



Delft University of Technology

Document Version

Final published version

Licence

Dutch Copyright Act (Article 25fa)

Citation (APA)

Sleeswijk Visser, F., Stappers, P. J., & Sanders, E. B. N. (2026). Two decades of contextmapping: experiences from education. *CoDesign*, Article 2612238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2612238>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Copyright

In case the licence states "Dutch Copyright Act (Article 25fa)", this publication was made available Green Open Access via the TU Delft Institutional Repository pursuant to Dutch Copyright Act (Article 25fa, the Taverne amendment). This provision does not affect copyright ownership.
Unless copyright is transferred by contract or statute, it remains with the copyright holder.

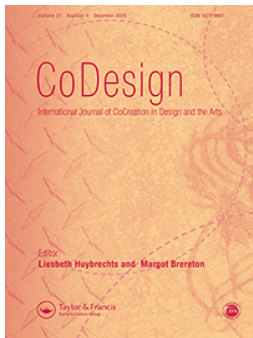
Sharing and reuse

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights.
We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This work is downloaded from Delft University of Technology.



Two decades of contextmapping: experiences from education

F. Sleeswijk Visser, P. J. Stappers & E. B.-N. Sanders

To cite this article: F. Sleeswijk Visser, P. J. Stappers & E. B.-N. Sanders (12 Jan 2026): Two decades of contextmapping: experiences from education, CoDesign, DOI: [10.1080/15710882.2025.2612238](https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2612238)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2612238>



View supplementary material [↗](#)



Published online: 12 Jan 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 179



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Two decades of contextmapping: experiences from education

1. Introduction

Two decades ago, Co-Design practices saw a rise, as marked by the launch of this journal. At the time, many design researchers, including the authors, were looking for structured ways to bring on board people into design processes ‘as experts of their experience’. In the article ‘*Contextmapping: Experiences from Practice*’ (2005) we described our understanding of codesign, giving guiding principles (see Table 1; for more detail see the Field Guide in the appendix), structure diagrams, and an appendix with concrete, actionable details for the techniques.

A reason for the appeal of the article was its combination of theory and practice. In part, this mix came about through the different backgrounds of the authors. Liz had pioneering experience in design practice in industry, using a background from anthropology, psychology; Froukje was designer who graduated on applying these techniques, and Pieter Jan came from a multidisciplinary research background and had responsibility for constructing a large education programme.

The term ‘contextmapping’ was chosen to express the increased emphasis in design education and design practice to understand not just the functional, economic, and aesthetic sides of product design, but also the physical, social, and cultural context and personal state of the ‘users’ (a term that has since widened to ‘humans’, ‘people’, as design broadened its scope).

2. History

In the years following, the article was at the basis of codesign education at our universities which host sizeable design programmes. The article also formed the basis for the textbook *Convivial Toolbox* (2012), various workshops, courses and projects, and has been generously cited in the literature. The three-triangles-diagram linking techniques to levels of knowledge became an icon, often cited, reproduced, or recreated. Both academics and design practitioners used it to guide their own fieldwork. In this letter, we look back at what we learnt from two decades of sharing the techniques in design education. And – as with the 2005 article – we provide an appendix with actionable tips to guide a first field experience with the techniques.

Over time, the techniques described in the article, from generative tools to grounded analysis and transfer of insights into design action, have become an integral part of our design teaching. Each year, about 200 master’s students at TU Delft and 50 undergraduates at OSU took part, alongside electives, graduation projects, and workshops that engaged both students and professionals. Together, we have guided 5000+ learners in applying these techniques to varying degrees, and collaborated with fellow teachers across design education. The three of us continued to be active in research, education,

Table 1. The four principles of contextmapping.

Explore everyday context	go where it takes place to include the richness of experience.
Participants are the experts of their experience	support participants in reflecting and expressing
Use generative techniques	to bring out needs, values, opportunities, and dreams
Use the path of expression	Lead the conversation from the present through the past to the future

and practice on the topic. These activities informed one another, but in this letter, we focus on what we learned through and for teaching.

3. Reflection: challenges for learners

Doing contextmapping builds on typical design competencies such as empathy, visualisation, and interpretation, and confronts the learner with a set of challenges.

