



EXTRA

THEATRICAL METHODS – AN INTRODUCTION

Theater offers many methods which can be used to investigate, ideate, prototype, and roll out both physical and digital services. They are powerful tools to investigate emotion, timing, tone of voice, and practicalities of the use of space.

Why?

Services, as co-created value exchanges, are fundamentally human interactions. They are often human-to-human exchanges, like in retail, medical, hospitality, or advisory services. But even in many digital or machine-based services, the technological platform essentially mimics the functions of a human being as it processes your order, connects you, gives you information, or sells you a ticket.

Theater offers perhaps the ultimate toolkit to model, prototype, and play around with human–human or human–digital interactions. It’s important to think not only of the theater stage, but of the rehearsal room, technical desk, prop studio, backstage areas, and everything else which enables a theater to both develop and deliver experiences. With thousands of years of history, theater – or more generally, the performing arts⁰¹ – enjoys a uniquely mature, highly creative, and utterly practical toolset which is fast, effective, and fun. Unlike almost every other prototyping method,

the tools of show business focus on emotion, the core of a great experience. And once you have gotten past the initial inhibitions of your team, they are easy to use as everyone understands the terminology. There is no need to introduce confusing new terms like touchpoints, personas, processes, and tangibles when everyone can already talk about scenes, characters, stories, and props.

The relevance of theatrical thinking and practice to services has been explored for many years, starting perhaps with Goffmann’s dramaturgical examination of human life in the 1950s,⁰² and becoming more explicit with Grove and Fisk since the 1980s.⁰³ They point out many further parallels between the worlds of service and performing arts – such as the observation that services and theater performances share a transitory nature and “must be experienced in real time if they are to be appreciated.” Important themes are staging, actors/audience, performance, and improvisation – all considerations which apply to both worlds, and where theater can be a reference for service designers.

⁰¹ We will use the term “theater” here for simplicity, but you can always think of other performing arts as well, like opera, film, music, and dance.

⁰² See Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

⁰³ See Fisk, R. P., & Grove, S. J. (2012). A Performing Arts Perspective on Service Design. *Touchpoint* 4(2).

What are the techniques?

Theatrical techniques in service design should not be confused with *business theater*. This is the performance, usually by a visiting troupe of professional actors, of small playlets that have been developed to carry a message to a particular audience on a certain theme. Business theater can help develop empathy for users, get buy-in for a service design project, and spread awareness of the need for or results of a service design project, but it is not in itself truly a design technique.

Yet there are other theatrical techniques and lenses that can be applied or adapted as service design techniques, especially in the prototyping phase. Empathy techniques, storytelling, character work, improvisation, Forum Theater, storywriting, scripts, subtext, message, status, direction, an actor's interpretation of a script or role, dramatic arcs, surprise, staging (especially considerations of the use of space and of backstage and frontstage boundaries) – all these concepts and tools can be used in the practical creation of a new service. ◀



A Theater offers perhaps the ultimate toolkit to model, prototype, and play around with human–human or human–digital interactions.