Collaborative Reflection: A Practice for Enriching Research Partnerships Spanning Culture, Discipline, and Time

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Abstract

All too often, research partnerships are project-driven and short-lived. Multi-lifespan design and other longer-term approaches offer alternative models. In this paper, we contribute one alternative model for cross-boundary research partnerships spanning longer timeframes and offer one best practice: collaborative reflection. Specifically, we provide an in-depth case study of a multi-lifespan design partnership (over nine years and ongoing) between a Rwandan NGO focused on peacebuilding and a US university research group focused on information design theory and method. First, we document our process for conducting a collaborative reflection that seeks balance among the contributors while navigating differences in culture, discipline, experience, and skills. Next, we reflect on five themes: (1) common ground: sensibilities and commitments; (2) trust; (3) research landscape: crossing nations and institutions; (4) research as a healing mechanism; and (5) multi-lifespan design partnership. We conclude with a discussion of overarching considerations for design researchers who engage in cross-boundary research partnership.

Our Collaborative Reflection Process

Four Guiding Principles:
• Leveraging strengths across disciplines
• Balance teams
• Face-to-face conversation
• Structured participation

Five Step Process: (1) Selecting a paper topic; (2) exchanging discipline specific literature; (3) ideation; (4) selecting themes; and (5) developing reflections.

Five Reflections:
• Common ground
• Sensibilities and commitments
• Trust
• Research landscape: crossing nations and institutions
• Research as a healing mechanism
• Multi-lifespan design partnership

Author Keywords

design reflection; healing; multi-disciplinary; multi-lifespan design; peace; post-conflict; research partnership; research practice; Rwanda, time, trauma, trust, value sensitive design.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Partnerships lie at the heart of collaborative research. While often constructed on the basis of shared interests or complementary expertise, skills or access to technology, populations and contexts, such partnerships depend on a host of other dimensions such as trust, cultural sensitivity, and socio-political context. Further, in fast-paced fields like human-computer interaction (HCI), research collaborations are often project-driven and short-lived. Multi-lifespan design and other longer-term approaches invite alternative models for sustained research partnerships.

In this paper, we reflect on the nature of longer-term research partnerships—their characteristics, opportunities, challenges, benefits, and limitations. We ask what brings such research partnerships together? What sustains them over longer-periods of time? How do these partnerships navigate change over time as partners grow independently and as their respective research landscapes and socio-political contexts evolve?

We conduct our examination through the case of a long-term partnership between the Rwandan non-governmental organization (NGO) Never Again Rwanda

(NAR) and the US university design research project Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal (VRT). Our research partnership spans disciplines—NAR is focused on building peace and social justice in post-genocide Rwanda, while VRT is focused on developing multi-lifespan design and value sensitive design knowledge (e.g., theory, method, and practice) in the field of HCI. Our partnership also spans the national, cultural, and socio-political environments of Rwanda and the United States. Over the course of the partnership, there has been extraordinary change in both contexts, particularly as Rwanda continues to recover from the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis and rebuild its national research infrastructure. The partnership also spans a longer-time period than typical in HCI—our partnership began in 2008 and is ongoing. This collaborative reflection is one joint activity along our shared trajectory. An activity that positions us to examine where we have come from and how; take stock of current strengths, skills, and aspirations; and ask what has changed, and what (if anything) is next.

Our Collaborative Reflection Process

Our goal was to carry out an even-handed cross-cultural, cross-discipline reflection on our nine-year (and ongoing) research partnership. To do so, we adapted the form of design reflection, a structured reflection performed by designers on a given design situation and the remembered design activities in order to improve upon their design processes [3, 5]. In particular, we sought an approach that would provide balance in terms of contribution, while taking into account differences in culture, discipline, experience, and skills. Others [1, 2, 4] have identified the need for such balance in cross-cultural, cross-discipline reflections and pointed to challenges, yet few models

Insights for the HCI Community

Process: Many elements of our collaborative reflection process were successful, in particular the four guiding principles helped account for diverse values, balanced co-authorship, and preserving voice.

Multi-lifespan design: We surfaced specific challenges and questions tied to multi-lifespan design. For example, as partnerships mature, and organization members exit the project, how do relationships continue?

Transferability: In addition to other benefits, we propose collaborative reflection (along with its four guiding principles) as a fruitful practice for exchanging culture, knowledge, and skills among different actors in any project.

exist for how to do so. Toward addressing that gap, we report on the collaborative reflection process we developed (see the sidebar on the previous page for our collaborative reflection process). Our hope is that others engaged in similar collaborative research will adapt and improve upon the guiding principles and steps taken here.

To begin, early on we articulated our intention to create a balanced reflection process. To achieve this end, we stated explicitly that each organization would need to provide honest perspectives and that each person from each organization would need to contribute. At the same time, we explicitly acknowledged three constraints and limitations. First, we were writing a quasi-design reflection paper intended for the HCI community. In that way, VRT had particular discipline knowledge in HCI and design that NAR did not, including familiarity with the form of a design reflection. Second, we were reflecting on our work and writing in English. While all team members were fluent in spoken English, only two individuals both from the VRT team were native speakers. Third, during the 10-day period in which we were collocated in the NAR office in Kigali, the NAR team had local ongoing responsibilities, while the VRT team was devoted almost entirely to this project.

