Causing a Stir: Co-creating a Crowd-voted Grants Platform for Creative Entrepreneurs

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Stir was a crowd-voted grants platform aimed at supporting creative youth in the early stages of an entrepreneurial journey. Developed through an in-depth, collaborative design process, between 2015 and 2018 it received close to two hundred projects and distributed over fifty grants to emerging creatives and became one of the most impactful programs aimed at increasing entrepreneurial activity in Canberra, Australia. The following case study will provide an overview of the methodology and process used by the design team in conceiving and developing this platform, highlighting how the community's interests and competencies were embedded in the project itself. The case provides insights for people leading collaborative design processes, with specific emphasis on some of the characteristics on programs targeting creative youth.

Keywords: Co-creation, Collaborative Design, Community Building, Creative Entrepreneurship

Introduction
In late 2014, the Canberra Innovation Network was founded as a partnership between local government, academic institutions and the private sector, with the purpose of supporting entrepreneurial activity in the Australian Capital Territory. Their leadership soon realised that both youth groups and the creative industries had not been accounted for in their original plan. Using an in-depth co-creation process, facilitated by a team of design professionals, an initiative aimed at supporting the development of entrepreneurial intentions and behaviours among young creatives was born.

The initiative, named Stir, established a crowd-voted grants platform that ran between 2015 and 2018, received close to 200 project applications, delivered over fifty micro-grants, contributed to entrepreneurial competencies among young creatives, and built a community of over twelve thousand people.

This case study highlights the value of co-creation as a methodology that enables the simultaneous development of product, user engagement and word-of-mouth marketing. Additionally, it highlighted the shortcomings of pure design teams and the difficulties of attracting young creatives to the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The case study will provide practical insights and guidelines for people leading co-creation processes, while surfacing some of the limitations present in a design-led team when building programs aimed at supporting entrepreneurial activity.

Part 1: The Context and the Opportunity
In November, 2014, the government of the Australian Capital Territory, in collaboration with local universities, research institutions, and the private sector, founded the Canberra Innovation Network (Canberra Innovation...
Network, 2018). With the motto “Connect. Promote. Accelerate.” (Canberra Innovation Network, 2014), this new institution (CBRIN) aimed to provide cross-sector support for entrepreneurial activity in the region. It was in early November, shortly before the official launch of the initiative that the founding CEO recognised that the CBRIN lacked a way to engage youth and the creatives industries with the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

To address this, she contacted an interdisciplinary design team who had a track record of designing entrepreneurship education programs. The team was led by an industrial designer with experience in the development of student communities, interdisciplinary learning, game design and innovation education programs; a mathematician with experience in higher education, innovation research and small business management; and an undergraduate graphic design and marketing student with strong ties to local youth leaders and the creative community.

Her goal was to identify how entrepreneurship could be made attractive to a younger demographic. The initial brief was to design and deliver a one-day “hackathon”, where young people would attend, describe what they wanted from CBRIN, and have their ideas compete for some form of material reward.

To gauge interest, the team quickly drew upon their personal networks in the intended audience. After engaging with different youth groups, it became clear that success would require the project not be perceived as a “token gesture” or “photo opportunity”. Although a reward could provide extrinsic motivation for young creatives, the risk was that they would not feel represented or desire to connect with entrepreneurship in the longer term. It also became apparent that, through an in-depth co-design process, CBRIN had the opportunity to develop something novel and meaningful to young creatives, even if this would require a longer timeframe and better resourcing.

This was a daunting proposition for an organisation predominantly led by the public and academic sectors. The design team, interested in seeing what would come from said co-creation process, decided to show their commitment by halving their fees. This led to a mutual leap of faith and approval of the co-design approach for what was then known as the “Youth Innovation Initiative”.

This marked the beginning of a four-year project aimed at determining a way to engage youth and people from the creative industries with the entrepreneurship ecosystem. The following section will provide an overview of the design of the project, how it was implemented and some of the impacts it had throughout its lifespan.

