Rewarding conversations

-How to reach them, arrange them and spread them
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Abstract

This thesis gives you an introduction to rewarding conversations and a set of guidelines for reaching them more easily. I have found that there is an interest for having rewarding conversations with strangers. In a number of experiments I have tested a variation of arranged meetings between strangers aiming at creating rewarding conversations. This study have shown that more participants reaching rewarding conversations in a private meeting in contrast to a space where several conversations takes place.

Several experiments has confirmed that there is an interest for listening to other people’s rewarding conversations and that they prefer longer, but edited conversations. By studying the experience of listing to a conversation I found that the understanding of what we hear will be different for everyone, down to the level of a specific word. Similarly the understanding of what you hear will change depended on if you are listening alone or with other people, which means that the surrounding situation affect what you perceive. It is still possible to recognise a general quality despite of subjective preferences. Based on the findings I have created a design proposal, a website whose goal is to encourage rewarding conversations through allowing to arranging and spreading them.
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1 Introduction

For many years I have been interested in conversations. Not any conversation- and defiantly not every conversation. I have been interested in really good conversations. Conversations that opens you mind to a new insight. Conversations that makes you understand. Conversation that creates new perspectives. Conversations that makes you see the world different from what you did only seconds before. I want to have the type of conversations that creates cracks in my skull when my brain expands and thoughts develop. I want to have rewarding conversations.

1.1 I love conversations

Everyone of us carries experiences, life knowledge and thoughts. And I want to learn! I want to learn what choices you made in your life and why you made them. I want to learn of the knowledge you gained through your life. I want to understand what you think. I want to get as close to an experience as possible without actually experiencing it. I want to listen to another voice- and gain understanding.

A conversation is a collaborative action. It is created in the moment and this gives the conversation partners involved an equal responsibility and opportunity to create a conversation they want. A conversation can take you unexpected places within seconds! In a conversation you have access to twice as much imagination, twice as much life knowledge and a double set of thoughts! A conversation is a tool. Use it!
1.2. Conversation piece

The first time I did a conversation piece, as an experiment, was in Hamar, Norway in 2003. I carried two chairs to a square in the city, wrote on a A4 piece of paper “Let me help you” with a blue ballpoint pen, taped it to a stone, put two chairs next to it, and sat down on one of them. And waited. Four minutes passed, and a girl came up to me, asking me how I could help. I told her that I was there to help her with whatever problem she had, and that I would do my best to help her with the tool of talking together. She sat down, and told me about her boyfriend that was very egocentric. Every time they had a conversation he only talked about himself. I suggested that she tried to lead the things he told over to something that was about things she had experienced that day. She told me she had tried that several times, but it always ended up being about him anyway. We talked some more about things she could try, before she had to run to the cinema. I told her I was unsure if I had been able to help her, but she replied that I had in some way- it had helped to talk about it. Directly afterwards two guys about 16 years old came by. They where interested in getting some help. I asked them to split up so we could talk one-on-one, and one walked away, so he was unable to hear what we talked about. The first guy I talked to, told me he was gay, and then he struggled to finish the sentence. In my predetermined mind I had already understood that he did not know how he would tell his friend, so when he continued telling me that they had just become a couple, I changed my mind, and (still in a very predetermined mind) asked if he had difficulties telling his friends or family about it. But no, he did not have any problems relating to that, everyone accepted him. He hesitated for a while, but managed to tell me that he was unsure of how to deal with intimacy and the sexual relationship to come, as he was inexperienced and had not told his boyfriend. He felt insecure. His sharing came as a surprise. There I was, an art student, a stranger, on a chair, with a poster written with a blue ballpoint pen taped to a rock. I had no idea what to respond. I recommended him to talk to his boyfriend about it, and I felt helpless when he walked way, and his boyfriend that did not know what I knew, came and sat next to me. This boy told me he was active within politics and in help organizations. He had been on TV many times, and got quite a lot of attention for his work. He was afraid his boyfriend maybe felt inferior because of this. Again I was surprised that a stranger shared a “real problem”, and again I was unsure how or if I could possibly help. I ended up giving him the same advice; talk about it. Tell him what you are thinking.

It was not only because I had no better answer I told these men to talk to each other what they just had been telling me, but also because it is the best way to make the problem disappear. You can end up having a conversation in form of an argument, but most times the problem simply disappear and you get a bit closer. This experiment gave me the first indicator that people want to talk, to have conversations, with strangers or friends, about problems or thoughts.

