Report hot topic workshop
Milan, 20 November 2018

Introducing Design culture in Social Innovation and in the Public Sector

The 20 November 2018 POLIMI/UNIBO run the hot topic workshop on the issue of how to use design competences and methodology in public sector and in social innovation.

The workshop started from the consideration that the economic, demographic, social, and environmental long-term challenges are calling for deep changes, questioning many of the assumptions that have underpinned public services and posing new challenges for institutions, policy makers, civil servants, and communities. While austerity measures are being adopted, innovative solutions based on the active involvement and engagement of citizens emerge as a new paradigm, questioning the established welfare systems and raising quite a few unsolved problems. In this scenario, design thinking (Brown, 2009) is being interpreted as a mean to generate innovative solutions, to reshape services and to change the ways in which they are conceived and delivered. The workshop will investigate how service and participatory design processes can be applied to foster innovation in the public sector, and how prototypes and small-scale experiments can be scaled and turned into diffused practices.

The workshop put together 15 people to discuss the following Main questions and challenges:
What is the desired impact of design culture on public sector and on SI?
How can we introduce design culture as an agent of change in public organisations?
How can we relate design experiments to policy making to create impact and scale innovative solutions in the public sector?

Participants
Francesca Rizzo – University of Bologna/Politecnico di Milano
Alessandro Deserti – Politecnico di Milano
Guy Julier – Aalto University
Sabine Juginger Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts
Nicola Morelli – Aalborg University
Anna Meroni – Politecnico di Milano
Daniela Sangiorgi – Politecnico di Milano
Fiorenza Lipparini – Plus value
Stefano Maffei- Polifactory – Politecnico di Milano fablab
Massimo Bianchini - Politecnico di Milano fablab
Stefano Crabu – Politecnico di Milano and University of Padova
Marzia Mortati – Politecnico di Milano

5 PhD students from the Politecnico di Milano PhD programme have been invited on the basis of their research interest as described in their dissertations.

Figure 1: participants in the hot topic workshop hold in Milano the 20th of November 2018.

Format

Morning session 10.00 – 12.30
Participants had 15 minutes to give a presentation.
They have been invited to present research results coming from their recent and ongoing
activities both in service design implementation projects as well as in reflective-oriented
research on case studies, current practices, trends.

Afternoon session: 13.30 – 15.30
Discussion in group.

Main results
In the following the main results emerging from the discussion are reported for each of the
research questions that guided the workshop

What is the desired impact of design culture on public sector and on SI?
If we want to be realistic and not just relying on an over-enthusiastic approach – we must be
aware that any attempt to transform public bodies must take into account that public sector
innovation is severely limited by an array of barriers.

How can we introduce design culture as an agent of change in public organisations?

We thus hypothesise that the introduction of DT in any organisation, and specifically in new
contexts such as the third and the public sector, should be based on its practice, or else in a
learning by- doing framework that can be complemented with reflection to achieve a
sustainable transformation. This is not only in line with generic organisational learning
principles, but also with the construction of design knowledge and culture, which is
historically bound to practice. In such a context, the role of experimentation, a core ingredient
of the design disciplines, can be regarded as key to knowledge creation and appropriation.

Design experiments can then be seen not only as part of the design process, typically meant to test solutions and improve them in an interactive way within a trial-and-error framework, but also as boundary objects (Wegner, 1998) that may serve as learning experiences (Beckman & Barry, 2007). Therefore, the experimentation loop can be interpreted as a key element for the introduction of DT methodologies and tools within organisations.

At the core of this paper resides the idea that innovation, organisational change and learning are tightly interwoven, and that the introduction of DT as a means to sustain social and public sector innovation can (and should) be integrated with an experiential learning framework. This arrangement gives way to the possibility of engaging internal and external knowledge and resources, establishing a positive transformative environment for both third sector organisations and the PA, based on the external interaction among diverse actors and levels of governance, and the internal interaction among functions/divisions. Innovation projects, typically taking the form of small-scale experiments dealing with the development of new services or with the redesign of the existing ones, are at the core of the experiential learning process, and should thus be interpreted not only – which is their first objective - as ways of giving shape to innovative services better responding to pressing societal challenges, but also as ways of triggering and supporting an interactive and reflective transformation

How can we relate design experiments to policy making to create impact and scale innovative solutions in the public sector?

In most established policymaking frameworks, policies are primarily designed to provide answers to specific problems. Increasingly, the field of public sector innovation is asking more of the way policy and services are formulated: dominant public sector responses have a tendency to focus on addressing the symptoms rather than the root causes of social challenges. There is value in having public sector agencies adopt a more systemic, joined-up approach to specific policy areas (e.g. labour, education, housing etc.), and seeking to understand users' needs and realities. It is in fact rare to find policy and service solutions so visionary that they understand that problems (and responses) may be integrated and interdependent, which is exactly what is happing in Turin. If we look at the problem from the perspective of citizens, it is likely that problems of housing, labour market and social integration may systemically and disproportionately affect some groups or individual. Responses are currently diverse and non-integrated, being provided through separate silos of disconnected organizational units or by a scattered system of actors operating at different levels. Also, while the policymaking process may be driven by good intentions, the actual implementation of policies may be ineffective due to cultural and knowledge gaps, a lack of capacity and a lack of readiness.

Conclusion and future steps

A number of issues emerged over the the hot topic workshop which were seen to have wider relevance to public sector and SI contexts across Europe . The following are the key challenges that emerged regarding the introduction of service design and social innovation methodologies in the public sector.

1. Public employees are in need of new skills through hands-on approaches.
Most of the EU public administrations run teaching activities (internal or external courses) meant to re-skill their workforces. For many reasons, these activities are ineffective (old formats, boring topics, approaches far from practical application and the core interest of the attendees, etc.). According to those who took part in the co-design workshops, and to the opinion of the head of the HR department of the Municipality, a hands-on approach (learning-

by-doing in practical experimentation) emerges as a much better way of creating knowledge and skills.

2. Public policy silos need to abolished and substituted with systemic thinking and user-centred approaches.

We need to re-think policies and policymaking assuming a user centred perspective: this means taking into account not only what different actors, sectors and measures can do to improve the lives of citizens, but also and primarily what they can do together, in order to provide to users more integrated answers (knowledge and process silos) and new integrated services.

Most often the difficulty is to reconnect the design of a policy with its real implementation. A coherent explanation of the difficulty to bridge ideation and implementation of new services could be linked with the policy - that the public sector has widely applied in Europe over the past years - of outsourcing service implementation and delivery to intermediaries. Extensive externalisation of the delivery of its services may actually prevent an organisation and its employees to learn from the interaction with users, and to better design the new services capturing factors that reside in their implementation at later stages. In our view, both to avoid this problem and to render the service co-design process effective through the involvement of all the relevant actors involved, public procurement should be redesigned. This can be done by adopting innovative and experimental public procurement processes that allow public organisation to collaborate with the whole system of actors potentially involved in the delivery of the service, as well as with the interested stakeholders, while ensuring transparency and fairness in decision making and public expenditure.

3. Synergies can be found in connecting social and public sector innovation.
Public sector experimentation, such as this ongoing example in the Turin municipality, demonstrate the complex nature of challenges facing the public sector and the need for public administrations to open up to unprecedented forms of collaboration with citizens and external actors and stakeholders. This experimentation is also proving to be a promising opportunity to connect social and public sector innovation: two fields that until now have been largely analysed as separate phenomena.

As future step we would like to collect the participants presentations and transform this materials in a collection of chapters for a book.