For both students and practitioners, the main hurdle was to ‘talk to participants’ in a way that brings out the participant’s experience, knowledge, needs and values. Talking to strangers is one hurdle. Doing so with an openness rather than ‘selling your stuff’ is another. Supporting the participants with a guided process and tools to support their ability to express themselves is a third. For experienced design practitioners, it took effort to not lead participants towards their own ideas for solutions and discovering new perspective. They readily recognised its relevance to their practice.

Most learners love to make generative materials overly aesthetically pleasing, especially if they have a background in design, and are eager to show their new skills. But they’d quickly find that overly ‘designed’ materials can intimidate rather than empower participants when it scares them from soiling the beautiful print with their unsteady handwriting or drawing. An ‘unfinished’ aesthetic gives participants more freedom to ‘add their own stuff’ and use the toolkit materials as their own rather than as an assignment where they have to ‘colour within the lines’. When five participants show what they made with their sensitising packages, it’s a good sign if these artefacts express *their* contributions and ownership.

Tools can distract from principles. The toolkits such as workbooks and props are physical, and easy to document, point at, and even copy. Mastering the principles behind them is less visible, more difficult to explain, and takes practice to learn. One example is the confusion between sensitising toolkits and cultural probes: both use similar tools with ambiguous questions and provoking visuals. But their purpose and use are different (sensitising workbooks are primarily for preparing the participants towards follow-up actions, whereas cultural probes were introduced as artefacts returned to designers for inspiration, not analysis). Another signal of fixation on the tools is the repeated request from learners to ‘give them the toolkit’ (e.g. an image and word set for collaging making) for reuse in their own project. The actions of designing the toolkits to fit your envisaged participants are an essential part of the whole process. Practicing different tools and techniques helps to free learners from the idea that ‘to do contextmapping you need to give a workbook and have a 3-hour session with 6 people as shown in the article’.

Many learners felt overwhelmed by the nature and variety of the rich data they get from interacting with the participants and struggled dealing with this. Digesting, interpreting, reviewing, uncovering latent needs (‘trying to understand the why, why, why’) is

an inquiry process that requires openness and confidence. Learners often valued being guided through a process in sensemaking before doing this fully by themselves. The process requires them to make choices, to select, and to articulate their interpretations for sensemaking and to derive emerging insights that are relevant for their design process.

Learners are often unsure where contextmapping fits between the supposedly different activities of research and design. As a result, they feel uncertain that ‘the sample sizes are too small, the interpretations too subjective for the standards of research’, or ‘it seems like preparation for design, not design itself’. The procedures described in the article can easily be viewed as ‘research’: producing data, interpreting it, and drawing conclusions. Learners with earlier research training (in design or more recently, in other disciplines) have established notions of research, often in a perspective of hypothesis testing and statistics, or an understanding of conventional ethnography which insists on meticulous engagement to create a full overview of a phenomenon. This made them hesitant to make interpretations on the basis of ‘only a few people’ or ‘just a single quote’. Another tendency from the research streams just mentioned is to present the most generalised insights as ‘the outcome’, ending up with highly generalised statements that carry little new information and provide even less inspiration. However, the purpose of contextmapping is not hypothesis testing, rather exploration, discovery, and joint formation of ideas for action. To make the insights actionable, it takes a mix of high-level insights, raw-data quotes, and the links between them. To strengthen this understanding, we encouraged learners to introduce themselves with ‘I am a designer and I hope you will help me with my challenge’ as being different from the conventional ‘I am a researcher and want your answers to my questions’.

Designers are by nature curious, and eager to apply whatever they learnt elsewhere. At university, they receive various theories from different disciplines. This brings the risk that learners bring in theories or concepts which they only understand superficially (e.g. ‘self-actualization’ introduced as a level of Maslow’s pyramid) rather than build an understanding from the ground up. For example, in one course, a student team spent several days analysing their field data using a high-level behavioural theory they had received in another course. They were disappointed to find only confirming examples. Relying on the theory led them to select data that fit its lens and to frame interpretations in its jargon, missing the deeper challenge and reward of constructing meaning from the ground up and uncovering multiple perspectives (after getting feedback they redid the analysis from the ground up and got satisfying new insights).

