

Contradictions, complexity and the 'conversational self' design research methodology: "Australian Citizens' Parliament" documentary

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of the designer as actor/agency working within and across flows of knowledge, perception and information for filtering, negotiating and mediating design decision-making. The research methodology uses auto-ethnographic writing to construct and explore a series of deliberative conversations as (I /You/ Me / We). Each of these personas offers a distinctive mediatory stance for the designer/self to engage with relations to *other-ness* across personal and public social contexts. As a second order cybernetic approach, the designer/self is thus constructed as being simultaneously participant and observer in ongoing collaborative design conversations as synthesis. These fictive and auto/biographical personae provide access to a range of viewpoints and perspectives, which can be used to actively reflect, mirror and respond to stakeholder interests and investments, whilst effectively being considered in light of the designer's own reflections on, in, and through action (Schön).

Whilst the paper proposes this methodology as having general benefit for design research in any field, its application for a visual design narrative project is described. The case study is of the making of a video documentary about the 'Australian Citizens' Parliament' (2009), as 150 randomly selected citizen participants take part in a deliberation about ways to improve Australian democratic governance systems. The designer's process of decision-making and story telling is guided by using the personae methodology to engage with synthesis of multiple perspectives from the video capture process. Key stages of the script design process are described, where the designer uses the framing and mediating concepts of public/private; and individual/collective (I/ You/ Me/ We) to generate a revised form for the documentary as an essayistic work consisting of a series of ambient scenes. What emerges in this final video piece is an engaging narrative treatment and shared understanding about a uniquely Australian political context, titled 'Deliberation Nation'.

Keywords

designer as actor/agency, experiential narrative, ambient scene design methodology

For the designer as agency/actor, engaging with *social experiential knowledge* in complex negotiations and communication contexts involves working closely with multiple perspectives and approaches from 'problem' stages towards 'solution' stages. The kinds of decision-making that take place throughout these fluid processes are often difficult to make transparent due to the pragmatic and contingent nature of collective/individual mentalities, expertise and sensibilities which carry with them implicit and explicit values and normative assumptions. Kolko (2010) discusses the push towards synthesis in designing as a practice that can be described in terms of what is termed 'sense making'. He comments that synthesis is a means to apply abductive logic 'within the confines of a design problem' (2010, p 20). Kolko describes synthesis practice methods in design as 'reframing, concept mapping, and insight combination', which all emphasise 'prioritizing, judging, and forging connections'. (2010, p27). In this paper, I describe a particular approach for building about design synthesis by capturing project knowledge through auto-ethnographic writing from the designer 'self'. What this approach produces is a set of multiple personae (voices) through written form - as (I, You, Me, and We) personae insights and perspectives about the design problem context. The multiplicity that is generated by the usage of these perspectives provide a range of

insights into possible solutions and sub problems which is similar to Kolko's description of abductive sense-making as 'judging, prioritizing and forging connections'.

Whilst initiated within the subjectivity of the designer's own thoughts and reflections, these personas gather momentum, and become ways to signify and represent a range of external stakeholder perspectives and project concerns. For design research generally, the use of fictive persona is already a well-established methodology shown to be useful and effective for establishing user characteristics and constraints for product designing (Carroll 2000; Pruitt & Adlin 2006). In this paper, I show how the synthesis work of design thinking can be made more concrete when written out using the (I/ You/ Me/ We) personae method. By writing and thinking about design practice using these subjective personae, both individual and collective viewpoints are kept in mind as dynamic spaces of private/public and individual/collective are mediated within and through the design process as it shifts across the space of problem to solution in design practice.

Methodology: Conversational learning and auto-ethnographic writing

Design and Conversation Theory

The cybernetic theory of conversation (Pask 1975) offers ways in which design communication can be explained and understood in terms of knowledge emergence, as new knowledge comes through the productive and generative interactions between conversationalists. The underlying ontology of conversation theory is the premise of an agreement, or, an agreement to disagree which is an interaction producing some kind of new knowledge as shared agreement about the particular context, as suggested by Glanville (2007). As key actor in the process, the designer brings 'expert' knowledge about how these communication scenarios may be nurtured and managed, towards innovation and successful outcomes. The designer is thus in a unique position to mediate, observe and oversee the influence and presence of all manner of experiential knowledge, events and actions which make up the project context as a real-life messy conglomerate. The fluidity of the design as 'problem' becomes clearer as norms and boundaries emerge, which provide frames for the further development of a design 'solution'. The random and contingent nature of such an understanding is similar to Latour's (1986) 'Actor Network Theory', where influences and active contingencies which are both human, and nonhuman (i.e. situational), are recognized and described as part of the social knowledge context – as a form of 'assemblage' (Latour) which the designer seeks to manage and explore. The designer thus leads from the knowledge space of the semi tacit, balancing the effects of concrete everyday experiences into a framing of social knowledge as abstractions as the design process unfolds over time. The designer as expert, understands knowledge complexity, and is also well able to both participate in as well as observe the design activity where they are actively and directly involved. I propose that these are significant features of how designers do design, but which are often so self-evident as to be not fully taken into account in the designing process.