**Part 2: The Narrative**

Tackling the question of how to involve young creatives in the entrepreneurial ecosystem was a complex issue, in particular due to the fact that “youth” is in itself a poorly defined concept, representing a broad demographic with diverse needs and interests that could be better understood as a mindset than an age bracket. This situation suggested that the best approach to addressing this question would be through a co-creation process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The co-creation process used was comprised of three stages. The first stage focused on establishing relationships with local youth leaders. The second stage focused on engaging these youth leaders in a workshop aimed at discovering their needs and how these could be served. The final stage drew on the outcomes of previous two to collaboratively develop a solution.

**Stage 1: The Secret Brand**

The first stage of the process required engaging representatives of local youth communities. The challenge here was that these communities were diverse, exclusive, and often reticent to participate in programs run by “the establishment”. As one person eloquently put it “A government Youth Innovation Initiative is about as attractive as a poster that encourages me to get tested for a sexually transmitted illness”.

To overcome this, the team took steps to develop a community that could help to execute the project. This process began by attending a CBRIN event and capturing a photo that evidenced the lack of young creatives present within the organisation’s decision-making structures. The second part of building a community was developing a “secret brand”. This concept was inspired by William Gibson’s (2010) novel “Zero History”. Given that a key aspect of the community would be its focus on developing a tangible solution, the brand should emphasise practice, work, innovation and unexplored perspectives. The team arrived at the concept of “shift”, defined in the Oxford Dictionaries (Shift, n.d.) as:
The secret brand became “SHIFT ONE”. The team designed a simple logo (see figure 1) and began building the community for the co-design process. Starting with their own networks, the team showed the aforementioned photo to representatives of the project’s target audience, accompanying it with the following statement:

*The local government is about to decide how to support young people’s participation in entrepreneurship. These are the people making the decision.*  
*Want to have a say? Join the SHIFT ONE Crew.*

The team connected with approximately twenty people who were influential among specific youth or creative communities. They ranged between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, with the majority in their early twenties. They were invited to a workshop on a Saturday, 22nd of November, 2014. To build upon the intrigue established by the secret brand, the email included a Google maps geo pin and a street view image with the message “entrance is behind the white van”. This due to there being a vehicle parked directly in front of the doors to the venue.

**Stage 2: The Co-creation Workshop**

To make the most of the diverse group that had been recruited, the team designed a co-creation workshop that could help gain a better understanding of what they needed from a program aimed at encouraging them to engage with entrepreneurship. The process of designing the workshop began with a set of clear objectives from which the team designed a series of gamified activities that provided the structure for the workshop. These activities aimed to be playful and fun, allowing people to feel confident expressing what they really needed in a trusting and comfortable environment. The objectives and diagrams used to describe these activities can be seen in figure 2.
Once the day arrived, they set up the room in the early morning and got ready to begin. There was an aura of nervousness amongst the team due to the short promotion cycle and the early, Saturday morning start, but when the time came, twenty-three people arrived. Attendees included people who had their own independent record labels, film-makers, event organisers, designers, game developers, photographers and visual artists. It also included café managers, appliance technicians, bi-cycle repair people and educators (see figure 3).

As attendees were a diverse crowd, it was important that everyone, no matter their background, gender, age or experience, have their contributions received as equally important by others. For this purpose, the team introduced all participants and stated “Now that we know who we all are, we can leave our egos at the door and focus on the needs of the thousand people we each represent”. At this point, the workshop began. It was divided into four activities which are briefly described below.

**Activity 1 – Exploratory Brainstorming**

People formed groups of three with others that they had not met before. Each group received one of three colour-coded questions (see figure 4) The questions were aimed at eliciting concepts related to what participants thought would be necessary for an entrepreneurship program looking to benefit them.
Figure 4: Questions to elicit concept generation.

Data generated through this exercise was analysed to detect key themes. These themes became the two axes of a conceptual map. Snippets of the resultant maps are provided in figures 5 through 7.

**Figure 5:** “How would you like to see CBR described in the future?”

**Figure 6:** “Which opportunities would help young and creative people?”
Activity 2 – Narrative Possibilities

Participants were asked to choose the concepts that seemed the most meaningful to them, forming a new group with people who had been given the two other questions. Their task was to draw on their previous discussion, constructing a narrative of how what they were envisioning could be made a reality. Three key narratives emerged from this activity – “Easy Start”; “Staged Learning”; and “Seasonal Innovation”. These are described in figure 8.

