

Researchers as Makers: Exploring the Role of Making in Academic Research

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Abstract

This workshop will provide a unique opportunity to consider how making and fixing, practices which frequently take place during the course of academic research, can provide unique, different and insightful research perspectives. To actively explore the connection between making and research, each participant will be asked to create a tangible artifact prior to the workshop which will serve as an embodiment of his/her research or some aspect of this research. The term tangible artifact is used broadly here and can include artifacts produced using various mediums. The guiding questions are: 1) How can the process of making challenge us to be more self-reflective and critical about the research we are conducting? 2) Can making add a dimension of tangibility to research that is distinct from other research activities? 3) How can reflecting on making and telling stories about the making process illuminate and stimulate learning and assist in research conceptualization?

Keywords: making, fixing, materiality, research

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1 Introduction

The increasing digitization of our world, from data and knowledge to social interactions and relationships has prompted scholars in information and social sciences to consider the significance of materiality through making and fixing. These questions have been explored in various socio-technical contexts, from book restoration to 3D printing. In these activities, reflection is often essential, as it allows the maker to pivot and maneuver around challenges, to creatively and critically design, develop and invent. Reflecting on the act of making, both during and after the making process, can help uncover and make salient the invisible traces of making, and in the process provide the opportunity to stimulate reflection on the relationship between maker and material results.

Making and fixing are practices that, at their core, center on the relationships among information, people and technology. Previous research conducted by several of the hosts of this workshop examines how hands-on production and/or repair can enable one to explore relationships between digital technologies and society in a deep and reflective manner.^{1,2} Additional research has focused on the intersection of technical skills and materiality.³

¹ Jackson, S.J, Pompe, A., Krieshok, G. (2012) “Repair Worlds: Maintenance, Repair, and ICT for Development in Rural Namibia,” in Proceedings of the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) Conference, Seattle, Washington, Feb 11-15, 2012

² Ratto, M. (2011). “Critical Making: conceptual and material studies in technology and social life”, *The Information Society* 27(4).

³ Rosner, D. K. (2012). *The Material Practices of Collaboration*. Proceedings of the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) Conference, Seattle, Washington, Feb 11-15, 2012

Yet, scholars rarely use these practices as a self-reflective lens through which to further develop their own research. Ian Bogost has used the term “carpentry” to describe the philosophical practice of craftwork.⁴ Bogost contends that philosophers (and academics for that matter) tend to relegate productivity to the act of writing, which is only one, less accessible activity. To remedy this issue, he calls for philosophers from various fields to engage in the act of doing, by making things. The reason being that philosophy should serve the world and inform what he calls “the carpentry of things”- the way things mold each other and the broader world.⁵

Taking inspiration from this call to action, this workshop will provide a unique opportunity to consider how making and fixing, practices which frequently take place during the course of academic research, can provide unique, different and insightful research perspectives. To actively explore the connection between making and research, each participant will be asked to create a tangible artifact prior to the workshop which will serve as an embodiment of his/her research or some aspect of this research. The term tangible artifact is used broadly here and can include artifacts produced using mediums such as photography, sewing, woodworking or other related approaches.

The following questions will be used to broadly frame our discussions about the significance of making in relation to academic research and the construction of research narratives:

1. How can the process of making challenge us to be more self-reflective and critical about the research we are conducting?
2. Can making add a dimension of tangibility to research that is distinct from other research activities?
3. How can reflecting on making and telling stories about the making process illuminate and stimulate learning and assist in research conceptualization?

The intended audience for this workshop will be scholars who are interested in exploring how their making skills can help deepen their engagement with their research as well as those scholars interested in exploring materiality in their work.

In accordance with this year’s iConference theme, “Breaking Down Walls: Culture-Context-Computing,” this workshop will explore how the unconventional lens of making can inform the narrative crafted by academic researchers.

2 Participants

Interested participants should submit a 500-word position statement that includes a brief description of the individual’s area of research and addresses the following question: How do you currently practice making or fixing in your research? Scholars interested in participating should submit their position statements to klhassma@syr.edu by Feb. 17, 2014. Participants will also be asked to create or bring some type of existing tangible artifact that embodies their research to the iConference.

3 Tentative Workshop Agenda

9:30-10:00	Welcome & Introductions
10:00-11:00	Artifact Sharing Session in Small Groups
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:15	Large Group Discussion of Artifact Sharing

⁴ Bogost, I. (2012). *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

⁵ Bogost, I. (2012, May 5). *The Aesthetics of Philosophical Carpentry* [Blog Post].

12:15-1:00	Lunch
1:00-2:30	Interactive Discussion w/ Open Design City and Fab Lab Berlin
2:30-4:00	Zine Making Session
4:00-5:30	Visit/Tour of Open Design City

The morning half of the workshop will be dedicated to sharing and discussion, built around the tangible artifacts that participants bring to the workshop. In small groups, each individual will share the process of making their artifact and how it serves as an embodiment of research, which will be followed by discussion to highlight common themes and identify fertile differences. During the last half hour of the morning sharing session, each small group will also be asked to share their insights with the larger group. We envision small groups to consist of 4-5 people.

In the afternoon, we will begin with a hands-on group activity, developed in concert with our panelists, which will be followed by an interactive discussion. The discussion will feature speakers from the Berlin makerspaces, Open Design City and Fab Lab Berlin. The workshop will end with a field trip to Open Design City (ODC), where session participants will have the chance to experience a physical space created specifically for making. Open Design City is within walking distance of the conference venue, which will make it logistically easy for participants to travel there.