History of Collaboration

The Director of NAR has been on the Advisory Board for the VRT project for nearly a decade, providing ongoing advice and support on culturally sensitive issues as well as connections and entrée to various ministries, NGOs and thought leaders in Rwanda. Correspondingly, the VRT Principal Investigator (PI) and team have provided NAR with advice on research design and proposal development as well as introductions to other research partners for projects related to civic engagement, peacebuilding, mobile technology, and other topics.

Conclusion

In this case study, we have reflected on a multi-lifespan design partnership spanning culture, discipline, and time. In doing so we have developed a process for cross-boundary collaborative reflection and presented a model for what a multi-lifespan design partnership might look like. While the partnership between the NAR and VRT teams is not perfect—no partnership is—we believe we have explored and begun to develop a set of practices and reflection themes that could be adapted by other design researchers whose work engages in cross-boundary research partnership.

Team Bios

Never Again Rwanda
Never Again Rwanda is a peacebuilding and social justice organization founded in response to the 1994 genocide perpetrated against Tutsis. Guided by a vision of a nation where citizens are agents of positive change and work together toward sustainable peace and development, NAR's mission is to enhance citizens' capacity to analyze the root causes of conflict, facilitate dialogue, and appreciate diversity among citizens in order to generate ideas and activities that work toward sustainable peace and socioeconomic development.

Since its inception in 2002, NAR has placed a particular emphasis on youth as the future of a peaceful society. In 2015, NAR extended its interventions to other community members and added participatory action research and advocacy to its core strategies. These broader constituencies and strategies have contributed

to increasing NAR's profile not only as a sound evidence-based advocacy partner for policymaking and governance.

Voice from the Rwanda Tribunal
The Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal [6] is a testbed project to conduct research on multi-lifespan design, funded by the US National Science Foundation. The research seeks to generate two types of contributions. First, design knowledge—theory, methods and practice—to deepen our understanding of longer-term approaches to design processes and outcomes. Second, the research explores opportunities for information systems to contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict settings, particularly with sensitivity to cross-generational perspectives.

In 2008, VRT collected 49 video interviews with personnel from the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). The collection has served as the cornerstone for VRT's work on multi-lifespan design. One strand of work has emphasized envisioning and meaning-making of the interview collection with diverse communities, including with Rwandans in Rwanda [7], with Rwandans living in the diaspora in the United States [8], and with the international justice community in The Hague (in progress). A second strand of work has emphasized the design of information systems to support transitional justice in Rwanda and, more broadly, international justice around the globe.

Author Bios
Joseph Ryarasa Nkurunziza, is a medical doctor with over 10 years' experience in the clinical field, Public health and Peace Building. He is currently the Country Director of Never Again Rwanda, a peace building organization that promotes human rights and advocating peace among the Rwandan youth and the population at large. He has also initiated projects that engage Youth in the Democratic Process in Rwanda, which are implemented in some Rwandan high schools and higher institutions of learning that aim at helping to provide the nation's youth with the skills to make informed decisions in governance and human rights and raise interest in national policy issues and leadership. Dr. Nkurunziza's work in Rwanda gives young people the guidance, encouragement and knowledge to be active citizens. Dr. Nkurunziza is also the Board Director and Co-Founder of Health Development Initiative-Rwanda (HDI), a local NGO committed to improving the health of disadvantaged populations across Rwanda. He has worked extensively with international organizations and Rwandan civil society, and is closely connected to members of the government, international agencies, and local communities. In November 2010 Joseph was honored by Junior Chambers International as one of the 2010 ten outstanding young persons of the world in Osaka Japan.

Batya Friedman is a Professor in the Information School and holds adjunct appointments in the School of Computer Science and Engineering, and the Department of Human-Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington. She co-directs the Value Sensitive Design Research Lab and the UW Tech Policy Lab. Batya pioneered value sensitive design (VSD), an approach to account for human values in the design of information systems. First developed in human-computer interaction, VSD has since been used in architecture, civil engineering,

computer security, energy, human-robotic interaction, information management, land use and transportation, legal theory, and moral philosophy. Batya is currently working on multi-lifespan design and on methods for envisioning – imagining new ideas for leveraging information systems to shape our futures. Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal—a collection of video interviews with personnel from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda—is a first project in this multi-lifespan design research program. Through that work, Batya has been working in Rwanda, in Tanzania and in The Hague on the design of information systems to support healing from widespread violence. Never Again Rwanda is a long-term research partner on this work. In 2012 Batya received the ACM-SIGCHI Social Impact Award and the University Faculty Lecturer award at the University of Washington. She received both her B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

Daisy Yoo is a PhD candidate in the Information School and a member of the Value Sensitive Design Research Lab at the University of Washington. Her work spans the fields of human-computer interaction, design, and information science. In particular, she is interested in the use of digital technologies in politically contested arenas. From 2011 to present, Ms. Yoo continues to work as the lead PhD student on the Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal project to investigate the roles of information systems to support the long-term processes of transitional justice and societal healing in post-genocide Rwanda. In her doctoral thesis, she focuses on addressing challenges of designing with emerging, pluralistic publics in the case of end-of- life law, policy, and practice in the United States. Prior to University of Washington, she received her Master's in Interaction Design from Carnegie Mellon University and

her Bachelor of Science in Industrial Design from Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST).

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