

## Drop your tools (Workshop)

### Exploring qualities of transformative relationships in design

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# RIVERS OF CONVERSATIONS

RELATING SYSTEMS THINKING & DESIGN  
RSD13 | OCTOBER 2024

## Drop Your Tools

**Exploring qualities of transformative relationships in design.**

**Emile Mazerant and Frido Smulders**

This workshop delves into the essential qualities of transformative relationships within design processes, focusing on the interactions among designers, clients, and other relevant stakeholders. Grounded in the framework of transformative learning, we identify interpersonal connections as pivotal in guiding actors through design transformations. Specifically, transformation in design entails the adoption of—and engagement in—novel frames to increase the likelihood of implementing proposed designs. This transformation often necessitates actors to reevaluate and potentially abandon their existing "tools" – symbols, artefacts, activities, and relations – which were previously integral to their pre-existing problem frames, routines, and role-identity.

Drawing from Weick's (1996) reflections on firefighters' responses to sudden change, where some succeeded by dropping their tools while others perished due to their reluctance, the workshop will explore factors influencing individuals' attachment to their tools and their ability to let go of them. Concepts such as justification, trust, and identity will be explored to understand how people's relationships with their tools shape their behaviour and responses to change.

The workshop further investigates the notion of the "relational tool" using Improvisational Theatre, where actors navigate uncertainty collaboratively, adapt to emerging narratives, and collaborate effectively by letting go of individual control and embracing collective creativity. Participants will gain insights into

how relational dynamics can facilitate transformative change in design processes.

By delving into these themes, the workshop aims to equip participants with insights and practical strategies for fostering transformative relationships and facilitating organisational and systemic change through design transformations.

KEYWORDS: reframing, design impact, transformative relationships, social dynamics

RSD TOPIC(S): Economics & Organizations, Methods & Methodology, Sociotechnical Systems

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## **Context and aim of the workshop**

This workshop aims to explore the required qualities of transformative relationships between designers, their clients and other relevant actors in design and framing processes in organisations. Transformative relationships, within the framework of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), here refer to interpersonal connections that play a pivotal role in facilitating the transformation of actors in a design process.

Transformation in design refers to the adoption of a new frame on a design task and is required to increase the chance that proposed designs will be implemented by relevant actors (Mazerant & Van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2023). Such transformations through reframing require actors to change or drop their 'tools'. Tools here refer to the symbols, artefacts, activities, and relations (e.g., Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021), that made sense within the pre-existing problem frames of these actors, and how actors relate to these. In reframing processes in design, this required transformation might become existential when it involves transforming the tools of embedded actors.

On dropping one's tools, Weick (1996) reflects on two situations where groups of firefighters in the midst of severe bushfires were commanded to drop their heavy tools and run as the situation suddenly changed. Some did and escaped, while others, unable to let go of their equipment, perished in the fire. Weick lists and elaborates on ten possible reasons why the firefighters did not drop their tools, like Justification, Trust, and Identity. Weick states that understanding how people relate to their tools requires

interpreting their behavior using such concepts as essential interrelated components of a social system that become visible only when we focus on relationships. In this workshop, we explore these components as qualities of transformative relationships, supporting organizational actors to drop their 'tools', to enable design transformations.

In the workshop we explore the 'relational tool' in design transformations using Improvisational Theatre, a context where the focus is mainly on relationships in a continuously changing and uncertain environment (e.g., Barrett et al., 2018; Friis & Larsen, 2006; Larsen, 2005; Vera & Crossan, 2005; Weick, 1998). Improv actors build scenes iteratively, interactively, and on-the-go. As such, they are continuously required to let go of their own ideas and adapt to the emerging narrative. Since there is no script to fall back on, progress requires the courage to jointly step into the unknown. For a shared narrative to emerge in such a way, actors rely on the qualities of the relationships with the other actors to let go of control – and their (kn)own tools.

## **Topics covered**

### **Ice-berg model (Vink and Koskela-Huotari, 2021)**

Both researchers and design practitioners are welcome to this in-person workshop. We use the ice-berg model as presented by Vink and Koskela-Huotari (2021) to outline the visible tools of their community/ies of practice and attempt to articulate the invisible institutional pillars (Regulative, Normative, and Cultural-Cognitive). The model presents a conceptual framework that illustrates the depth and complexity of service ecosystems. At the surface level, observable elements such as tangible products, interactions, and transactions are readily apparent. However, beneath this visible layer lie deeper, often intangible components, including underlying motivations, values, norms, and socio-cultural contexts. These hidden aspects profoundly influence the design and delivery of services but may not be immediately apparent to stakeholders. In the context of this workshop, we use the model to structure the reflection and discussion about "tools" within communities of practice.