Summary of theory behind the 'conversational self' writing methodology

The methodology for journal writing using these self-personae employs Baker, Jensen and Kolb's (2002) five dialectic frames for conversational learning. In using these frames the designer/author also employs two 'voices' of self, as 'subject' participant, and as 'object' observer, an approach adapted from the work of Margaret Archer (2003). This is shown in Figure 1 below, as a form of what Maturana and Varela (1980) describe as an 'autopoietic' self-producing system for generating and exploring experiential knowledge.

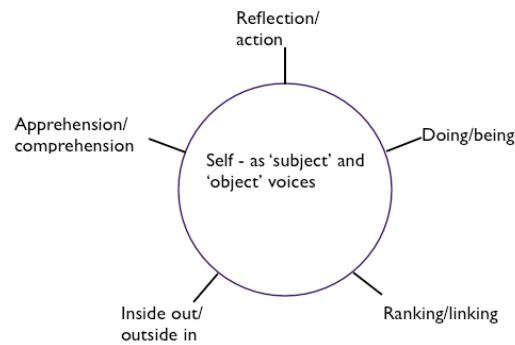


Fig 1: Conversational self as learning system: adapted from Archer (2003) and Baker, Jensen & Kolb (2002)

The configuration shown in Figure 1 provides a constructive means for developing written entries as layers of observation, reflection, and personal commentary. As a result stories within stories are recorded, as instances and episodes that take place in the designing. As a system for writing, these frames may be taken up at any point in the journal writing, they are not linear or prescriptive, but rather, suggestive of nuances of tonality and emphasis in writing styles and content. The first frame, 'Apprehension /Comprehension' provides a starting point to gather up and scope out a diversity of knowledge influences which may be of value for the design context, often linked to a sense of context and time passing. 'Reflection /Action' often takes place as longer forms of writing narrative which relate the history and background of the context. 'Doing /Being' offers a means to capture and note perceptions of the present time and place, as the doing action in a present time frame of human being-ness. 'Inside Out /Outside In' provides a means to evaluate what is emerging against a background of normative values and benchmarks around the design problem context. 'Ranking /Linking' provides a strategic approach for specifically assessing the value of the designing in relation to wider external social contexts. By continual use of the two 'voices' of self, an ambience is maintained across the writing, providing a kind of coherent narrative where idiosyncratic notations and codings come into play. The uses of the two voices of self (as 'subject' self and 'object' self) provide an opening up of the situation for engaging with experiential knowledge at many levels. In the process of writing in this way, the personae of (I/ You/ Me/ We) become personae as points of reference for views and commentary that address all manner of knowledge and knowing about the design problem and possible solutions.

Archer (2003) describes these states of self, as forms of self as agency, which emerge as a result of this self-conscious and deliberate positioning. Archer describes these states as the 'I', 'You', 'Me' and 'We' of the self-reviewing itself as social object. This is shown in Figure 2 as a process of self in review, shifting through different states of self as forms of agency showing how the identity of self is developed through a progressive working through of 'Self' ('I'), 'Primary agency' ('Me'), 'Corporate agency' ('We'), and 'Actor' ('You'). The conversations take place in a concrete way through writing as 'subject' self (SS) and 'Object self (OS) as shown in Figure 2. Thus, 'self' (I) begins the conversation, which progresses through the identifications of 'Me', and 'We', to reach a mature and considered status, as 'You' (Actor). In this way, the self converses with 'itself', as both observer and participant, across past, present and future. What results is a foregrounding of the dynamic interplays between what is 'individual/personal', and what is otherwise 'public/collective'. In effect, these states of self become metaphors for a variety of social communication scenarios. They exist as a unity of parts - they may be addressed and understood as separate approaches, yet they are also one to each other, as analogous components of human interactions within a design context. This sounds complicated, but when used as a process of self-capture, it provides a rich set of options for gathering and reflecting on the wide range of possibilities within a design situation. It is a way of capturing what one could and often is, thinking implicitly, and making these half-formed thoughts more explicit.