**THEME 1: EASY START**

A desire for Canberra to become the most favourable context for start-up activity in the country.

Opportunity to develop an easier start-up process, in terms of support structures and lowered regulatory burdens.

In addition, the hope was raised for a financial structure that provides support to low-cost ideas through “micro-grants”.

**THEME 2: STAGED LEARNING**

Recognise the unique educational needs of creative youth and their relative business knowledge and experience.

Emphasis was placed on the need for training to be delivered through a staged approach.

This extends to providing knowledge and experience of entrepreneurship as a viable career choice.

**THEME 3: SEASONAL INNOVATION**

Incorporating natural themes into innovation. Participants expressed interest for creative-focused innovation festivals, exhibitions, and conferences occurring cyclically throughout the year.

Planning innovation activities in alignment with the city’s distinct seasons, which recognising that innovation projects have a birth, or Spring, but also experience Winter, or closure.

Activity 3 – Preliminary Messaging

The following activity was a group conversation aimed at determining how to best communicate these narratives to the members of the many communities represented in the room. The goal for this activity was to ensure that support of entrepreneurship among young creatives be perceived as relevant, desirable and accessible. There were four broad aspects discussed – “Considerations” or desirable outcomes; “Content” that messaging should include; “Tone” or nature of the relationship with the audience; and “Channels” or the means used to deliver the message (see figure 9).
Figure 9: Narratives to engage young creatives with entrepreneurship.

**Activity 4 – Online Community**

The final activity set out to establish a way to continue the discussion after the workshop was over. This was not just to keep people informed, but also to present findings and involve them in development of the potential solution. The channel chosen for this purpose was a secret Facebook group. Community members were given the ability to nominate potential members. Once a nomination received a certain number of “likes”, the person would be invited to join the “SHIFT ONE Crew”.

**Stage 3: Co-Designing a Solution**

After transcribing hundreds of post-it notes, organising the data, and uploaded the results to the SHIFT ONE group, several interesting insights emerged. The most important were:

1. Young creatives are often very entrepreneurial. They do not, however, identify as such, and do not feel catered for by existing support initiatives provided by government or academia;
2. More than monetary support, many were interested in empowerment and personal development through education. They also wanted mentoring and business coaching for their projects; and
3. There was less interest in a “mass market” than there was in being part of one or more emerging “micro-collectives”. Each of these represents a unique community with specific interests, which provides the validation and sense of purpose to the individual’s work.

To begin developing a solution, the design team invited the SHIFT ONE Crew to participate in defining how these needs could be addressed. Proposed ideas were put up for a vote by members of the community. One member of the group asked:

“What if people could upload an idea, and if it gets a number of votes, then they get some money to make it happen?”

This resonated with the design team lead, as it reminded them of “LEGO CUUSOO” (CUUSOO, 2014), now known as “LEGO Ideas” (LEGO, 2019), which they had encountered while in Japan in mid-2014. It led to an interesting series of questions, including: What does an incubator for young creatives look like? Does it have to look like every other incubator? Can it be something completely different? Could it be completely online?

These questions led to the following concept:

“An online incubator that could guide the young and creative through stages of learning, developing an entrepreneurial mindset and helping
them to structure and present a business concept. Projects submitted would be evaluated and voted upon by the public, incentivising a positive attitude towards sales and encouraging the project creator to obtain feedback from their target audience.

At the end of a season, projects with the strongest crowd response would receive a microgrant to help with their execution. After the season, grant recipients could share their stories and motivate the next generation of project creators.

This concept was presented to the CEO of CBRIN, receiving support and resources for execution. The concept was presented to the SHIFT ONE community, who were invited to participate in development of an “Online Micro-Grants Incubator for Creative Youth”. The design team reserved some of the budget to remunerate those that chose to remain involved in the form of “consulting fees”. Four project teams were formed, working interdependently on specific aspects of the solution. The project lasted seven weeks. Below are brief descriptions of each team and some of their key findings.

[Ed] Education Team: “Make it easy to understand”

This team included people with skills and experience in education. They worked on translating concepts from the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), with the goal of making the framework accessible to people non-business backgrounds.

