Doing and Undoing Workshops

Anja Groten

ANJA GROTEN IS A DESIGNER AND RESEARCHER BASED IN AMSTERDAM. SHE IS INVOLVED IN DIFFERENT INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLECTIVES SUCH AS HACKERS & DESIGNERS AND THE FEMINIST SEARCH TOOLS.

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FORKSHOP: DOING AND UNDOING WORKSHOPS

[Note to facilitators: The following script is intended for groups of workshop facilitators and offers them a space to review, discuss, and reconsider their own workshop-based practices, taking into consideration the specific conditions and communities in which their workshops take place. In order to attune to the needs and interests of the group, departing from and remixing the script is encouraged.]

Preparation for participants: Bring a workshop script.*

PART 1: SETTING COLLECTIVE CONDITIONS

Step 1: Introduction

*   We introduce ourselves with our names, preferred pronouns, and a short account of the ways workshops have played a role in our lives.
    [Consider giving people a few minutes to think about how to introduce themselves.]

Step 2: Paying attention to space

- We walk through the space together, in silence, paying attention to the details of the space.
- We annotate the space with stickers/labels. (For instance: »This space is too bright for me«, »the acoustics are challenging«, »I like the cozy couch«, »this corner could function as a rest area.«)

Step 3: Expanding / Extending

- After reading each other's comments, we rearrange the space together.
- If there are wishes for the space that cannot be met, we use tape and markers to make these limitations visible.

PART 2: WORKSHOP ANECDOTES

Step 1:

- Take an A4 sheet of paper.
- Fold it in half along the long edge.
- Use the left side of the fold to write a personal workshop anecdote (it can be a real story or fictional).
- When you are finished, pick a location somewhere in the workshop space and hang it up.

Step 2:

- We walk around the room in silence, read the anecdotes, and leave comments on the empty side of the paper.

Step 3:

- We walk around the room and read the comments people left for us.

PART 3: FORKSHOP

Step 1: Sifting through a pile of workshop scripts

- We gather around a table and look at a pile of workshop scripts. The pile may contain assignments, how-to's, handbooks, technical guides, installation, manuals, etc.
- Did people bring some scripts to contribute? If so, add them to the pile.
- People are invited to sift through the pile for a bit, and intuitively pick up one document that resonates with them – perhaps through its topic, its formal or material qualities, the writing style, etc.

Step 2: Going for a walk

- We go for a walk and tell a person close to us about the document we picked.

Step 3: Reuse

- Take one of the workshop scripts (one you did not bring) and one of the workshop anecdotes (one you did not write) as a departure point to rewrite the script.
- Gather in a smaller group, read the scripts out loud.
- Now write a new workshop script together, using the material you gathered as a resource.
- Create a workshop bibliography. Cite the references you used and perhaps other references that seem relevant.

* The term »workshop script« refers to a document that accompanies self-organized learning situations. Workshop scripts are pragmatic as well as imaginative, capturing approaches, techniques, and atmospheres that evolve from within specific communities of practice. A workshop script may be concise or expansive; it may include instructions and installation manuals, code snippets, timetables, and read-me's. It may also include context-specific, personal, and narrative aspects.

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The double bind of the workshop

The workshop *Forkshop: Doing and Undoing Workshops* is one of many iterations (Hackers & Designers 2018, 2022a) of a workshop that pays critical attention to the workshop format as such. It derived from the context of Hackers & Designers (H&D), a self-organized collective of practitioners from different backgrounds (technology, design, art, and education).

H&D has experimented with alternative approaches to learning, working, and being together since 2013. Sharing knowledge across disciplines and in a hands-on and egalitarian manner are characteristics of H&D's workshop-based practice since its first inception. The format of the workshop has been interpreted, practiced, and circulated in various ways and has significantly influenced how H&D evolved as a collective.

