Asynchronous Collaboration

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Introduction

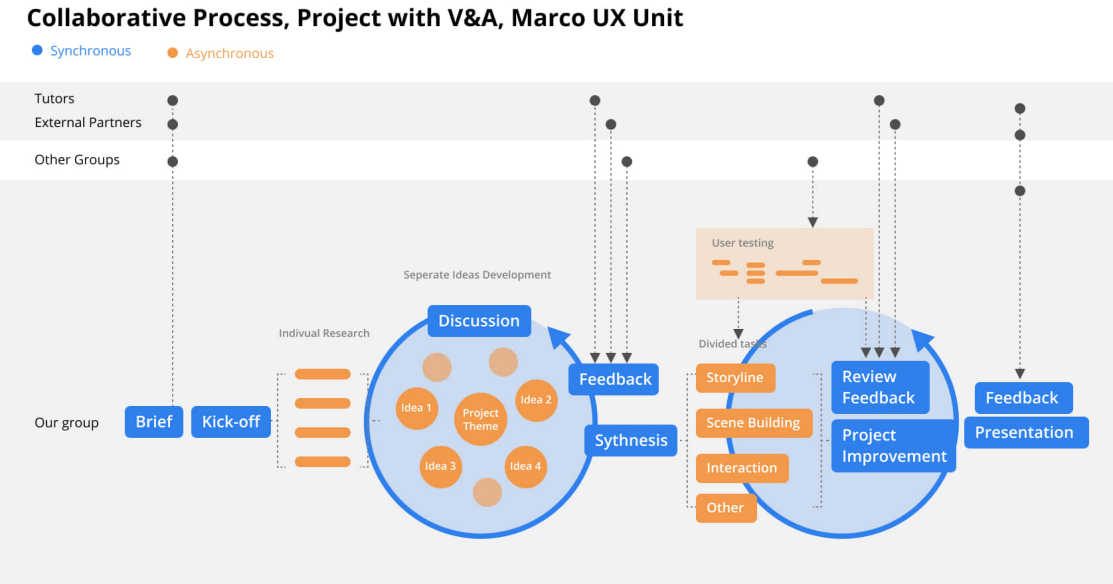
Since the beginning of the MA User Experience Design course, we have collaborated in blend mode education, group projects, and external partnership. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affects how we work, especially in this term, when all education was online. In this context, the typical collaborative view in which all participants discuss simultaneously in the same room is hardly achievable. The challenge raised questions in my mind: How can we collaborate better if we can not work together? How to adjust our work style to adapt to the intense collaborative project?

This essay will first demonstrate my understanding of collaboration as a mixed process of synchronous and asynchronous factors. It will then review my Macro UX project and discuss opportunities to develop more beneficial asynchronous communication in collaboration.

The Tangled Collaboration

It is attempting to describe collaboration as mere collections of individual contributions. However, 'groups of people working together are not necessarily collaborative' (Hathorn and Ingram, 2002). Academia tends to utilise cooperative and coordinated behaviours to describe collaboration, but many addresses direct negotiated communication or working together. Both mutual engagement, inter-organisational relationship, and ongoing communicative process are vital to defining a collaborative group (Castaner and Oliveira, 2020). These intricate, multi-factor connections resemble Haraway's (2015) tentacular thinking, which recognises the world as an entwined system and that 'everything is connected to something.' Sharing unique experiences and build on each other's ideas could reveal marginalised stories and form collective thinking. Diverse participants and activities serve as complex non-linear couplings, compose subsystems as part of the coherence collaboration process.

The above literature review inspires me to analyse the nature of collaboration as an entanglement of collective and independent work, with constantly switching synchronous and asynchronous communication. Each string is worth tackling, but many efforts in collaborative design environments have emphasised synchronous capabilities (Jeng, 2000). However, my project practices suggest that improving asynchronous factors also supports real-time conversation and develops a more successful collaboration.



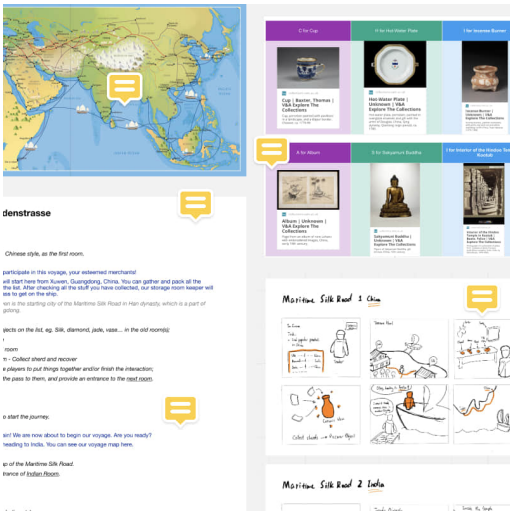
A simplified diagram of the entangled collaborative process.

Improving Asynchronous Collaboration

In the Marco UX project with the V&A Museum, our group encountered the limitation of brainstorming meetings. At first, we intuitively started numerous online meetings to generate ideas of interacting with V&A's online collections, but the outcome remained shallow and unsatisfying. Besides, framing these separate concepts in our 'Silk Road' theme was too complicated for real-time verbal communication. We trapped ourselves in silence with too much information to digest. The turning point occurred when we implemented more asynchronous communication and preparation before the next meeting. Each of us synthesised and visualised selected interactions into storylines. With more thoughtful elaboration and evaluation on the same canvas, the next meeting became effective and boosted decision-making.

Reflecting on the project, I appropriate a usual Computer-Mediated Communications taxonomic model to classify our collaborative behaviours as synchronous and asynchronous (Hathorn and Ingram, 2002). In this collaborative process, we benefited from synchronous meetings by getting immediate feedback to generate more creativity sparks. It builds stronger group connections but reached the limitation in further reframing and development. The indispensable asynchronous supplement, even admittedly slower, promotes individual reflection and often results in a more thoughtful and higher quality discussion (Huang and Hsiao, 2020), explaining why it benefits us in reframing design with complex dimensions.

After embracing the asynchronous mode, I noticed that we actively carried out more team conversations, including thought exchange and commenting. These frequent interactions build a more transparent, contributive environment. In the next task of building both Chinese and Indian scene, the teammates shared indigenous knowledge in these two cultures and applied them in parallel space design. It allows us to dive deeper into different cultural mindsets.



Asynchronous visualising the storyline in shared document and leave comments.

Applying Indian Culture knowledge in temple scene building. Floor plan by Sanya Nayar.

Leaning to Lorde's (2018) estimation and extending from the intersectionality of Black lesbian, if individuals with distinguished identity get empowered and draw their strength, we can transform our differences into creativity and allow bordered parameters of change. A healthy design environment requires more 'active beings', and the characteristic of asynchronous communication provides equal opportunity for participation, which is harder to approach in online synchronous conversations (Huang and Hsiao, 2020). In my opinion, combining these two communication types could be a possible approach to embrace differences and building an inclusive team.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed my critical learnings from collaborative practices. It has proposed evaluating collaboration as a non-linear process with collective and separate, synchronous and asynchronous activities and outline some asynchronous communication suggestions. I speculate the network view reminds us to value the minor opinions in teamwork, and therefore further enhance equal conversation to flatten the hidden hierarchy. A comprehensive strategy, which considers these communication modes' distinctive implications, could be a leverage point to facilitate future collaboration.

References

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