### **Drop your tools (Weick, 1996)**

In addition to the ice-berg model, we use the list of ten possible reasons that Weick (1996) suggests as to why the firefighters in his analysis were, or were not, able to drop their tools when the situation required them to do so. These are:

1. Listening: The command simply was not audible to everyone.
2. Justification: People do not change in the absence of a clear reason.
3. Trust: People persist when they do not trust the person asking for change.
4. Control: existing rationality can complicate letting go of familiar cause-and-effect relationships.
5. Skill at dropping: Simply not knowing how to release a tool.
6. Skill with replacement activity: Finding the perspective of new tools more exciting than holding onto the old ones.
7. Failure: Dropping your tools feels like admitting failure. Holding on to them postpones that.
8. Social Dynamics: Following the behaviour of others.
9. Consequences: Holding onto tools in the absence of the belief that letting go will make any difference.
10. Identity: People and their tools are inseparable. Tools are essential in defining one's role, job, and other responsibilities. Who am I without my tools? Letting go of your tools might equate to letting go of your pride.

In this workshop, we use these ten reasons to reflect on our socio-interactive improvisation experiences. In addition, they guide our exploration of what dropping one's tools requires of the qualities of the relationships between involved actors, and what the implications might be for our practices and research.

### **(Applied) theatrical improvisation**

Several scholars use improvisational performance arts in music and theatre as a lens for studying organizational- and team processes such as learning, change, and innovation (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Barrett et al., 2018; Friis & Larsen, 2006; Larsen, 2005; Vera & Crossan, 2005; Weick, 1998). Improvisation is often considered a mechanism, and/or set of rules, for teams and organisations to be more spontaneous and comfortable in

explorative behaviour, or as a way to deal with the tensions between exploration and exploitation (March, 1991). However, research into the required qualities of the relationship between organisational actors for them to improvise and move away from *their (!) knowns* and into the unknown is scarce.

## **Potential Outputs**

Participants will experience and explore an actor's perspective in "dropping one's tools" and gain possible insights into the required qualities of transformative relationships in reframing processes. As an additional perspective on reframing processes, this helps participants to better understand the "relational tool" in achieving impact with design.

Organisers, first of all, gain insights into how (well/easily) members of a community of practice are able to articulate their visible and invisible tools. Second, a potential output is to explore what members of the present community/ies of practice consider to be relevant qualities of transformative relationships in reframing processes in organisational settings. Third, organisers will gain a better understanding of which of Weick's explanations of being reluctant/able to drop one's tools apply. As this novel workshop is currently envisioned to be repeated within multiple organisational settings, this may be valuable data for future publications.

## **Agenda**

This is a ±3-4 hour, in-person and highly interactive workshop with 12-20 participants. Both researchers and design practitioners are welcome.

First, in subgroups, participants outline the visible tools of their community/ies of practice and attempt to articulate the invisible institutional pillars (Regulative, Normative, and Cultural-Cognitive). We introduce the ice-berg model as presented by Vink and Koskela-Huotari (2021) for doing so. (± 60 minutes)

Next, we will take participants along a mini-workshop in improvisational theatre, focusing on group dynamics that affect individuals in letting go of their own ideas, in being spontaneous, and in playing. Participants engage in game-based exercises into the unknown. We consistently reflect on individual experiences and how these possibly

connect to Weick's (1996) ten explanations for (not) being able to drop one's tools.  
(±90-120 minutes)

To conclude, in subgroups, we combine the outcomes of the first part and the second part to explore the required qualities of transformative relationships in facilitating embedded organizational actors to "drop their tools" in reframing processes in design.  
(±60-90 minutes)

This workshop requires:

- a (studio?) set-up with sufficient open space to move around (minimum 20 m2) and tables/chairs on the side, facilitating groups of 3-4 participants, preferably with minimal view for non-participants and some (wall?)-space to put posters/flip-charts
- projector/screen for keynote presentation
- preferably a flip-chart

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## **Facilitator/organiser profile**

**Emile Mazerant** (MSc), Delft University of Technology, [e.b.mazerant@tudelft.nl](mailto:e.b.mazerant@tudelft.nl), is a PhD candidate, lecturer, and professional developer of organisational creativity and innovation. Fascinated by social dynamics in related processes, he has over fifteen years of experience in designing and moderating workshops in organisational creativity, group training, and theatrical and applied improvisation.

**Frido Smulders** (Prof.), Delft University of Technology, [F.E.H.M.Smulders@tudelft.nl](mailto:F.E.H.M.Smulders@tudelft.nl), is a full Professor Entrepreneurial Engineering by Design at the school of Industrial Design Engineering and Delft Centre of Entrepreneurship, Delft University of Technology. His work in academia and in industry focuses on the socio-interactive dimension of innovative and entrepreneurial endeavours.

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