Rethinking Participatory Design Research in Virtual Environments: A Case Study

Valerie Nesset[a] & Owen Stewart-Robertson[b]

[ab]University at Buffalo, State University of New York, USA

[a]vmnesset@buffalo.edu; [b]owenstew@buffalo.edu

ABSTRACT

After the COVID-19-related closure of most institutions, including public libraries, in March 2020, there arose a need for significant modifications to research methods for an ongoing three-year IMLS-sponsored project investigating the use of participatory design techniques, specifically, Bonded Design (BD), to enable meaningful collaboration between public librarians and older adults in development of targeted programming and services. The foremost modification involves converting face-to-face design sessions to virtual, to allow older adults to participate from their homes. Shifting to a completely virtual environment actually benefits the participatory goals of this research; for example, by going virtual it is surmised that the possibilities for greater solicitation of non-library users for participation will broaden the perspectives and expertise of the design team and allow for the inclusion of the older adult participants in all aspects of the research design. However, this new reliance on technology to host low-tech activities within the shared space of the design team, and inherent in BD, has also introduced new complexities for planning: 1) the focus of investigation must remain on the efficacy of the BD methodology and not the hosting technologies; 2) as BD emphasizes equity among its members in recognition of the unique expertise each team member brings, librarian-researchers must devise ways of avoiding teacher-student hierarchies when helping those older adult participants who may experience difficulties using the technology; and 3) methods will need to be developed to support any participants not comfortable engaging in virtual environments due to issues such as privacy concerns.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information needs; information use; specific populations.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS