

THE POTENTIAL OF DESIGN WORKSHOPS' ICEBREAKERS IN THE POST-COVID ERA

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ABSTRACT

Design workshops involve individuals from different backgrounds such as researchers, designers, government officials, students, and those with disabilities. Icebreaking is a method frequently employed by workshop organizers to foster rapid acquaintance among the diverse participants from the onset to the point of facilitating collaborative teamwork. This study delves into icebreaker techniques across three types of design workshops conducted domestically in Japan, and internationally. Icebreakers of face-to-face, online, and hybrid workshops are analysed by comparing their communication methods, proactive or cooperative engagements, and emotional perspectives. The objective is to explore icebreaking methodologies from past workshops and identify their impact in post-COVID design workshops. This research can also evoke students' concern for social issues and their sense of responsibility through online teaching even after the epidemic.

Keywords: Design workshop, icebreakers, design method, post-COVID

1 BACKGROUND

Design workshops are typically participatory workshops based on design thinking, where participants from diverse backgrounds take up a local issue and work in teams to propose a design solution over a period of two to five days. In these workshops, the participants are diverse, including researchers, designers, government officials, students, and people with disabilities. Icebreaking is a method often used to help participants get to know each other quickly from the initial meeting, until they start creating together as team members. Imamura states icebreakers consist of elements such as self-introduction, recognition of others, and collaborative work [1]. He describes icebreakers as playing the dual role of dynamite that breaks through the rigidity of a group, and as cement that binds people together [1]. Miura described icebreakers as “human relations” due to the degree of human connections made among participants [2]. Tanaka and Moribe state the need to deliberately create an atmosphere from the first meeting point that would instigate a desire get to know the other person, which in turn can create a better relationship [3]. Hori et al. talked about the effectiveness of icebreakers from the perspective of “team building,” which is used to help members get to know each other, build relationships, and increase their willingness to work together [4].

After the COVID-19 outbreak, in-person design workshops changed to online meetings and, as a result, the icebreaking approach changed significantly. Face-to-face discussions were held online via ZOOM and Teams, sticky notes became the online whiteboard Miro, and icebreaking methods had to adapt. Zhang highlighted the effectiveness of icebreakers in enhancing communication during online workshops [5]. In the post-pandemic era, design workshop organizers enjoy greater flexibility in choosing operational methods, including face-to-face, online, or hybrid formats. However, research exploring the positive impact of icebreakers on design workshops in this new context is still limited.

2 OBJECTIVES

This study focuses on the use of icebreakers within design workshops across face-to-face, online, and hybrid formats. It aims to delineate the nuances and impacts of various icebreaking strategies—spanning communication methods, the spectrum from individual to collaborative efforts, and emotional

dynamics—to enhance design workshops in the post-COVID landscape. These findings can be implemented in future design workshops in the post-COVID era.

3 METHODS

As a design workshop practitioner, the author has conducted many design workshops in Japan and internationally with three formats: face-to-face, online, and hybrid. For each workshop type, recorded images and data were collected and analysed to measure the icebreaker’s effectiveness. Based on Hori’s previous research [4], the focus was on the participants’ desire to collaborate and their emotion. Using the Participant Involvement map framework proposed by Manzini [8], each workshop’s active involvement and collaborative involvement was measured. Specifically, media data of the three workshop types which contained ice-breaker methods, communication methods between participants (verbal or non-verbal communication), participants’ participation attitudes (proactive or collaborative), as well as the level of participants’ emotions, were visualised and analysed.

By extracting and integrating the characteristics of icebreakers in the three types of workshops, this study aims to explore the possibility of new, effective icebreakers that allow participants of design workshops to get to know each other to confidently to create together.

4 DESIGN WORKSHOPS AND ICEBREAKERS

The purpose of a design workshop is to use design methods to bring together participants from diverse backgrounds to find creative solutions to social issues. Design workshops are divided into four processes: Explore It, Respond to It, Make It, and Share It [6]. This research, using two-day design workshops as case studies, organizes the icebreakers into process types. Icebreakers will be held according to a process of the three workshop types: face-to-face, online, and hybrid as seen in Figure 1.

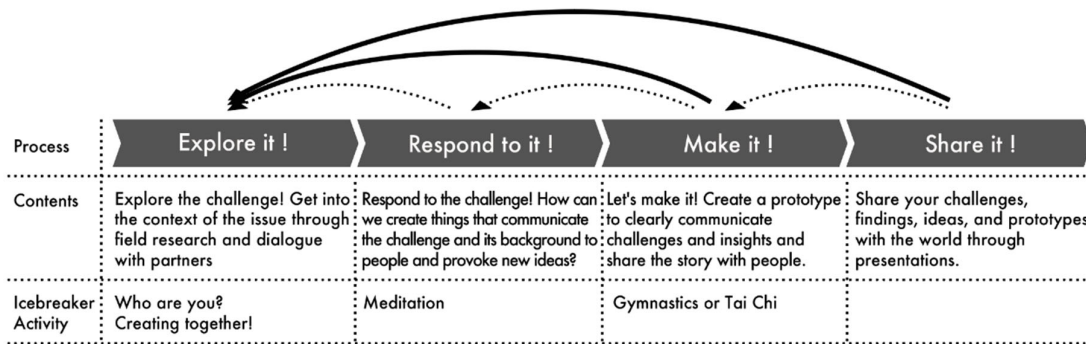


Figure 1. Icebreaker activities of design workshops

In the figures that follow, using the labels: Physical (P), Digital (D), Hybrid (H), a description of the icebreakers: Who are you (1), Create together (2), Meditation (3), and Tai Chi/Dance (4) were provided. For face-to-face workshops, icebreaker activities are P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4; for online workshops, they are D-1, D-2, D-3, D-4; and for hybrid workshops, they are H-1, H-2, H-3, H-4. Digital records of two-day workshops from were analysed to discover each icebreaker’s communication method, participant engagement type (e.g., proactive/cooperative), and emotional level (ranging from normal to very happy).

4.1 Icebreakers in face-to-face workshops

Face-to-face workshops were held from 2015 to 2019, and 2023. At the beginning of the workshop, diverse participants meet for the first time and begin with the “Who are you” icebreaker. At that time, the following icebreakers (P-1—P-4) are conducted and described in Figure 2.

4.2 Icebreakers in online workshops

The online workshops were conducted in 2020. All participants communicated via Zoom and used Miro to develop ideas. The descriptions of the icebreakers (D1—D4) are captured in Figure 3.

4.3 Icebreakers in hybrid workshops

Hybrid workshops were conducted from 2021- 2022; their icebreakers (H1—H4) described in Figure 4. While primarily conducted with in-person participation, some participants joined online. Therefore, preparations were made for both in-person and online participation, with Zoom and Miro being utilized.





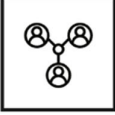


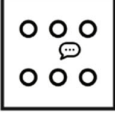


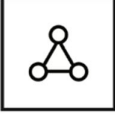

Icebreaker Activity	Communication Method	Participant Engagement	Emotional Level
P-1: Who are you? (2017) Draw an image of yourself on a card, put it on your clothes, and introduce yourself. (Sharing your hobbies is crucial, as it quickly initiates communication with people who share similar interests.)	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Normal
P-2: Creating together: Silent Machine Game (2016) This is a game to ease tension among team members who do not know each other, where they silently combine their bodies to form a single machine. Then, they present it, and other teams guess what kind of machine it is. It involves using the brain, physical movement, and cooperation.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Cooperative	 Very Happy
P-3: Meditation (2023) For 10 minutes, participants closed their eyes, either sitting or lying down, and followed the verbal guidance of the instructor while engaging in meditation.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Slightly Happy
P-4: Dance (2017) A 3-minute SDGs dance. Participants watch a dance video and imitate it. Although it's an individual activity, dancers also observe the movements of those around them while dancing.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive-Cooperative	 Happy

Figure 2. Face to face workshop icebreaker observations


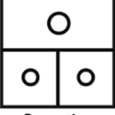


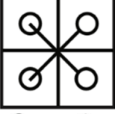


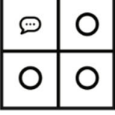


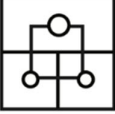

Icebreaker Activity	Communication Method	Participant Engagement	Emotional Level
D-1: Who are you?: (2020) Using Zoom from their respective computers, each participant introduces themselves. Those who can use Miro, use text, photos, and illustrations.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Normal
D-2: Creating together: Create animals using sticky notes. (2020) Each team member connects via Zoom from their computer and work together on Miro to create an animal from the materials given to them for 10 minutes.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Cooperative	 Happy
D-3: Meditation (2020) The workshop producer leads a 10-minute meditation session through Zoom, to enhance concentration, attention, and further foster creativity.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Slightly Happy
D-4: Tai Chi (2017) For 10 minutes, participants will engage in Tai chi, following the guidance of the workshop producer on Zoom.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive-Cooperative	 Happy