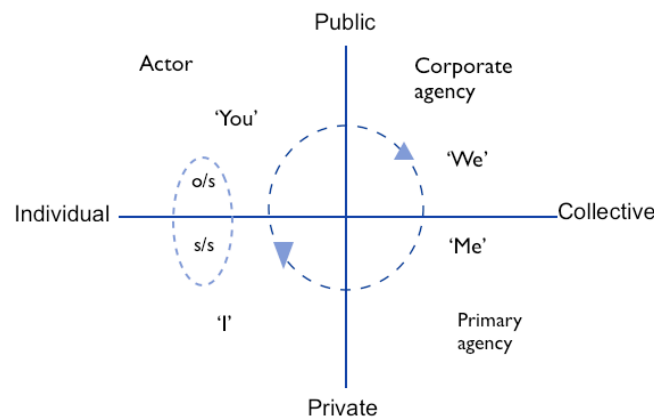


Figure 2: Adapted from Archer (2003: p 124): How the subject reviews itself as social object

As a result of the overall process of writing in this way for design research purposes, key themes emerge about place, time, characters, action, and tension relationships between story elements. The development of the 'what' is integrally bound up with the telling about 'how' and 'why' as the narrative evolves through contextually based references to time, place, actors, intentions, characters, objects, actions. The writing process evolves and configures the personae of self as characters, as voices within the narrative who participate and observe, who join forces at times, and or disagree as they work towards a shared or in-common understanding of some-thing about the situation at hand. What occurs is effectively a writing practice of mediation that takes place between the stances of observation/objectivity; and participation/ subjectivity (Shumack, 2009). As a design research method this is a particular style of abductive thinking for engaging with experiential knowledge and knowing. The method has value for design thinking practice, if and when it suits the designer's own interest and orientation. The process of writing out one's own thinking in this way is initially clumsy and can be fraught with self-doubt and a sense of being 'too personal' (Roth, 2005). However, over time and with practice, I have found the writing begins to flow more easily, and as part of my own designing I have been able to identify and engage with the object/subject voices of self to generate integral and meaningful insights. In effect, what is happening is that I am articulating what it is that I would be thinking, but doing so in a way that orders or structures, makes more self aware the depth of thoughts and influences which are occurring around the design problem. What also occurs is that the focus around being object/subject self creates a rich body of experiential project knowledge about what is collective/ what is individual; what is private/ and what is public. These knowledge strands can be seen as *dialogic framings* of the project that can be woven together towards the problem's solution.

I suggest that this approach to methodological framing using multiple points of view and narrative distance has a particular value for visual design story telling practices in communicating social knowledge, systems and contexts. In visual design, the designer is always present in some way, as a form of silent author, as explicit director, and always as a mediator of the context that is being explored and represented. By explicitly revealing the dialectics of object/subject relationships, the visual designer has much to gain from adapting and exploring the relational spaces of object/subject: participant/observer to encompass the designer's intentions and bias, alongside the capturing and understanding of stakeholders views. In the case study that follows I explain how this approach was explored in the design development of a documentary video that tells the story of an extraordinary national event, the Australian Citizens' Parliament. The final title given to this documentary is 'Deliberation Nation'.

Application: Design of 'Deliberation Nation' documentary

Background

The project involved a collaboration with researchers from the disciplines of political science, political theory and applied politics, and a partner not-for-profit organization (newDemocracy) on the video documentation of what is known as the Australian Citizens' Parliament (CP) research project. Our design team's brief was to produce video documentation of the project over several months. The mission of deliberative processes like the Australian Citizens' Parliament is to review the way the public discusses and engages with politics and political decision-making processes - the space of the 'commons'. The event took place as 150 randomly selected citizens deliberated, then delivered their recommendations at Old Parliament House, Canberra in February 2009. Their task was to answer the question: "How can Australia's political system be strengthened to serve us better?"

It is rare for such large-scale initiatives of deliberative democracy to occur. The success of the Australian CP event was largely due to the planning and coordination that took place prior to the actual three days of the event itself. As a government funded research project the CP had its own objectives, which were driven by research questions from the fields of applied politics, law, political theory and social policy. These involved the design of a system for conversational interactions to occur through deliberation processes, as a staged facilitation around generating new ideas and the process itself of conversation and engagement with the issues at hand using techniques such as the 'World café' and the '21st -century dialogue' with computer tabulated summaries of large scale conversations and suggestions.