[Ev] – Events Team: “Make a splash at existing events”

This team counted with the participation of people with experience managing venues and events. The key takeaway from this team was to leverage existing events in the city. This led to a presence at Art, Not Apart (Art, Not Apart, 2019), exposure to thousands and a social media following of over 750 people in one day.

[Ux] – User Experience Team: “Make a clear story that people can follow”

This team brought together people from the worlds of code, design, information systems and game development. Although their role seemed technical, the team included a film-maker who focused their efforts on establishing a clear narrative for the different user groups - project creators; voters, sponsors, etc.

[Br] – Branding Team: “Why don’t we call it Stir?”

This team drew people from design and marketing backgrounds and was the last to meet. This ensured that they included the insights from the other teams. The name emerged as a perfect description of what the platform was looking to achieve: To mix things ups, to awaken people from slumber, and to create a murmur among the crowd.

The findings from these teams set the requirements for what would become the Stir platform. Although it evolved over time, figure 10 describes the platform’s core functions at the peak of its lifecycle.
Between launching on the 26th of March, 2015, and the close of Season 4 in early June, 2018, Stir ran 6 grant seasons. These included four major seasons and 2 shorter summer seasons. Seasons lasted approximately 50 days. During this time, over 13000 people registered to the platform, uploading close to 200 projects and submitting 12629 votes that determined who would receive a micro-grant. 57 individual grants were delivered, totalling AUD51000. The platform was visited 82747 times, with over 250000 pageviews. These numbers, although not large by global standards, were significant when taken in the context of the 403000 people that live in Canberra, Australia (Population Australia, 2019).

Although now defunct, Stir represented a shift in the scope of what was achievable by entrepreneurship programs in the Australian Capital Territory. Its reach was larger than the standard set by other local initiatives. Although it did not support high-tech, high-growth start-ups, it provided an avenue for underrepresented communities to feel their work was important and their passions were worth pursuing. Figure 11 includes some of the logos of the projects Stir supported. While many of the projects have since been discontinued, people who participated in its initiatives have now become embedded in the local ecosystem as founders, consultants, contractors, support service providers and community managers. It was a platform that, like its name, caused a stir.
Part 3: The Key Learnings

The process of engaging with the local community in the definition and development of the “crowd-voted grants platform” provided several key insights and lessons for a collaborative design process.

These lessons are specific to a context where the team was working towards establishing a common ground between two groups with very distinct values, goals and accountabilities. In this case a government agency and representatives from multiple creative youth communities, with the purpose of supporting increased participation of an underrepresented communities in a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem.

There were many lessons derived throughout the project’s four-year lifespan. Most of these were incremental and happened on a daily basis. It would be hard to capture all of these lessons in writing here, but it was possible to derive some themes that encompass these learnings. This section will outline some of those lessons and highlight some considerations for co-creation. It will also include personal observations and challenges derived from the experiences of the team executing the project.

Lesson 1. The Common Struggle

Engaging underrepresented communities in a collaborative design process requires an authentic understanding of their “common struggle”, or the challenges they perceive themselves to have faced throughout their careers. In the case of creative youth, many expressed feelings of having been exploited by the business world, either through low wages, poor treatment or working for “exposure”. For the Stir project, it was important not to trivialise these experiences. With a background in the creative industries, the team shared some of these experiences. This common ground between the team and the community that was emerging from the project led to strong ties and commitment between the two groups, which increased mutual respect, trust and willingness to contribute to the project. When deciding to undertake a collaborative design process, it seems that an important factor for success would be a genuine connection between the facilitating team and the target community. This will avoid tokenising the audience and could increase their sense of ownership as they see themselves reflected in the team that is supporting the process.

Lesson 2. Choose a Side, Start a Movement.