Figure 3. Online workshop icebreaker observations


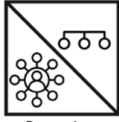


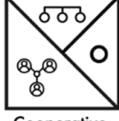


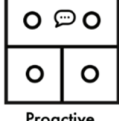




Icebreaker Activity	Communication Method	Participant Engagement	Emotional Level
H-1: Who are you?: (2021) Self-introductions take place in face-to-face groups, and participants use sticky notes and cards to share nicknames and hobbies. Online participants listen and communicate using Zoom.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Normal
H-2: Creating together: Create animals using sticky notes. (2022) Both online and in-person participants used Miro making animals using sticky notes and other online materials for 10 minutes.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Cooperative	 Happy
H-3: Meditation (2021) Both online and in-person participants follow the workshop leader's voice simultaneously and engage in meditation for 10 minutes.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive	 Slightly Happy
H-4: Tai Chi (2021) The producer's guidance is essential. Tai chi movements are explained through voice while actions are performed. In-person participants listen to the voice instructions, observe the producer's actions, and observe other participants while engaging in Tai Chi. For online participants, it was challenging to clearly discern both the voice and movements through Zoom.	 Verbal and nonverbal	 Proactive-Cooperative	 Slightly Happy

Figure 4. Hybrid workshop icebreaker observations

4.4 Findings

Tanaka and Mori found that conversations using online conference systems differ from face-to-face conversations in terms of the quality of interpersonal communication [7]. Face-to-face conversations involve both verbal and nonverbal communication, the physical presence, gaze, posture, and distance of between participants are important and are often accompanied by powerful emotional experiences. In online conversations, nonverbal cues take a back seat, leading to more direct exchanges where one person speaks and the other responds. This means that individuals online tend to verbally express themselves more explicitly, making it easier to share personal viewpoints and engage in meaningful discussions. Based on these characteristics, we analysed icebreakers based according to communication type, participant engagement type, and emotional level:

For introductory icebreakers, P-1 utilizes verbal and non-verbal communication, making it easier for participants to understand and express their emotions, thus facilitating empathy among participants. In D-1, verbal communication takes center stage; focusing on the content of speech without feeling a physical presence makes it difficult to establish empathy. In the case of H-1, communication bounces back and forth between in-person participants and those online. It was found that face-to-face participants understand each other best, followed by hybrid participants, then solely online participants. For collaborative icebreakers, P-2 fosters emotional contagion through physical and facial expressions, making participants' joyful expressions distinct. Although D-2 involves cooperative creative activities, enjoyment may decrease compared to face-to-face workshops due to the constraints of online applications. In H-2, there are no issues during the discussion stage, but online members cannot participate hands-on, leading all members to use Miro, mirroring D-2. It was found that face-to-face workshops are the easiest to facilitate team building, while hybrid formats are the most challenging. Regarding meditative icebreakers, while the environment of online participants may have a slight impact, there was not much of a difference among P-3, D-3, and H-3 in terms of activity content. Tai Chi and dance icebreakers are activities done individually under the guidance of a leader; it is easiest in face-to-face workshops (P-4). D-4 was difficult because it is hard to capture movement transmitted by a camera on a computer screen through Zoom. Hybrid workshops (H-4) are the most challenging; the recording device must follow the leader's movements, while being aware of the participants who are physically present. This makes it more difficult for online participants to follow or focus on the leader.

5 ICEBREAKERS DISTRIBUTED ON PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT MAPS

The workshops conducted in this study aim to collaboratively generate solutions to social issues involving diverse individuals. Because of these characteristics, a framework called the Participant Involvement Map [8] (PI map) was applied for analysis. In creating a PI map, this study employed the principles of active involvement and collaborative participation. By using these two principles as axes and intersecting them, the PI map was generated in Figure 5. This map outlines methods through which participants can contribute towards achieving a desired outcome.

The degree of active involvement refers to what participants are tasked to do, ranging from passive to active participation. In passive participation, participants are categorized as passive users who are served by active providers. In contrast, active participation involves participants leveraging their personal resources such as time, energy, attention, and specific skills. In this scenario, the distinction between users and providers blurs, as users become co-producers alongside providers.

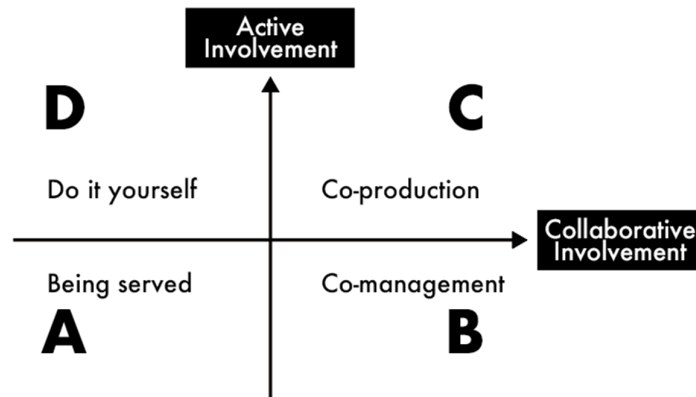


Figure 5. Participant involvement map adapted from Manzini

The degree of collaborative involvement signifies the extent to which participants engage in collaboration, varying from no collaboration to intense collaboration. In instances of no collaboration, participants work alone, either being served or being actively involved as individuals. Intense collaboration involves participants working with peers (horizontal collaboration) or with other social actors such as experts, institutions, associations, or businesses (vertical collaboration).