The CP event provided a significant opportunity for the researchers and agencies involved to understand better the processes of deliberation and to be able to examine and trace the development of mass scale conversations as an experiment in deliberative democracy at work. As commented by Carson (2008) this large-scale public event can be characterised as an 'insisted space' for democratic participation as distinct to an 'invited space' which would be managed and promoted by governments and power brokers:

"The newDemocracy case study is an example of a nascent social movement of citizens-as-electoral reformers who insist on a place at the decision making table for a mini public because of the democratic deficit that has arisen as a consequence of a faulty system of governance. This site of activity can be described as an "insisted space". " (Carson, p7)

The CP event was momentous and extraordinary, in bringing together a large number of randomly selected citizens with academics, public figures, experts and researchers. Working with an experienced media team, my role was to direct the documentary of the event in its complexity, as a record of the event, but also to capture the essential qualities of deliberative philosophical thinking which underpinned the process. A challenging broad question was asked of the 150 randomly selected citizen participants. The video documentary aims to represent the findings in light of the event goals – to answer the initial research question.

Initial journal writing research

The initial journal writings assisted in framing the shooting script treatments, and approaches. Consideration was also given to how to encapsulate the 'conflict' or key question as a basis for the documentary work. The journal includes references to key protagonists, contingencies of production and resource constraints, and ideas about how to position and extend outward to the viewer. Figure 3 shows the baseline shooting script as a basic narrative spine for the project. The initial story 'arc' was loosely aimed at showing the way the event played out based on linear time - the background, the event taking place, and reflections about what was learnt. Part of the design problem was the diversity of footage shot and the sheer amount of material with which to select from.

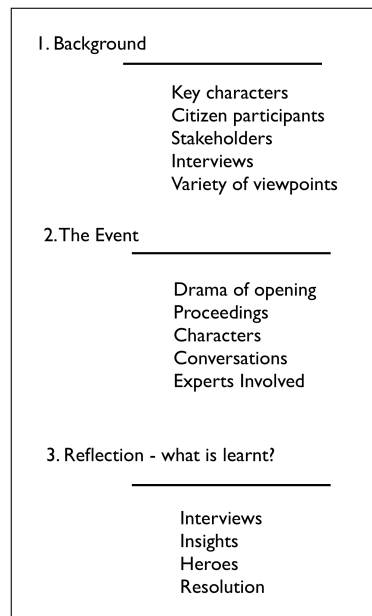


Figure 3: Baseline shooting script for documentary

Second stage script design concept

As the shooting progressed, key characters emerged, and the story lines became cluttered with possibilities and options for nuances and story 'hooks' on which to hang audience interest. The initial editing process followed the shooting script structure as a chronological unfolding of the event. Despite variety of video material that was included the tone or voice which came through in this first draft was authorial, factual, dry and often confusing. In order to develop a finer and more insightful story with greater human interest, the second draft focused on building a story around the theme of 'journey'. This was portrayed on several levels - as a journey being taken by a range of different stakeholder groups, and as a transformative process involving individuals, and groups. As shown in Figure 4 these themes were elders, teachers, hero characters, interaction, knowledge transfer, self-esteem and taking actions.

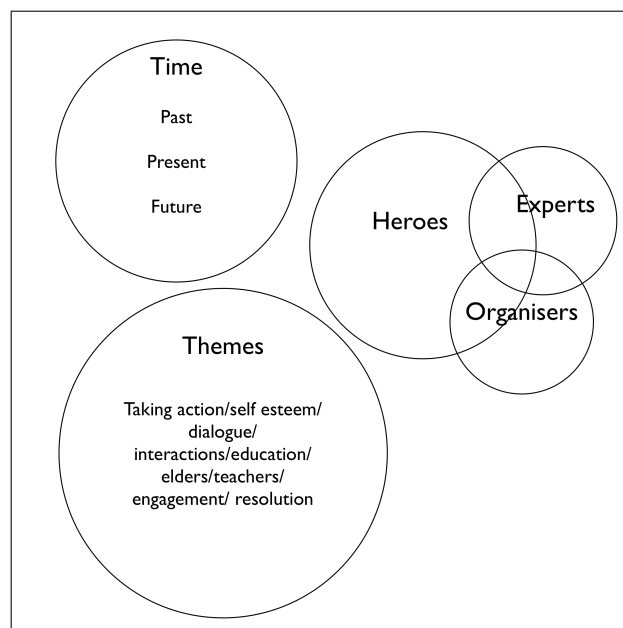


Figure 4: Second stage script as 'journey' thematic

Introducing the Personae of Self as Frames for the Script Design

Figure 4 shows the second phase of the documentary script development. It was thought that the story journey was still unclear, and lacked a sense of depth and cohesion in the script treatment and ambience. On reflection, it seemed that the first draft (Figure 1) of the shooting script presented a kind of authorial tone that was factual and highly distanced. The second draft (Figure 4) was overly personal, too close, a collection of many insights, thoughts and views which did not really tell a meaningful story about what had happened at this momentous event. Reflections led to a structural shift from an exposition about the actions of the event, to a more essayistic approach where a narrator asks a series of questions, and then these are answered through a layering process of different subject/object voices. The story telling needed a protagonist, a narrator figure to provide continuity and as an insight bridge for the imagined viewer, to balance views and perspectives, to moderate and mediate the range of views and tonalities being introduced. In order to begin to work with this dynamic, the four personae of self from the 'conversational self' research were overlaid onto the script map as a means of weaving the storylines together. One of the CP participants became the 'everyman' protagonist narrator as a focus for these new scripting directions. The journal writing process guided these reflections and decisions, resulting in a new approach where the personae of self were introduced to help frame the script's structure.

Figure 5 shows the way in which the four personae of subject/object self are now considered within the visual text. Each of these voices within the documentary represents a different mediatory presence and tone as a result of a sense of *rhetorical distance*. '*I*' works primarily through self-expression and engagement with individual concrete experiences through curiosity and interest, providing an idiosyncratic and personal mediatory tone. '*You*' self is the mature and resolved custodian of the emerging decisions about a particular design situation, the authorial factual voice. '*Me*' engages with commitment to in-common histories and cultural and social identities, so is the often vague and imaginative mediatory tone. '*We*' operates in the domain of current expert knowledge, and what is already part of a shared common public social context. This structure provides a scaffold upon which to begin re-shaping the script design around these concepts as ambient scenes.

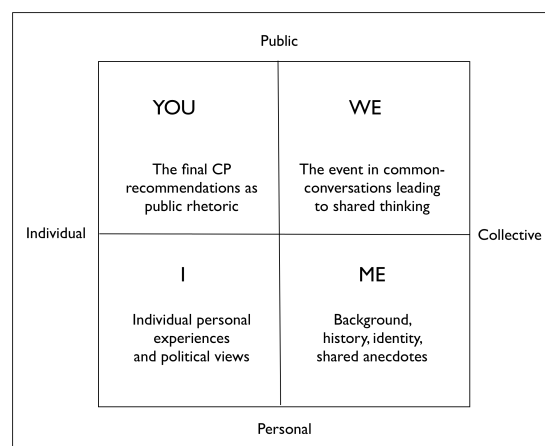


Figure 5: Alignment of personae as mediatory presences within the re-design for documentary script

The Process of Concept Development Using Self Personae – a series of ambient scenes

As a result of this new approach, the video material, which had been already selected from the first cut of video footage, was broken down into component parts, loosely framed around a series of narrator 'questions'. This initially took place using coloured index cards, resulting in a rich layered script treatment that highlighted the new role of a narrator in guiding the storytelling. The introduction of the 'narrator' creates an ambience around each section that is structured around a rhythm of the (I/ You/ Me/ We) perspectives within the visual script design. The key question or

'conflict' remains central, and the short essayistic vignettes each addresses aspects of complexity, contradiction and deliberations as the event unfolds. What is critical in adopting this ambient scenes approach is that the narrator's role is dialectic - presenting at least two perspectives relative to each other, not a single viewpoint to drive the overall story-telling forward. This takes place as a form of questioning which keeps the ambience of the themes open-ended and dynamic, but with a clear narrative idea. Figure 6 shows how the ambient scenes are constructed as a form of semantic architecture to underpin the script re-writing. Each of the fourteen vignettes is based around:

- 1/ A concept ideas for the development of the story
- 2/ The narrator evident before, during, or after the main action
- 3/ An ambient emphasis on each setting as a dialectic interaction between various combinations of these personae (as I/Me/We/You)