1.3. Problem domain

For the beginning of the process I have been looking for certain type of conversation, and tried to find patterns for when it appears so I can be able to calculate and have these kind of conversations whenever I want to. This is what I have identified as rewarding conversation. I have researched other people’s interest in rewarding conversations, and arranged a number of them between strangers. I have recorded rewarding conversations, and explored the interest for listening to them as well as commenting on them. This has lead to a design proposal based
on the findings from these experiments. The design process has been focused on exploring variations within a field, and to test, as well as handle complex situations. Each experiment have lead me to findings as well as new questions.

1. What is a rewarding conversation? Can I find ways to allow me these conversations more frequently?

2. Is there an interest in having rewarding conversations? Is it possible to arrange rewarding conversations between strangers?

3. Can I capture the moment when I experience a understanding on “tape”? How will I experience listening to it?

4. Can other people hear the understanding I experienced? Or possibly a certain quality?

5. Is there an interest in listening to other people’s conversations? And/or is there an interest for continuing conversations after listening to a playback?

6. Can I distribute rewarding conversations?

### 1.4. Thesis structure

The next chapter, I will give you the theoretical background of my work. I will start up introducing some variations of conversations, before I move over to related works were I have looked at public and private arranged conversations, podcasts and digital storytelling. Thereafter I will introduce interaction design theory, which I have used as a base for this work, and give you an introduction in rewarding conversations. In chapter 3 I will provide a backdrop for the methods I have used. Chapter 4 will take you through then ten experiments done throughout the process, and with some short reflections in the end of each experiment. In chapter 5, I will reflect upon and discuss the findings from the experiments, and connect it to interaction design theory and related works. Next I will share my conclusions in chapter 6. And at last give you the list of references in chapter 7.
2 Background

In this chapter I will guide you through some different forms of conversations, before I give you a background in projects and podcast, which has played a role in my work. Then I introduce you to Suchman (1994) and Dourish (2004), two interaction design theorists, and end the chapter with an introduction to rewarding conversations.

2.1. What is a conversation?

A conversation appears in all kinds of different settings and for all kinds of different purposes. It can be to avoid silence, to strengthen bonds between family members, to share information, to reach an agreement or to understand a person's perspective.

“A conversation is a collective process in which we alternately speak and listen. Through the dialogue, the meaning emerges by the participants responding and building upon each other's contributions” (Thornquist 2001, p. 13).

Thornquist (2001) shows what every conversation is; a collective process. They can turn out very different, however, the purpose of the conversation, and the situation we are in will affect what kind of conversation we have. I will look at four different types of conversations, and point out what I have been interested in.

2.1.1. Conversation for social relation

Every day we engage in conversations for keeping social relations to people in our surroundings. A typical conversation theme in Scandinavia is about the weather. The weather is a theme everyone can relate to, and that we can talk to with friends, as well as strangers. It is not because it is so incredible interesting to discuss the weather, but rather because it supports the social relations. A family gathering is a good example where relational aspect of the meeting is in the centre of importance, rather than the content in the conversations itself. Album (1994) put an appropriate name “inane meaningful talking” (translation by the author) on the conversations which main goal is building social relations between people. Despite of the fact that I find it important to create, or maintain social relations, this is less important in relation to rewarding conversations.

2.1.2. Conversation for professional purpose

A conversation for a professional purpose often has a concrete aim for the information one wants to reach. A doctor has a conversation with a patient to understand more about the patient. A psychiatrist has conversations with patients for the patients to understand more about themselves. A journalist has a conversation to learn more about a person or a situation. The purpose of the conversation is to gain information, to see the bigger picture, and to understand
more. In professional conversations the relationship between the people involved are mostly a-symmetric, which means that one person is leading the conversation, and deciding what is relevant (Thornquist 2001, p. 24-25).

“(…)Frankel reports that physicians’ utterances almost always take the form of questions (99% of the time), while participants’ take the form of answers. And in the courtroom, by definition, the examiner has the sole right to ask questions, while the exterminated is obligated to answer” (Frankel 1984, cited Suchman 1994 p. 88).

This means that the person asking the questions is leading the conversation. Suchman points to how these conversations are partly pre-decided; “(1) the pre-allocation of types of turn, i.e. who speaks when, and what form their participation takes, and (2) the prescription of the substantive content and direction of the interaction, or the agenda” (Suchman 1994, p. 88). In these situations we rarely break the “set of rules” we are taught, example asking the doctor how she/he feels. In the work I have done I have tried to create symmetric relations (Thornquist 2001, p. 24-25), for the conversation partners to have an equal possibility to ask questions and share experiences.

2.1.3. Conversation for development

Every time I am about to make a big decision in life I have conversation upon conversation with everyone that can spare their time and energy listening to me. The psychiatrist Trygve Braatoy (1979) says; “Let us sit down and talk to each other so that I can understand what I mean” (translation by author) (Thornquist 2001, p. 109). Being able to understand what I mean by speaking out loud is one of the ways to reach personal development by having conversations. Another is to learn from a conversation partner’s experience and advice. We have an ongoing conversational process throughout our whole life, and it is partly what help us develop. This is the type of conversation that has created the foundation for rewarding conversations. Hoel (1995) describe group conversations in teaching, but which I would apply for any developing conversation;

“Through conversations you use the language as a help for ones own thinking, one gets reactions and feedback towards ones own thoughts, one gets to take part of a conversation partners thoughts, knowledge and experiences and one extends your own world knowledge (…)” (translation by author) (Hoel 1995, cited in Thornquist 2001, p. 110).

2.2. Related works

In this part I will guide you through a number of works I find relating to my project. Firstly some examples from different arranged conversations, within different settings and domains. Secondly I have listed a number of podcasts that inspired me, and influenced my work.

2.2.1. Arranged private conversations

The artist Lee Lozano made Dialogue Piece in 1969. She invited several people from the art scene have conversations with her in her apartment. The documentation from the conversations was only a few sentences describing the content of the conversation and her experience of it. Lozano herself describes her reason for making this piece;

“The Dialogue Piece comes closest so far to an ideal I have of a kind of art that would never cease returning feedback to
me or to others, which continually refreshes itself with new information, which approaches an ideal merger of form and content, which can never be ‘finished,’ which can never run out of material, which doesn’t involve ‘the artist & the observer’ but makes both participants artist & observer simultaneously, which is not for sale, which is democratic, which is not difficult to make, which is inexpensive to make, which can never be completely understood, parts of which will always remain mysterious & unknown, which is unpredictable & predictable at the same time, in fact, this piece approaches having everything I enjoy or seek about art, and it cannot be put in a gallery, although some aspects of it could be ‘exhibited’ if so desired . . .” (Müller-Westermann 2010).

I find great recognition in the qualities Lozano describes in having a conversation, but I dislike the fact that she only invites people involved in the art scene to take part in these conversations.

Conversation club was created on initiative by Richard Hylerstedt, and is an ongoing project. Conversation club takes place about once a month in Hylestedts apartment. He invites a group of people that ideally is unfamiliar with each other, and that are interested in having conversation. I have attended the Conversation club once, which I will describe closer in the experiment (4.2.5.). This project is interesting because the aim is to create a good conversation in between the strangers that attend.

2.2.2. Public conversations

Levande bok (Living book) is a concept exercised by the city library in Malmö, Sweden since 2005. A “living book” is a person that they believe would be interesting to meet, and have for example been a homeless, an adopted, an imam, a survivor from Holocaust and a transsexual person. Several occasions every year the public get the opportunity to borrow a “living book” for a 45 minute long conversation. I have tried one “living book”, and she was a survivor from Holocaust. It was interesting because it creates a intimate meeting, were one has the possibility to ask about things one is curious about, but it was not a balanced conversation with an equal interest for each other. The expected roles were that she was telling a part of her life story, while I asked questions.

Rirkrit Tiravanij a has created what he define as “parallel spaces”, where he breaks down the separation between public and private space. He is known for installations that encourage participation of museum and gallery visitors, and invites his audiences to sample a meal, have a drink and engage in other social activities. The socializing becomes the core element in his work; “(...) celebrated as embodiments of art’s power to transcend institutional and cultural boundaries and create a utopian space of free and open exchange (of food, conversation, etc.)” (Grant 2004, p. 105). What I like about his work that he is creating a space for bringing strangers together, the critique, however, is that he is most likely only bringing an art audience together.

The Roof Is On Fire was arranged by Suzanne Lacy in a collaboration with youth and adults under the acronym TEAM (Teens + Educators + Artists + Media Makers) was a ten year series of installations, performances and political activism with youth in Oakland, California (2004, p.116). The projects purpose was to give the youth in the city the power of a voice different from the one created by the media.