The on- and offline publication *First, then ... repeat. Workshop scripts in Practice* ↗ This publication draws together collective workshop-based practices as a form of inquiry and is an attempt to show and discuss how workshops and workshop scripts shape—and, in turn, are shaped by—the various collective environments they pass through. (Hackers&Designers 2022b) ↙ is an

171   attempt to open up the repository of work-shop-based practices that have emerged from H&D's collective ecosystem. Situated somewhere between documentation and a call for action, the publication assembles the documentation and reflections of various befriended practitioners—everyday-hackers and sister initiatives that share an enthusiasm for the various ways collective learning can take shape. The range of workshops spans from »How to make batteries from mud« (Jaques/Wuschitz 2022), the »*SolarPunk*« (Borgers 2022) workshops, where solar powered wifi modules are repurposed to facilitate a scavenger hunt, to »Open-source Parenting« (Chambers 2022), a workshop aimed at accommodating moms and aunties with a focus on Black women in Pittsburgh and building »Experimental Chatrooms« (Lark VCR/Xin Xin 2020). The collection of workshop scripts also highlights the ways that workshop-based practices travel and are shared across different localities, timelines, and experiences.

People involved with H&D specifically are also involved in other groups and organizations simultaneously. Some describe themselves as »self-employed«, »independent«, or »without a boss«. Others might call themselves »freelancers« or »precarious creative workers«.

They come together at moments of (re)orientation, when we want to connect with new people, learn new skills, or expand our networks.

H&D is a fragile ecosystem of self-employed cultural workers who, due to their, at times unstable and diverging, socio-material conditions, tend to resort to short-lived, semi-committed, ad-hoc ways of working together, such as organizing workshops. One might say organizing workshops is all we can afford.

There is a double-bind in workshop-based practices. On the one hand, the flexible nature of workshops has functioned largely in favor of the H&D collective, in the sense that the shared activity of organizing workshops (while simultaneously defining and redefining what that means) is an activity that is equally loose and stable

enough to enable H&D to keep doing what H&D is doing and to keep those involved in H&D connected.

On the other hand, there are ethical concerns when perpetuating an image of the workshop as a format full of potential. At times it seems the workshop has become a product itself. Workshops tend to promise a collective experience as an opportunity for self-improvement and a return on investment, particularly if the workshop facilitators are renowned.

The free spirit of experimentation can be overshadowed by the coercive forces of a neoliberal workshop market, the fear of missing out on the latest workshop trends, and the pressure to constantly engage in processes of compulsive self-improvement and life-long-learning ↗ In her article »Lifelong Learning and the Professionalized Learner«, artist researcher Annette Krauss turns towards European policy papers on lifelong learning. She described developments such as »life-long learning« and the »learning economies« as examples »of progress-oriented accumulative models of learning that pervades institutions and subjectivities today.« According to Krauss, »learning from preschool to post-retirement, lifelong learning [encompasses] the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning and is tightly interwoven with the commodification of education.« ↙ , resulting in participants jumping from one workshop to the next.

The »workshop« is an ambiguous concept that blends effectively into the trajectories of contemporary flexible cultural workers. In its interpretive flexibility, the concept and format of the workshop relates to what sociologist Susan Leigh Star called »boundary objects«. A boundary object is »a set of work arrangements that are at once material and processual [...] that allows different groups to work together without consensus.« (Leigh Star 2010: 604). That is, there is no need for a group to agree on what defines »workshop« precisely for workshops to be put into practice. In fact, the ambiguity and interpretive flexibility of the concept workshop enables it to move between and combine various contexts and sustain various meanings simultaneously. Boundary objects »are at once temporal, based in action, subject to reflection and local tailoring, and distributed throughout all of these dimensions.« (ibid.).

173 In the context of H&D, it is not unusual that workshop participants meet in an »Etherpad«, an open source, real-time collaborative note taking tool, to role-play (Lisette 2022) together or to repurpose an open-source mailing list software to design a file-sharing game inspired by »exquisite-corpse« (Fincato/Moubarak 2022).

Flexible terms such as workshop have become part of the common vocabulary used by creative workers, freelance artists, designers and programmers who, according to designer and writer Silvio Lorusso, deal with »disorientation caused by a constant shuffling of the cards […] ›living in flexible time, without standards of authority and accountability‹.« (Sennett in Lorusso 2019: 44).

Through the recurrence of the workshop format within H&D's collective practice, it could be argued that H&D contributes to and feeds off the growing popularity of workshops. H&D workshops take part in knowledge economies that endorse the idea that workshops can be easily applied to any situation, given their temporary and adaptable nature.

The overuse as well as confusing use of the term workshop across various fields and practices raises the following questions: Why do we organize workshops and how do we define »workshop«? How can we ensure that our workshops align with our values such as commitment and responsibility, caring for someone or something long-term?

H&D's aim is to build community around critical socio-technical practices. We try to do so by facilitating spaces for experimentation where trial and error and unexpected outcomes are welcomed and by reducing the pressure to produce anything precious or finalized at the end. How is it possible to ensure this aim can be accomplished within the time constraints of a workshop and without falling into the trap of reproducing semi-committed, consumerist mentalities towards these workshops?

In ›Cooperative gaming‹ Giselle Jhunjhnuwala reflects on their cooperative game workshop during which participants create games about developing regenerative

ecosystems using the open-source card deck **174** generator software Phylo(mon). The software is distributed under a Creative Commons License Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. More specifically, Giselle talks about the significance of the world of free and open-source software and its principles of sharing and repurposing and continuing where someone else left off. Giselle writes that they »enjoy […] exploring alternative economic and technological systems that aim to provide more equity.« (Jhunjhnuwala 2022).

The departure point of the script »Forkshop: Doing and Undoing Workshops« is the acknowledgement that workshop is an ambiguous yet persuasive concept that requires critical attention. As a workshop about workshops ↗ (Hackers & Designers 2018) Workshop script of later workshop iterations: (Hackers & Designers 2020, o.J.) ↙ it attempts to work against a neo-liberal notion of the workshop as a recipe for high-velocity and result-oriented production and proposes to (re)articulate the collective conditions for a workshop to take place. The prompts in the script are an invitation to view the workshop itself as a medium, something that can be externalized, discussed, tweaked, and reiterated.

Rather than showcasing best practices, the intention behind facilitating a workshop about workshops is to explore the format of the workshop itself, as it has become a substantial ingredient for H&D's and many other self-organized groups alike but remains mostly unquestioned and never clearly articulated or problematized. With every new group we ought to slightly adjust the ways in which we approach a workshop. Facilitating exchange regarding past workshop experiences and attending to the expectations of a group supports the articulation of similar and diverging incentives for facilitating and participating in workshops.

The way a workshop unfolds depends on many variables that are conditioned by the environment in which the workshop takes place. Throughout the various activations and reiterations of the script, it has proven useful

175 to hear about various workshop experiences and expectations of participants in addition to articulating collective desires and also insecurities that were specific to a particular group.
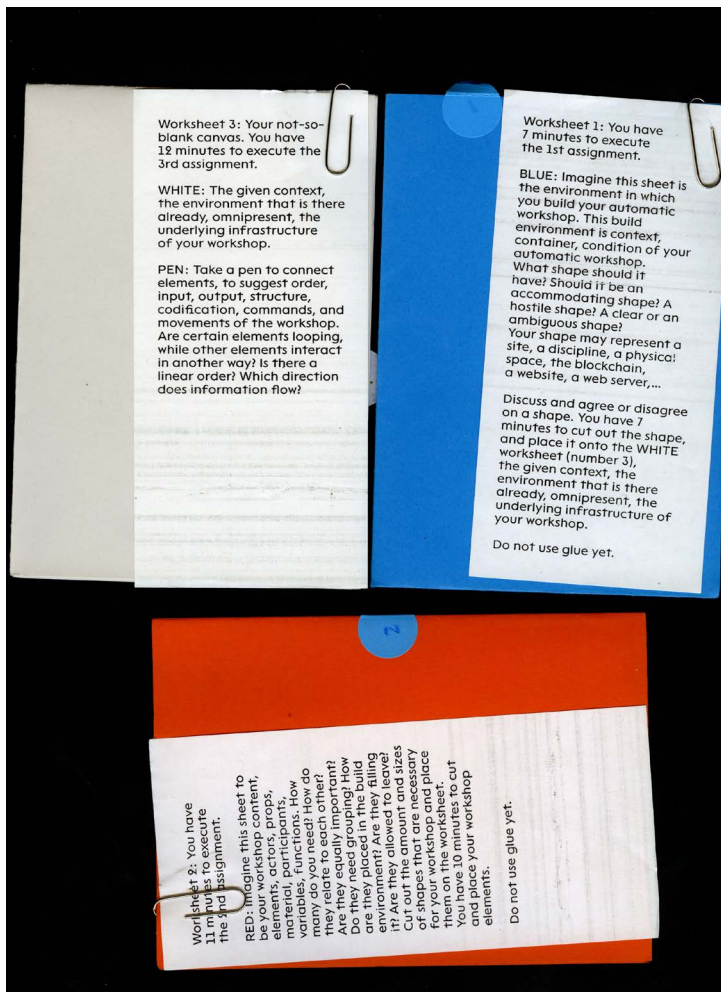
In the iteration »Workshop, Werkstatt, Weerkplaats,« H&D alongside befriended *collectives fanfare* and *Fabulous Future* explored the tension between understanding the workshop as a place for material and hands-on production and as an ambiguous format for time-boxed collaboration. To prototype workshop spaces, we asked fanfare to lend/rent their »display system«—a modular system made of wooden beams, planks, and reusable screws which is easy to assemble and reassemble in various spatial structures. As such, the display system can accommodate many collective situations and includes possibilities for seating, tables, presentation walls, and shelves. In the workshop, participants were invited to collectively challenge / expand / enhance the display system as a workshop space (fanfare 2022; Groten 2022).

Through the different modes and stages of the workshop—vocalizing, writing, commenting, discussing personal workshop experiences—a vast inventory of stories came into being. The exercise of writing and commenting on workshop anecdotes proved to be particularly generative. Through the constraints of time and format (e.g., A4 paper folded in half), participants were able to tap into their personal repository of workshop experiences and unveil humorous tales and memorable insights as much as frustrations and dilemmas.

Interestingly, throughout the different workshop iterations, participants repeatedly expressed discomfort with the neoliberal connotation of the workshop. Alternative terms were proposed, such as »session«, »meeting«, »event«, or »assembly«. Yet, it was challenging to find a term that could accurately express both the ephemeral character of the workshop format and its correlation with the material workshop space—the artisan workshop, that is, a term that encompasses a practical, hands-on approach and the emphasis on doing and

making that H&D workshops strive for, along with their temporal character, all of which is reflected in both uses of the term workshop.

By including participants, organizers, and facilitators in questioning and redefining the particular conditions of workshops every time there is a new occasion, we resist one definition of workshop. The workshop, as such, becomes less agile and universally adaptable to any context.

Worksheet 3: Your not-so-blank canvas. You have 12 minutes to execute the 3rd assignment.

WHITE: The given context, the environment that is there already, omnipresent, the underlying infrastructure of your workshop.

PEN: Take a pen to connect elements, to suggest order, input, output, structure, codification, commands, and movements of the workshop. Are certain elements looping, while other elements interact in another way? Is there a linear order? Which direction does information flow?

Worksheet 1: You have 7 minutes to execute the 1st assignment.

BLUE: Imagine this sheet is the environment in which you build your automatic workshop. This build environment is context, container, condition of your automatic workshop. What shape should it have? Should it be an accommodating shape? A hostile shape? A clear or an ambiguous shape? Your shape may represent a site, a discipline, a physical space, the blockchain, a website, a web server,...

Discuss and agree or disagree on a shape. You have 7 minutes to cut out the shape, and place it onto the WHITE worksheet (number 3), the given context, the environment that is there already, omnipresent, the underlying infrastructure of your workshop.

Do not use glue yet.

Worksheet 2: You have 11 minutes to execute the 2nd assignment.

RED: Imagine this sheet to be your workshop content, elements, actors, props, material, functions. How variables you need? How do many do you relate to each other? Are they equally important? Do they need grouping? How are they placed in the build environment? Are they filling it? Are they allowed to leave? Cut out the amount and sizes of shapes that are necessary for your workshop and place them on the worksheet. You have 10 minutes to cut and place your workshop elements.

Do not use glue yet.

Img 1: Worksheet for »An Automatic Workshop,« collaboration with Shailoh Philips during the H&D Summer Academy 2018, Amsterdam.

Figuring Things Out Together

Exploring the 'Workshop'
as a concept and format for
collective learning and publishing

Workshop script
for a ⏲ 2 hour on-site workshop
Date: ~~21~~ 24 June 2022, ~~15-17:00~~ 10-12
Location: TROEF,
Middelstegracht 87 Leiden

Outline

9.45
~~14.45~~

Farbre

- People arrive, coffee, tea, cookies

~~10.00~~
10.00

Anja says hi, then I continue. Introduction of myself and the

- Welcome everyone
- Share the workshop script
- Round of introductions:
  - Names, preferred pronouns
  - How do you relate to workshops in your practice/work/life?
  - Anything else you would like to share with the group?

~~10.10~~
10.10

Workshop introduction:
- Why 'workshops'?!
- Introduction research methods:
1. Workshop anecdotes
2. Sifting through pedagogical documents
3. Workshop reenactment
4. Writing / designing / publishing / distributing 'workshop scripts'
- Structure of the workshop

*temporary institutions. (why script!)
script as institution of moving with,
research as method of exhibiting but searching together.
not "just" exhibiting the phenomenological
Documents as objects, orienting the participant.
→ Workshop as form of publishing
while researching. An
active document. Reading
it while doing it
lively? Or reading/writing
actually.*

*anecdotes as [?]
affective documents
form of criticality
formulating subtext.
Iteration & critique
Why reenactments?
Intertextual
relationships, mirror reading
(where practice builds on other
practice), reproduction
We institutions reproduce*

~~11.20 – 12.00~~
10.20 – 11.00

🕐 40 min
Exercise 1: Workshop anecdotes

We read the script/exercises.

change phone!

🕐 15 min
- Take an A4 sheet of paper
- Fold it in half along the long edge
- Use the left side of the fold to write a personal workshop anecdote (it can be 'real' or made-up)
- When you are finished, pick a location for your anecdote somewhere in the workshop space and hang it up

We do the exercise.

🕐 15 min
- Take a sticker sheet
- We walk around the room in silence, read the anecdotes and leave annotations on the empty side of the paper

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Img 2+3: Script annotations by Pia Louwerens, Workshop reenactment, Troef Leiden, June 2022.

In this workshop I co-set up, I was supposed to osciliate between the roles of a participant, observer, & facilitator. Another person was supposed to document. There was a script a a timeline, but an improv introduction question was so intense, we all felt glued to our chairs confined in the role we started a confront with the impossibility of switching roles at that moment.

ve-evaluated

I felt the skill of sensing subjectivity cannot be assumed. It is so important to keep checking

I think it's often a problem that a workshop can be perceived as of an less strong emphasis when sharing

I can see a workshop around intoductions only. Or is that just group-therapy?

ALWAYS INTIMIDATING TO START A WORKSHOP CHOOSE WORDS CONFINED TO ROLES AND PRE-DET-ERMINED NOTIONS OF THOSE ROLES.

Once I ~~di~~ joined a workshop ~~we were~~ ~~asked the string stories~~ ~~etc~~ that included sharing our experience ~~with~~ with war.

The place smelled of fresh bread, herbs and in the center of the space was a kitchen. I was offered an apron.

Was it a silent experience of cooky?

Something i ask myself often: can personal experiences and trauma be workshopped?

Apron as an implicit task or role. Could be comforting for.

~~happy meals~~ ~~hm to happns~~ sounds great! collective cooking, healing, relieving and eating over war trauma — sounds like [illegible]

workshop as experience

every workshop should involve meal-making :)

[illegible swirled text]

So the workshop had started great. Everyone was enthusiastic and motivated. So how did we end up line this? The plan was simply to introduce a bunch of people to some new software, yet another framework for artists and designers, etc. We had scripted everything, it was all timed to perfection and for once we were even able to be paid for the preparations. We had planned three days to dive into this and here we were, at day. nothing was working. Half of the participants had left, the host of the venue had gone from being panicked to pissed off, artsbach, one participant was crying, we were blaming each other, the only one person managed to install the tool, and had been wailing 2 day ter the workshop to start.

At which point do you realise that it is time to abandon the script?

oh nooo
software expectatic

How to build flexibility into the structure?

I wanted to work in my fathers Pastry shop and walk on his footsteps. he made me clean dishes food floor for 12 years. 20 years after I'm vice chair

How to voice expectation ?

I HAVE GIVEN JUST ON WORKSHOPS ON INSTALLING THE SOFTWARE.

Img 4-6: Workshop anecdotes, written by workshop participants, June 2022.

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