily for me and my fellow students, the master courses are designed in such a way that you can start applying everything in a parallel manner in one of your other university projects. For me, the Exploring Interactions (EI) project was the perfect opportunity to see how well I knew the techniques, how to put them into action, and whether there would be things that could be improved from my own experiences.

Therefore I decided to use my experience with using some of the techniques for this specific project, and how I think that they could be improved for future applications.

MAPPING THE CONTEXT

For the EI project, our goal was to help the staff in a bar to better handle an unwanted situation. At this point we realized that in order to even understand the scope of our project, we needed to answer some basic questions such as: What is considered an unwanted situation? According to whom? Who does it affect? How does it affect them? And also some less obvious questions: What are the causes? How is it handled? Who handles it?

All of the above mentioned questions regard the context we were hoping to define and explore, so we needed to evaluate the different techniques available to do so, and to select the most appropriate ones for this specific case.

This of course, because each technique has its advantages and disadvantages, which should be taken into account depending on the scope of the research, the time restrictions and the target group, among other characteristics of the given research.

Defining the boundaries

It was decided that the first thing that had to be done, was to define the limits of our context. This is essential, since *the notion of context needs to stop somewhere as the design activity is of limited scope and means* (Stappers et al, 2005). We must know the boundaries of the context we want to explore.

In our particular case, we decided to focus on the staff members of a specific type of bar (the kind known in Dutch as a *kroeg*), and what they consider to be unwanted situations regarding the behavior of clients within the bar and how it was handled.



Figure 1. A picture of the type of bar we wanted to target (known in Dutch as a *kroeg*).

As obvious and easy as it may seem, we realized how important it is to clarify our goal in such a way, in order to properly focus on what we want to know. If this had not been the case, we could have ended up with results explaining *unwanted situations in a bar* in terms of for example the working conditions of the staff (e.g. late salary payments) or from the point of view of the

the participants by stimulating them to make associations and revive memories, and they worked perfectly in this sense. But not only that, the collages turned out to be a very rich and valuable source for the data we collected, as they summarized and illustrated quite well the thoughts of the participants.

In addition to this, during the interviews the collages were also used by the participants as visual aids to support what they were saying. They not only helped introduce the subject matter, but were a vivid part of the discussion that was generated during the interviews. The images and texts worked as constant triggers for memories and comments the participants had regarding unwanted behavior in the bar.

Organizing the sessions with couples instead of individually, meant that the participants could react to each other's comments, add new insights to what was being said, and to generate a bit of discussion, or to illustrate different points of view about the same subject (such as for example how to handle a certain situation). Something that was completely unexpected for us (but a nice surprise nonetheless) about this interaction between the participants during the sessions, was that at certain points they saw in their colleagues' collage something that they had missed to put on their own, and so they were using each other's collages as inspiration or to explain their own points of view.

Another thing that we expected to have an effect on the smoothness of the interviews and on the results themselves was the *in situ* nature of the sessions we planned, by having them take place in the actual bars where our participants worked. As mentioned before, we thought this would be a good way of sensitizing the participants a bit since, due to the time constraints of the project, we were unable to prepare other types of sensitizing tools such as cameras or diaries



Figure 4. A session's participants *in situ*.

And indeed it worked quite well, as the participants, inspired by their surroundings, were able to remember certain episodes more easily and vividly, much in the same manner as the support provided by the collages. They were also able to make spatial references about certain episodes such as how and where they happened

exactly, and do little re-enactments of some of the experiences they've had while dealing with unwanted behavior in their bar.

Even while making the collages, the participants seemed to be very aware of their surroundings as the place itself served as a reminder of their experiences there and to reflect on what they wanted to portray with their collages.

What didn't work well and why?

In general the sessions worked pretty smoothly, yet we had a little setback after the second one. We had done our best to make the collage making exercise as simple and clear as possible, and this was tested during our pilot with two staff members of a bar. What we failed to identify was that these two people were students working as bartenders and they were more familiar with the concept of collages so they picked up on the idea quite easily. Yet for our second session, we dealt with a senior café owner, who found it difficult to understand what we wanted him to do with the collage toolkit.

For the subsequent sessions, we decided to make an example collage to better illustrate how the exercise should be accomplished. It was a simple collage, regarding a different subject and pictures, so as not to influence what they would make of their own collage, but illustrative enough to be able to understand the concept of collage making. This proved to speed up the process of the sessions since it made it easier for the participants to understand what was expected from them.



Figure 5. Example collage to illustrate the concept of collage making.

What could others learn from our process?

I think that the most valuable thing that could be learned from our research process is the *in situ* nature of our group sessions and how they played an important role in the use of generative tools. They not only provided a location where the participants would feel at ease, but it also served as a rich environment that would inspire them.

We consider that the location for the sessions was of a very high importance in order to fully understand the context we were trying to map. It also gave us as researchers an empathic view of the environment in which the participants work, how they move about it, how they interact with their surrounding objects and spaces and how these objects and spaces affected the way they acted.

CONCLUSION

Generative tools are an excellent means of acquiring information from your users, but it is sometimes difficult for the participants of your research to get started with them. And although using sensitizing techniques such as workbooks or disposable cameras are great ways of introducing your participants into the subject at hand, when there is a restriction in time these are not easy or desirable to apply.

In these cases a good way of getting the participants more involved into the subject is by conducting group

sessions in the location where the actions are supposed to take place. The surrounding space and objects can trigger the memory of the participants more easily than if they are interviewed in a neutral location, and they get the opportunity to better illustrate their points by re-enacting certain actions in the right place. *In situ* sessions also have a positive effect in the quality of the generated material via the generative techniques, making this material a valuable source of rich data.

This of course, is only possible to be used depending on the nature of the subject being researched. It works better for research dealing with working environments, and group activities in a specific location, but it could prove very difficult if we tried to apply it to more individual activities or activities that do not necessarily occur in a fixed place (e.g. the use of a mobile phone)

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