Chapter 14
Performing Charlotte:
A Technique to Bridge Cultures in Participatory Design

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the use of a performed persona as a device in cross-cultural design activities. The device serves to elicit knowledge and manage expectations in the context of participatory design workshops to explore the purpose and function of a tool for tracing the supply chain of ethical goods from producer to consumer. The use of the method with the staff of a wine producer in Chile is analyzed and the benefits and challenges identified in using the form live in workshops. The authors conclude that the device offers potential but also requires some confidence and skill to invoke.

INTRODUCTION

Let me introduce you to Charlotte... She is middle-aged, middle-class, from the middle of England, well educated by British standards and buys many Fairtrade products. She is a mother of two and in fact it was her daughter who convinced her that ethical consumption is important. She is here to answer any questions you might have about the British market ...from her own perspective, of course!...

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So began the first participatory design workshop session with Chilean wine producers in the meeting room at their bodega near Curicó in Chile, as part of the Fair Tracing (FT) project.

The rest of this article will explain how we came to be presenting consumer information to the winemakers of Chile, why we chose to present it in the shape of a performed persona and what effect it had on the work we were attempting to do together. To explain this, we will first introduce the wider FT project, before looking closely at the purposes of the workshop and how the persona served our ends. Finally we discuss hypothetical alternative approaches and look at the pros and cons of this kind of response in cross-cultural settings.

THE FAIR TRACING PROJECT (FT)

"Fair Tracing" (www.fairtracing.org) is a UK-led interdisciplinary project to research a bridging tool connecting producers with consumers in different global contexts. It aims to help bridge the divide between global North consumers and global South producers by using tracing technology to enhance trade. This includes, to some degree, bridging digital divides where some technologies are not available to producers. In particular, it is intended to give greater visibility to smaller producers in developing countries to help them make a presence in global markets. Indeed, the name of the tool acknowledges its conceptual link to the Fair Trade movement which supports producers in developing countries by guaranteeing them a minimum price for their produce and providing them with a social premium to invest in their businesses or communities. The tool is intended to increase and facilitate choice for both ethically minded traders and consumers who wish to understand and discuss the origin of their purchases. Of particular significance here is that small-scale producers in developing countries would be able to use a Fair Tracing (FT) tool to better understand the value chains they operate in and distinguish their product offer by adding production information and communicating directly with consumers.

Material might include details of the economic and environmental costs of creation, the individual creator, their working environment and pay, through the steps of its transport to the point-of-sale to the consumer. Some aspects of this data transmission could be automated, while the creation of audio-visual and narrative material would be in the hands of the actors along the value chain and might include stories of corporate social responsibility, social or environmental impact and community.

The FT project was funded to research the building of such a bridging tool and to contribute understanding of its potential for implementation and use *in context*, beyond individual technological components[1], over a three year period till 2009. Part of the work engaged producers along representative value chains to explore their existing production and information gathering processes.

The wider FT project includes two producer case studies (see Kleine 2008, Chopra & Kundu 2008). Here we discuss a Chilean Fairtrade wine cooperative (validated by FLO, the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International). In seeking producer groups for collaboration, we decided to build relations as full partnerships: bringing in producer representatives as informants to an investigation of feasibility and desirability and asking them to consult on ideas, partial prototypes[2] and potential uses. This involved setting up a collaboration agreement and including the partners in relevant parts of project discussions. It also involved commissioning a local academic researcher from a Chilean university who worked there on ICT and development projects, at the starting point of the chain to be the local link person. We looked closely at what we were asking of the producer partners in terms of time and energy and what the recompense might be, given that the tool was not going to materialize in the project's lifetime.