The Field Guide in the appendix reflects the challenges discussed above, and aims to help those learning the techniques with actionable tips towards effective results and against pitfalls. It extends the appendix of the 2005 article with dozens of practical tips and tricks that have proven useful in workshops, courses, and projects.

4. Development and future

A lot has changed since 2005, although the principles still stand firmly. New technologies such as social media, online collaboration tools, and Artificial Intelligence have transformed how we work and communicate, offering new ways to engage, record, transcribe, summarise, and interpret data. Yet, while the tools evolve, the principles of supporting

participants to reflect, discover, express, and maybe act on what they learned, remain unchanged.

Design practice has evolved beyond products and services. In 2005, the classic situation was that designers (design researchers) worked with users for an industrial client to provide insights for the client's design team. Since then, product design has been followed by the emergence of service design, social design and various other streams in which the roles of people are different. Where we earlier labelled the roles as client/design researcher/user these roles are now better expressed as actor/designer/participant, with the note that the roles overlap, and each of the roles is or can be assumed by multiple people.

Codesign is not just for designers. From the start, generative techniques have been picked up by activist citizens and other groups who were not in the traditional 'design sphere'. Increasingly, academics from outside design e.g. medical and social sciences and civil servants from government picked up on the techniques, as their own projects have become more multidisciplinary and oriented towards making change. More people are taking on roles of discovery, creativity and facilitation that were considered as typically for designers.

Regulations meant to protect participants' privacy and wellbeing now often limit the openness that codesign needs. Privacy rules and ethics committees have been put in place in universities and elsewhere, often working in a paradigm of quantitative medical research. But the open-ended nature of codesign engagements, the empowering value of ambiguous tools, and creative nature of discovery-oriented research do not fit easily into a mould made for predictability. There is some way to go. Currently, it has become common for educational institutions to tell their students to 'not work with vulnerable groups'. As a result, those vulnerable groups are less likely to benefit from design, which should not be the intention. Similarly, instructions emerge that personal data should be avoided as much as possible so as not to harm the 'subjects'. But needs, values, and dreams are personal as well. It will take some development and progress to create a sensible shared understanding of how participation can be realised in ways that are empowering and not threatening.

5. Conclusion

Twenty years ago, the article presented a hands-on process, with supporting principles. Two decades further, the principles are broadly used, and varied and extended. In this letter, we related a number of challenges that learners can encounter and overcome. The main lesson maybe is that the process is not, or not only, *a causal data pipeline* of steps leading to data, formulated insights, and design directions. Rather, contextmapping is *a formative process for collaborating people*. In that process not just participants, but also designers and collaborating actors are sensitised and gain tacit and explicit understanding which they can use in subsequent actions. In particular, those in the designer and actor role (organising the process and acting on the outcomes) gain empathic understanding from engaging with the participants. But we have seen many cases where *participants* themselves take action in their life with insights gained the process.

In our experience, the value of explicit process structure and tools is to form a language to plan and conduct contextmapping. Not an algorithm for execution. The tools change with technology and situation, but the principles remain valid: engage with each other, build on the life experience of participants, designers, and other actors, empower their expertise, and collaborate towards realising improvements in life situations.

Acknowledgements

The insights presented in this letter, and the tips in the field guide are the result of two decades of collective learning in collaboration with students, practitioners, teachers, international colleagues, and design agencies, such as design agency Muzus who co-taught the elective course Contextmapping Skills for over a decade.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

References

- Sanders, E. B.-N., and P. J. Stappers. 2012. *Convivial Toolbox: Generative Research for the Front End of Design*. BIS: Amsterdam.
- Sleeswijk Visser, F., P. J. Stappers, R. van der Lugt, and E. B.-N. Sanders. 2005. "Contextmapping: Experiences from Practice." *Codesign* 1 (2): 119–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710880500135987>.

F. Sleeswijk Visser

Department of Human-Centered Design, Delft University of Technology

 f.sleeswijkvisser@tudelft.nl

P. J. Stappers

Department of Human-Centered Design, Delft University of Technology

E. B.-N. Sanders

Department of Design, The Ohio State University

Received 26 December 2025; Accepted 28 December 2025