“It featured 220 public high school students in unscripted and unedited conversations on family, sexuality, drugs, music, neighbourhoods and the future as they sat in 100 cars parked on a rooftop garage. With cameras rolling and audience members roaming from car to car to listen, the production had the haunting familiarity of images on the evening news. But unlike the typical newscast, this story had a different twist: youth represented themselves” (Lacy, S.).
A continuation of the project was Code 33 were conversations between 100 cops and 150 high school students at the same parking garage. They were encouraged to speak and listen outside their typical interactions and to look beyond their assumptions about each other (Grant 2004, p 5). In my opinion it is a great project as it gives voice, or a different voice, to a group that normally is not heard. I am also very found of the meetings created between two groups that probably have a lot of negative ideas about each other, and that they were encouraged to talk about other things than their differences.

Documentation from “The Roof is on Fire”

Samtal at Signal (Conversation at Signal) was a half a year experiment at galley Signal in Malmö. During the spring 2010 three artist were asked to have “conversations” about their work. I’ve attended two of them. This arranged “conversation” was, sadly, an informal presentation, were the audience were allowed to ask questions during the presentation. I was disappointed because I expected a conversation about the work on a deeper level, were there would be room for critique and reflection.

Samtal at Inkonst (Conversation at Inkonst) happened in relation to two performances by Chicks on Speed and Cinderella. The conversation partners were Chicks On Speed (Melissa Logan & Alex Murray-Leslie), performance artist Ann Liv Young, choreograph Krôôt Juurak, photographer A.L Steiner, and the Dj Nadine Jessen. The culture boss of Sydsvenskan (south Swedish newspaper) Rakel Chukri lead the conversation, and they were all on a stage. Chukri asked questions, which they switched, to answer. Again, I found it disappointing because I expected a conversation, but I experienced a interview.

I’m a voyeur baby is an installation by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller and you can find it at Karrierebar in Copenhagen, Denmark. The installation is simply a microphone attached to one of the bars tables. Everything that’s being said by that table is published directly at Karrierebars webpage, were 50 people ca listen in at once. The table is clearly marked so that the persons present at the table will be aware that their conversation is being broadcasted. I like the idea of directly streaming a conversation, and that it only possible to listen to in the moment it is happening.
2.2.3. Digital storytelling

StoryCorps is a website for people to share their stories. They have shared, preserved stories since 2003. They have now collected and archived more than 30,000 interviews from more than 60,000 participants.

"The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America. The concept is to bring two people that mean something to each other together, and record a conversation where they talk about for example life, stories and relations. (…) Our goal is to make that experience accessible to all, and find new ways to inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important to them. Just as powerful is the experience of listening. Whenever people listen to these stories, they hear the courage, humour, trials and triumphs of an incredible range of voices".

StoryCorps webpage

This is a project I admire and their idea to spread experience is definitely one goal of my own. People have to come to them to record a story, which then creates a geographical limitation, and the edited recorded conversations for listening is only between five to ten minutes long, which I find to be to short.

Centre for digital storytelling is an ongoing project founded by Joe Lambert and Nina Mullen in 1994. They have been working on teaching non-professional to tell their stories to the world. In Lambert’s opinion a good story needs an answer to three things: 1. What are you trying to say? 2. Who are you telling it to? 3. Why are you telling this story at this point? They define themselves as “an international non-profit training, project development, and research organization dedicated to assisting people in using digital media to tell meaningful stories from their lives” and continues, “At the core of our work is an enduring respect for the power of individual voices and a deep set of values and principles that recognize how sharing and bearing witness to stories can lead to learning, action, and positive change”. To teach non-professionals to tell stories through digital media is the part of this project which I like, teaching them to tell it in a traditional style of storytelling is, in contrast, not interesting.
2.2.4. Arranged conversations through digital media

*Chatroulette* was created by Andrey Ternovskiy launched in November 2009. It is basically a website that makes it possible to have conversations with random strangers. Visitors to the website randomly begin an online chat (video, audio and text) with another visitor paired up by the program. At any point, either user may leave the current chat by initiating another random connection. It is often not only used for conversation, but also in a pornographic behaviour. I find Chatroulette to be an interesting experiment because it does connect random strangers with each other, but I am doubtful that there are a high percentage of good conversations happening.

*CouchSurfing* started in 1999, and is now the world’s largest hospitality exchange network. With over 2.12 million members in 238 countries and territories- according to the stats on their website CouchSurfing is a community for social networking, were one can travel the world sleeping on members couch, or get a guided tour in the city’s you are visiting. CouchSurfing has a vision:

“We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places we encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and creates a global community.”

I have enormously respect for the creators of CouchSurfing, partly because I agree on their vision, and because I believe they have managed creating a good system for keeping people safe despite of the fact that they get in touch online without knowing each other. They have managed creating a platform that supports meetings between strangers from different cultures all over the world - which is in some ways what I want to do as well.

2.2.5. Listening to (and distributing of) conversations thought podcasts

*Stuff you should know* is a podcast produced by How stuff works, which was founded by North Carolina State University Professor Marshall Brain in 1998. This program is basically (about) a half an hour show with two smart and funny guys who research a subject before they talk
about it. This is a distribution of knowledge through conversation. The subjects are everything from “Do zombies really exist?”, to “Health care systems around the world” and “How redhead works”. Their ability to communicate facts and knowledge in an entertaining way is admirable, and the digression helps making this a conversation that has the possibility of becoming about anything despite of the theme.

Dokumentärredaktionen (Documentary editorial) last for about an hour and are normally about certain persons, places, situations that took place and build up a story and use music to create pauses and moods. Despite that this is somewhat a classical curve of a story; a start, building up to a peak, reach the peak, and rap it up before it ends,- it often feels like a piece of a bigger story. I like that quality in the documentaries, that it creates a feeling that I only received a part of the big picture, in contrast to visual documentaries were I often feel that they try to convince me to choose a side. The documentaries partly tell stories from different lives. Hearing people telling their story, directly, without script, creates a very honest situation. I feel that this is about as close as I can get to a persons life and experiences- good as bad.

Sommar i P1 (Summer in P1) is a popular program in Sweden. Every summer some (more or less famous) people are invited to make their own radio show. It is one and a half hour show were the host for that day read from a script they have written about their lives and play music in between. When this functions as it’s best (according to me) I can not hear that they read from a script, and can easily become involved in the stories they tell. Again, it is a way to get an insight to a persons life. To participate, however, you need an invitation from the Swedish radio.

Ring P1 (Call P1) is a radio show on Swedish radio sent directly every weekday morning. It has a program host, and then anyone can call in to the program and say whatever they want about anything regarding the society. There is, however, of course an editor. During the 40 minutes long programme they try to bring in a diverse group, and to show a diversity of opinions. This is a form of direct democracy. The callers normally get a few minutes to speak about what they want to say, were the program host tries to provoke them slightly, or put some questions to their opinion. I like the fact that (in theory anyway) anyone can speak their mind on public radio, but I dislike the fact that it has to happen quickly, which makes it difficult to reflect and think, and create more of an “opinion sharing”.

2.3. Related theory

The theory presented here is within the domain of interaction design. I will explain theories of Suchman (1994) and Dourish (2004) in which I have found relevant for the project I have done. Throughout the paper I have used references and quotes that I have found suitable without considering the domain as such.

2.3.1. Situated action

While earlier theories claimed that humans follows a rational plan when taking action, Suchman argues that our actions is constantly created in the situation. In her opinion humans never fully specify a plan to a great level of detail before we do an action, but rather constantly adjust, and react to the situation we are in. This is what she defines as “situated actions”. Suchman argues that the course of action depend on the material and social circumstances. And
that rather than studying the human action independent from the situation, one have to study the human in the situ of action.

Suchman use conversations as a example of an situated action, because in a conversation, everything is dependent on the moment, the situation, in which the conversation is happening. It is a collective production in situ;

“That is to say, who talks and what gets talked about is decided then and there, by the participants in the conversation, through their collaborative construction of the conversation’s course. That turn-taking is a collaborative achievement, rather than a simple alternation of intrinsically bounded segments of talk, is evident in the common occurrence in actual conversation of simultaneous talk, of joint production of a single sentence, and of silence” (Suchman 1994, p. 73).

So what Suchman claims is that a conversation is a collaborative achievement, in which is created in the moment it is happening. This means that the course of a conversation is impossible to plan because there is (at least) two participants creating the conversation in situ. It is, on the other hand, possible to plan a theme for discussion or questions to ask during the conversation, which is common practice for a professional conversation practice as therapist or journalist. But it is impossible to plan every step of a conversation, a conversation is an action in the situation.

"Closer analyses of face-to-face communication indicate that conversations is not so much an alternating series of action and reactions between individuals as it is a joint action accomplished through the participants’ continuous engagement in speaking and listening" (see Schegloff 1972, 1982; C. Goodwin 1981, cited Suchman 1994, p. 71).

We have to read this considering the time it was written in. At that point one were hoping to create a machine behaving like a human. Therefore, Suchman points out how a conversation is not planned, or a “series of action and reactions”, but rather a creation happening in the situation.