Quadrant A represents low participant involvement in both activities and collaborations. This aligns with traditional service models and some collaborative organizations where participants primarily play the user role. Quadrant B demonstrates low user involvement in practical activities but emphasizes collaboration in organization design and management. This is typical of traditional services and collaborative organizations co-managed by participants. Quadrant C indicates intense participant involvement in practical activities with others. Quadrant D reflects intense participant involvement in individually carried out activities. This mode is prevalent in do-it-yourself-based services and collaborative organizations that have adopted such approaches [8]. PI maps were then created by applying these concepts to the icebreakers of the three workshop types as seen in Figure 6.

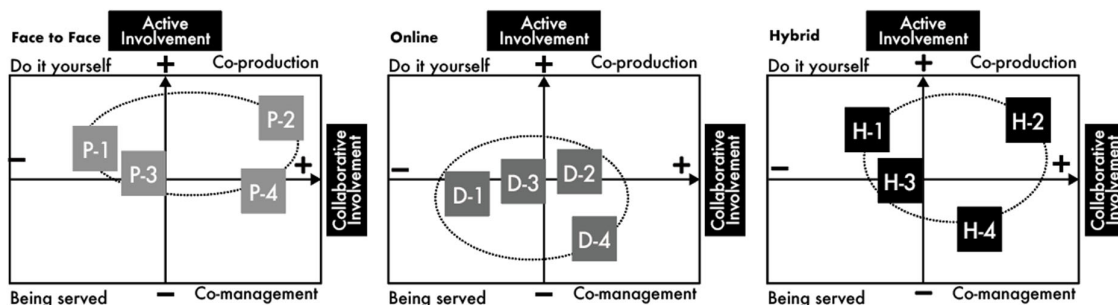


Figure 6. Comparison of PI map for the three workshop types

The PI map of the face-to-face workshop generally shows a strong tendency towards active involvement. It is thought that it is easier to motivate participants because many communication methods are utilized, and emotions are easily contagious. In online workshops, everyone participates through a digital device, so there is a tendency for weak active involvement and weak collaborative involvement. In comparison to the other two types, hybrid workshops exhibit a broader spread of active involvement and collaborative involvement. According to Manzini's concept, the PI map does not label Quadrant C as the most favourable or Quadrant A as the least favourable. What is ideal is having a balance between all Quadrants that aligns with the end goal of a workshop or activity.

6 CONCLUSIONS

When icebreakers are used as a self-introduction activity, the quality of communication can be ranked in the order of face-to-face workshops, hybrid workshops, and online workshops. For icebreakers that involve co-creation, it was found that those that are more challenging are more emotionally satisfying for the participants. Face-to-face workshops involve both verbal and non-verbal communication, making it easier for participants to understand and empathize. Additionally, it was found that the feedback from online collaboration can be received easily as the workshop progresses, making evaluation easier. Icebreakers that employ meditative practices have very little observable differences. For icebreakers that involve movement, face-to-face workshops were found to be the most effective, while hybrid workshops were found to be the most difficult.

Icebreakers in face-to-face workshops appear to be easiest to conduct and have the best emotional feedback. Online workshops focus on verbal communication and are more likely to promote the exchange of opinions that go well beyond personal views. Hybrid workshops pose the greatest challenge for organizers, requiring extensive preparation. However, according to the analysis of PI map, hybrid workshops show the widest range of active involvement and collaborative involvement, suggesting the positive potential for diverse participation. One limitation of this study is its perspective, which is primarily that of a workshop organizer. Future research will require data gathered from a broader participant base to enrich and deepen the findings. This study solely draws its conclusions from the above-mentioned processes and design method workshops; further research is needed for design workshops with different processes.

In the post-COVID era, a variety of workshops can be conducted even more successfully with the appropriate icebreaker in play. Icebreakers, where communication is crucial, excel in face-to-face workshops but appear to have a greater impact in hybrid workshops. The results of this research can assist workshop practitioners, educators interested in innovative teaching methods, and professionals responsible for human resource development, by showing ideal ways to spark participants' interest in one another, foster teamwork, and propose innovative solutions during workshop activities.

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