Without having experienced the aforementioned “common struggle”, it was difficult for the parent organisation to understand the interests and concerns of the community of creative youth that were participating. Although they provided significant support and had a genuine desire to connect with the
creative youth community, they did not fully understand some of their challenges or aspirations. Some of this stemmed from a deep misalignment of values between the Canberra Innovation Network, a government entity set up in collaboration with academic institutions and private entrepreneurship support services – whose goals were associated with stimulating economic activity – and a community of creative youth, many of whom were interested in personal achievements such as exploration, expression, and recognition. To ensure the support provided was genuine, the team had to take a stand for the community on numerous occasions, articulating their interests and avoiding these becoming second to the institution. When undertaking a collaborative design process, it would seem that an important first step is to surface the values and principles of the community that is participating. It would be important to recognise which of these are non-negotiable and why, discussing these with both the community and any funding or supporting organisations early in the project. Establishing the central values of the community can help in ensuring that the parent organisation does not inadvertently make statements or take actions that could compromise the relationships that are being constructed.

**Lesson 3. In Collaboration, Design can be the Mediator**

Although the team strongly advocated for the interests of creative community to the parent organisation, it was equally important to advocate for the interests of the parent organisation. The team acted as facilitators and mediators between the two stakeholder groups, highlighting that the funding parties did not have an ulterior motive that played into the young creatives concerns about exploitation. For this purpose, the team also invited members of the parent organisation to participate in events and activities organised by the members of the creative community. The leadership of the organisation responded admirably, attending these activities with their families, enacting the support and earning the trust of those they were aiming to support. Eventually, this led to members of the community having the confidence to have their own conversations with the upper management of the Canberra Innovation Network. A key aspect of collaborative design processes would therefore be to not only involve the target audience, but also encourage the participation of “upstream stakeholders”. They should not just be seen as funding parties to be reported to, but where possible, involved as equals and get directly involved in developing the solution.

**Lesson 4. Recognise the Value Inherent in your Target Audience**

A surprising lesson learnt by the team and the parent organisation was that many young creatives had experience in many business functions, including accounting and sales, due to the self-reliance which is prevalent in their industries. A clear example of this were members of the community who were independent musicians. This observation made it clear that much of the messaging targeting these groups and encouraging them to get involved in business-related activities was inadvertently both condescending and not relevant to their stage of development and experience. Thinking of them as “at risk” will not benefit either party. The creatives did not just want to “start-up”, they wanted to grow, learn and develop the capabilities they already possessed. When developing a program for an underreported community, it would seem important that the offerings, language and messaging begin by recognising the existing achievements of the community they are intended for. In the case of young creatives, they will be entrepreneurial with or without the support of the existing ecosystem. Rather than framing support as a “handout”, it could be more effective to frame it as an invitation to collaborate and an exchange, where the target community is bringing their valuable existing knowledge and expertise to a context that will also benefit.

**Lesson 5. Meritocratic Cultures may be Less Democratic**

Distributing corporate funding to young creatives is difficult. They do not seem to be motivated by the funding itself, but rather what the funding enables them to achieve, and what obtaining said funding signals to their peers. Making it easily accessible through a democratic method such as “crowd-voting” does not make it more attractive. They seem to prefer the sense of accomplishment that comes from being selected for a grant. For this purpose, it may be beneficial to identify people whose opinions the community respects and invite them to be part of the decision-making process. Offering these individuals some form of “weighted votes” could have assisted in attracting the more meritocratic members of the creative community.
Lesson 6. Designers are Great Innovators, but may be Mediocre Administrators

The hardest lesson learnt by the design team was that they were uncapable of managing all of the functions required to achieve economic and institutional sustainability for the project. The collaborative design process itself was simple, and the team were comfortable with many aspects of an innovation process – identification of the opportunity; setting a vision; recruiting the community; generating excitement; developing the product; obtaining traction; and presenting clear value propositions to potential funding parties. However, it was not long before basic administrative duties became a burden. Accounting and other simple business activities were less familiar than dealing with uncertainty, leading to high levels of stress and animosity within the team. It would seem that increasing the chances for sustainability of the project would require a more diverse, multidisciplinary team that includes specialists in basic business functions. The challenge is in recognising one’s own limits and ensuring that they can be overcome through collaboration with either the parent organisation or the community itself, as these two groups are the ones with the greatest potential to benefit from the longevity of the project.

We hope that these six themes can provide some guidance for people conducting similar collaborative design projects. Our greatest hope, however, is that people are inspired to contribute to increasing the number of creatives participating in the global entrepreneurship ecosystem. In a world of growing “gig economies”, the arts will be needed to ensure that these gigs are humane.

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