

# Mapping social practices through collaborative exercises and visualizations

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## Abstract

In this paper, we explore the use of collaborative exercises and mental map visualizations as tools for understanding social practices and exploring co-design opportunities for product and service development. The research is based on material gathered through a case study of a web-based data storage service in its beta stage.

We use these tools to study the interconnections of the designed system to an array of other applications, tools and services, which form what we refer to as people's digital ecosystem. Our experiences suggest that taking practices as the unit of analysis is a relevant strategy to bring forward users' own knowledge of their everyday life, and link it to the professional knowledge of developers and designers; and that visualizations and collaborative exercises are relevant design thinking strategies.

## Context: A Living Lab pilot project

The project case study was undertaken through a pilot project called Helsinki Living Lab (HLL) [5]. The project was set to explore broader partnerships (public/private, developers/users research/business) in the development of new products and develop user-driven innovation know-how in the Arabianranta neighborhood of Helsinki.

The case we refer to here is one that addressed the current user experience and future development possibilities of a web-based service for online storage and sharing of files. The service was in beta stage at the time this study was conducted.

## Practices

Embodied, materially mediated arrangements of human activities that

- are shared [12],
- are organized through practical understanding [8],
- constitute a kind of silent and ubiquitous "consumer production" [2] and
- are implicated on innovation activities in everyday life contexts [7].

## Mapping practices collaboratively

The approach is a combination of qualitative research techniques (e.g. semi structured interviews and self documentation tasks), supported by design oriented activities (drawing, visual representation tasks, and design ideation workshops) after which a series of – mostly visual – representations were used to analyze, process collectively and present the results and insights.

### A VISUALIZING PRACTICES

1. Participants are invited to individual sessions (usually lasting ca. 30-45 min), where they reflect on a set of everyday practices and their related artefacts, places and social networks. The sessions are constructed around collaborative drawing of a mental map, which serves both as an artefact for reflection and analysis as well as a documentation strategy.

### B GENERATING SHARED UNDERSTANDING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EXERCISES

2. Members of the team analyze together the map material and generate a visual summary of the themes and topics to identify commonalities and differences and pinpoint practices.

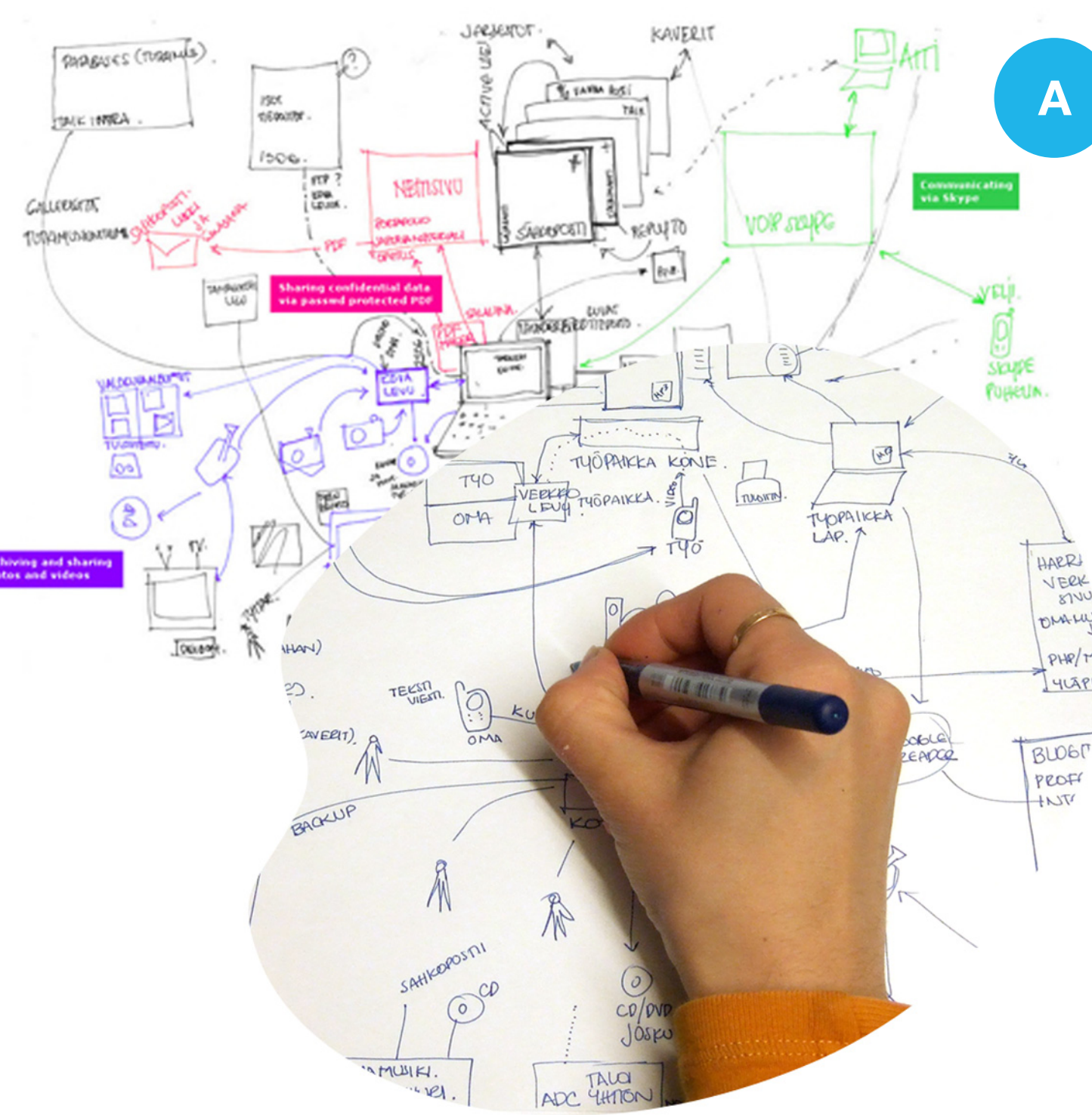
3. The resulting visualization of emergent topics was used as background for a collaborative online annotation software where the participants read and commented a set of questions related to each topic, and added new thoughts during a ten day period. The objective was to open up our preliminary analysis to all the participants, as well as probe if the sharing of the documentation process with all participants, would elicit new ideas worth collecting.

4. Joint workshop was arranged with all the participants, and the whole process was discussed as a background for generating ideas on how they envisaged that the service could work for them, on how it could be developed further, and on the service's relationship to the artifacts, devices and services they already used.

### C SOCIALIZING THE INFORMATION

As a deliverable and documentation strategy we decided to create short, condensed, yet contextualized materials in the form of a document of emerging topics and themes for sharing, archiving and backpping practices complemented with a series of textual portraits and visual practitioner portrait cards. These materials condensed our collective insights of the participants' current and expected sharing, archiving and backpping practices.

These representations aimed to act as boundary objects [11] for the purpose of helping in further development of the service and to be used by the different stakeholders (company developers, research team partners and participants themselves) as rich and illustrative reference materials. The maps, interviews and workshop materials clearly and concretely illustrated to all the stakeholders how the participants creatively configured sharing, archiving and backpping practices through a mixed ecosystem where the new service had a potential place. However, the material also uncovered gaps and conflicting areas in this relationship.



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