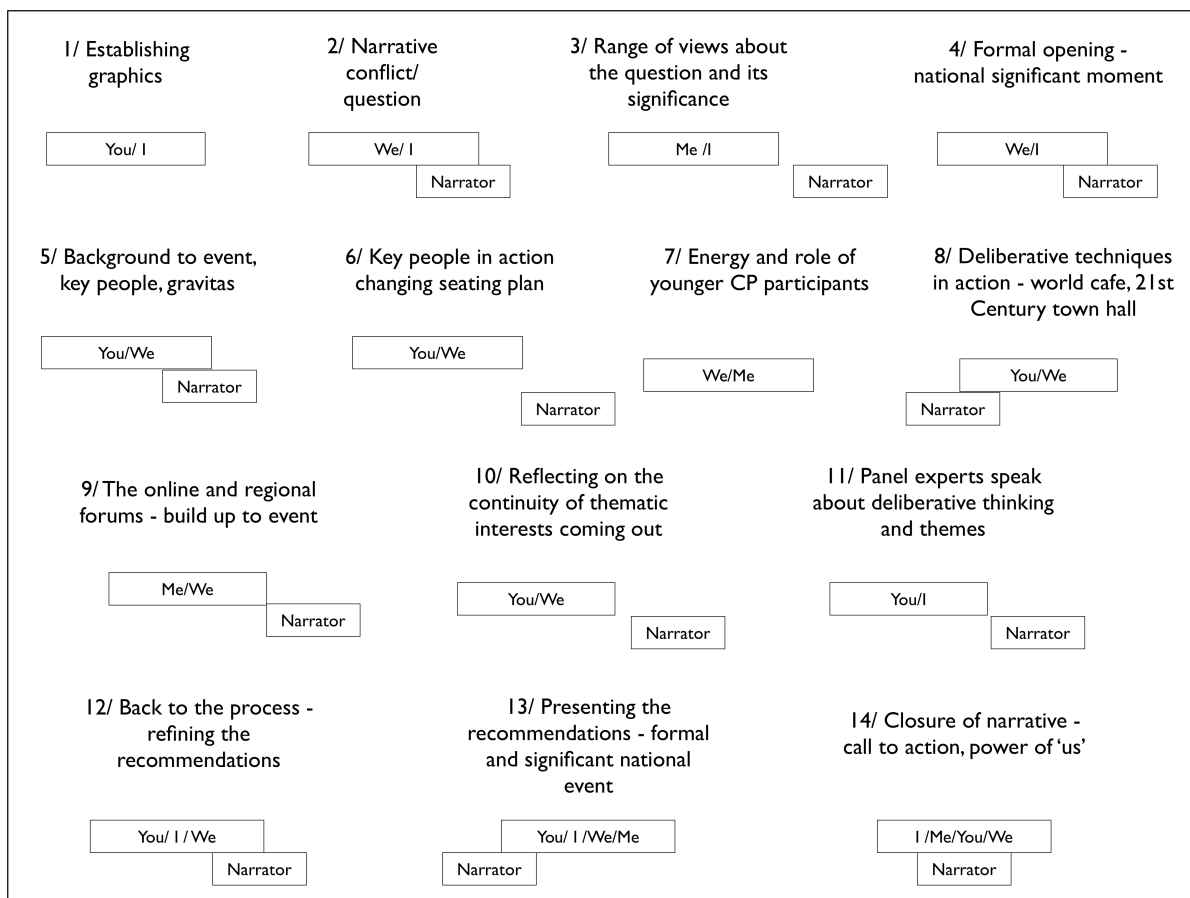


Figure 6: The script design as ambient scenes - a concept mapping of the narrator with the self-personae

As a result of configuring the script design using this approach, the story continued to become clearer, and key moments and characters emerged within the visual text. The narrator became a critical figure in the telling of the story, as a linking element across the hour-long documentary program. As the editing continued to shape and refine the work, further changes were integrated, but the semantic scaffolding that was established as a result of this approach continues to support and endure. On reflection, I believe that this approach was of particular benefit in the shaping of a rich documentary story where, as with documentary scripts in general, the actual ending is unknown in the initial planning stages. The application of a design methodology such as this one is, I propose, a valid and purposeful manner for the design of both documentary and factual narratives.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined an approach to design synthesis which engages with multiple subjectivities, as the designer self, is extended and negotiated through understandings of complexity, contradiction and negotiations with understanding other-ness and story-telling. The design process is shown as a movement towards solution, which takes place as a process that has its own momentum, critical pathways, and points of interest. What emerges from this design research approach is a focus on the development of a language around, and about, the dynamics of synthesis as a practice that involves transformative and creative thinking. The value of this approach has been shown in its application to a particular process of visual story-telling for managing complex knowledge and for how it can assist in crafting the 'raw material' of experience towards documentary design practices in a 'solid, useful and unique way' (Benjamin 1992).

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