Self-assessment by
Alexis Pala

A summary about me:

I am an anthropologist who accidentally became a designer when I sought to challenge how assumptions about people affects policy and legislation. I have been working with design for social innovation for over six years as across public services in the UK and beyond to deliver better outcomes for people. I have come to consider myself an applied researcher, facilitator, social designer, and social innovator passionate about strategic, public impact.

I strive to enable positive change on complex challenges through the power of facilitation and design. Making services more participatory, inclusive, evidence-based, and longer-term are golden threads through my work.

I currently work as a/at:

Research Associate, The Wales Centre for Public Policy: https://www.wcpp.org.uk/

My educational background:

Bachelors in Anthropology, honours; MPhil in Public Policy, Innovation Unit Design Academy Valedictorian (2022-23)

The following theories are the key components of my approach to service design:

Be abductive. In complex systems we often want to change an outcome, but we don't know 'what' is causing that outcome and 'how' those parts interact and relate. Abduction is another type of reasoning (like inductive and deductive) that is non-linear. We do it well as a child when we approach life with curiosity. I see it as a process of understanding the relationships driving complex outcomes and trying and testing to see if you can achieve another result.

Think systemically. Explore the wider relationships, the spaces between things, and take the influencing landscape into consideration. You need to support people to share the same mental model of what "a system" looks like so they can visualise the influencing factors and drivers to make more complexity-informed decisions.

Think differently to achieve different outcomes. You cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that created it. But thinking differently requires new tools, frames, and behaviours so facilitation can enable new thinking to happen and new dynamics to unfold.

Be systematic. This is about rigorous learning loops and an approach to divergence so you can meaningfully converge on something that will bring new depth. Being systematic is more than just ticking boxes, its understanding the why laying beneath the process.

Be participatory. People need to be involved in change and you get further faster with others and through mobilising networks. Unleashing active participation helps you to get more out of people and to better understand context.

Be playful. Design is about getting people to shed their narrow, bounded, rigid ideas of 'what is' to move into 'what might be'. Play is about creating psychological safe spaces that enable people to think laterally, creatively and see possibility.

My approach to design is summed up in one William Blake quote: "what is now proved, was once only imagined".

These are the most relevant resources I base my work on and I recommend them as a body of knowledge in service design:

Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need, Sasha Costanza-Chock - it forefronts community-led practices and social justice in design. It makes key connections about the different 'affordances' we make in design and the fallacy of universality.

Designs for the Pluriverse, Arturo Escobar - this book reads like poetry to me. Pluriverse is about designing for a world "where many worlds fit" and as Escobar says, "involves a deep concern for social justice, the radical equality of all beings, and non-hierarchy". Escobar makes design about more than the human realm and stretches my thinking about systems and interconnections.

Value Sensitive Design: Shaping Technology with Moral Imagination, Batya Friedman and David Hendry - this area in design gave me a framework, a new way of thinking about how to surface and address value-tensions in design. It also helped me to think differently about implementation.

Beyond Sticky Notes: Co-design for Real: Mindsets, methods and movements, Kelly Ann McKercher - this is a go to for me when thinking about how to slow down, and do co-design intentionally. The entire book is a provocation and set a standard for a space that was becoming a buzzword. Kelly Ann gave people (practitioners and participants) a gold standard to strive for to avoid tokensim.

Radical Help, Hilary Cottam - this book made design accessible, attractive and make sense for public practice. I am inspired by Cottam's ability to weave really deep academic theory and wisdom into design and aspire to do the same.

I have X years of working experience in service design:

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My working experience in service design includes involvement in:

- Service design projects
- Service design consultancy
- Service design training

I have particular experience in the following service sectors:

Health, social care, public services, sleep health

I have conducted X service design projects that aim at creating improvements or innovations within organisations:

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These are the service design projects I have successfully delivered:

1 - Ymlaen: developing a new innovation, improvement and research strategy for Wales. From January 2023 until March 2024 I offered strategic support to help the team at Social Care Wales to engage, develop, and consult on a new sector-wide strategy. This involved workshops to cocreate a theory of change.

2 - Supporting the development of the first Social Care Innovation Coaching support offer. From January to July 2023 I designed and delivered design research into how Social Care Wales could rollout Innovation Coaching support to the sector. We used co-design to design an initial framework and application process to pilot.

3 - User research into supporting innovation in social care with Social Care Wales. From January to August 2022 I conducted design research for Social Care Wales into how they could better enable innovation in Wales. We created social care innovation personas and a systems map. This secured a multi-million pound investment.

4 - Barts Shield: coproducing social innovation during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was an emergent and responsive proof of concept with Barts NHS Trust. The project ran from April 2020-21. It provided meaningful, virtual peer connection and integrated organisational support to clinically vulnerable staff. It was shortlisted for multiple national awards. Listen to our impact here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAkTcDW4I18&t=2s

5 - Supporting the Seinoli Legal Centre, the first public interest legal centre in Lesotho, with ongoing design research support. We co-created a theory of change to evidence their impact, built data collection and management capability, and tested new ways of working with the communities they support from Spring 2018 through December 2021.

6 - Somni: rethinking sleep by providing holistic sleep programmes. I have worked with Somni since 2018 as a behavioural health designer and conducted design research to inform product development and changes for companies like Disney (2018-19) and Fedex (2023-24). We focus on supporting workers with challenging sleep-life patterns.

I have provided service design training sessions and/or other educational experiences for X years:

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My philosophy as a trainer is:

My main philosophy is to immerse participants in the change I'd like them to make so they feel and understand it. I strongly believe that a successful training leaves people feeling energised and empowered to apply learnings to their work. Empowerment requires the trainer to really think about cases, examples, and tools that will feel relevant to the audience. I frequently am invited to train and expose people who aren't currently using design tools and approaches. My aim is to reveal the power and influence of design where they are and how although they might not become a 'designer' they can think like a designer.

I believe key components to achieving this are making a training:

Bespoke – adapting examples and activities to people's context.

Practical – don't just say, get people to learn through doing and playing to move past discomfort

Generate self-reflection – because people don't learn just from doing, they learn best by slowing down and reflecting on experiences.

Collaborative – people learn best when working on challenges with others and learning from how others think because there is 'no right way'.

These are the service design training sessions and/or other educational experiences I've facilitated within the last year:

Over the past five-years I have delivered a variety of taster sessions on design and design tools in public services. My training support largely focuses on supporting public services with problem framing, to understand user needs, and begin to apply tools to their practice. I have also developed a framework for better grappling with methods and approaches given the complexity of the problem a given service seeks to address.

I mostly provide my training offerings in the following language(s):

English

I mostly provide my training offerings in the following countries/cities:

United Kingdom

I cover the following topics during my training offerings:

- User research/deep customer insights
- Designing and conducting co-creation workshops
- Creativity and ideation processes
- Facilitation skills for service design
- Exploration of systems
- Service design for cultural change

My training participants typically have the following level of experience:

- Novice (new to service design)

These are the service design methods and tools that I use during my sessions:

Personas - they are a powerful tool for challenging assumptions and getting services to think differently about how they are meeting needs, and whose needs are they meeting.

Journey mapping - I use this to help people to think visually and begin to grapple with the gap between the 'ideal' and the 'reality' to think about how to narrow it.

Blueprint - I introduce this concept to people through training but largely focus on cocreating this with people through workshops so they see how it's supposed to work. I use it as an exercise to deepen journey maps and make narrowing that implementation gap more real.

Theory of Change - I see this as one of the most powerful tools when done well. It's a clear articulation of a vision and how that vision should look over time. It provides a basis for monitoring and evaluation, learning, and building a robust blueprint.

System mapping - the aim is not to map the system, rather to become aware of the interconnections and get people into the mindset of seeking leverage points for real change to happen and sustain.

After successfully attending my training sessions, participants will typically be able to:

Create a persona, articulate what problem framing is, articulate the basics of a design approach to public services, understand the importance of facilitation for service design, feel more confident with speaking about mapping and understanding the types of maps they might want to apply

I systematically evaluate and improve my offerings based on feedback. These are examples of feedback that have led to improvements:

My trainings were bespoke since they were ad-hoc and/or demand-led. This meant that although I asked evaluation questions, evaluation wasn't necessarily for content improvement.

I have participated in the following service design-related activities in order to stay up to date, share my experiences with peers and receive their supervision within the last 12 months:

- SDN Academy Course

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