2.3.2. Embodiment

Embodiment is, simply explained, the interactions we do without thinking about it. Dourish (2004) builds his theories on Suchman’s “situated actions”, and when Suchman says that we do not plan for the actions we do, we act in the in the situation,- Dourish points to the actions in these situations and calls them embodiment. These are actions we do without planning for it (according to Suchman), and that we do without reflecting upon it (according to Dourish)- we just do it. Embodiment is the way that physical and social unfold in real time and real space as a part of the world we are situated. Conversation is therefore an embodied interaction.

2.3.3. Space and place

Dourish make the distinction between space and place; “So while “space” refers to the physical organization of the environment, “place” refers to the way that social understandings convey an appropriate behavioural framing for an environment” (Dourish 2004, p. 89-90). This means that “space” is simply the physical element present; the room, tables, chairs. While “place” is created by the people present and the idea of what is appropriate to do within that space. He further argues that ““place” reflects the emergence of practice (Dourish 2004, p. 90). Which means, that through actions formed in the situation by the group present, the place is formed. Dourish continue; “(...) social action is embedded. By this I mean that it is firmly rooted in
the setting in which it arises, where that setting is not just material circumstances, but social, cultural, and historical ones as well” (Dourish 2004, p. 96). What Dourish is claiming is that the actions performed in a space is not alone affected by the physical environment, but rather that it is heavily affected by the non-visual presence.

2.4. Rewarding conversations

In this chapter I will go through what rewarding conversation is, and some core points in the process of trying to reach a rewarding conversation. Despite the fact that this was knowledge I reached through the first experiments (4.1. and 4.2.), I have chosen to include it in the background for you to easier understand what I have been working on. I found that it is possible to recognize situations when rewarding conversations appear, which again have lead me to creating “guidelines for rewarding conversations”. The guidelines are meant as a tool to reach rewarding conversations easier.

2.4.1. Definition

During the process of this project I have had conversations in order to frame what I was interested in, as well as defining what I was not interested in. Though experiments described in chapter 4, I found the definition to what I have chosen to call rewarding conversation. A rewarding conversation is a conversation that makes you think and develop. The purpose of having a rewarding conversation is to get new perspectives, learn knowledge and life knowledge. The aim is to gain new understanding through talking and listening.

2.4.2. Express yourself

When expressing your own thoughts they change. In the transformation from a thought to words it becomes something different than what it was inside your head. During the “speaking of the thought” there is two things happening that can help you to get a new perspective; 1) When using the tool words are, it will necessary slightly change the original thought which again can make you “look at” (think about) the thought in a different perspective. 2) By listening to yourself while speaking your thoughts out load you are able to “consume it” (listen to it)- and possible hear another perspective.

2.4.3. Actively listening

“Active listening is to be oriented towards the other person, towards what he or she is saying and doing. You are trying to understand the meaning of what is being said. This requires that you give the other person all your attention and attempts to put yourself in it’s position” (translation by author) (Thornquist 2001, p. 129).

Though active listening you are more likely to get an understanding for what your conversation partner is telling you. Rewarding conversations demands that the person(s) not actively talking are actively listening at all times. It is necessary to listen to the things said in the situation to be able to act in the situation. The linguists Duranti and Brenneis (1986, 1992) are using the expression “the audience as co-author” to show that a conversation is created by the parties
together. It is not about active senders and passive receivers and it is not just one party that is active at a time” (translation by author) (Duranti 1986 & Brennis 1992, cited Thornquist 2001, p. 14). Like Duranti and Brennis (1986, 1992) are pointing out, listening is crucial to the act of a conversation. It is not so that anyone within a conversation can become passive at any point, if you are not talking, you need to be listening. In my opinion you should even be listening to your own words, you might be surprised of what you hear.

2.4.4. Balance

There has to be equality between the conversation partners for the conversation to function as good as possible. Conversations can be divided into symmetric relations and asymmetric relations. A symmetric relation has equality, respect and confidence. A classical symmetric relation exist between friends. In an asymmetric relation, on the other hand, one has authority over the other, for example teacher/student, mother/child relationship. An a-symmetric conversation will necessary become less of an creation of two parts (Thornquist 2001, p. 24). “In a conversation among friends, the participants alternatively ask questions, listens, tells, brings up counter propositions, dominates and shows vulnerability” (translation by author) (Thornquist 2001, p. 24). It is through a symmetric relation, a balanced relation based on equal respect the foundation for a rewarding conversation is created.

2.4.5. Guidelines for reaching rewarding conversations

These guidelines are meant as a number of advices to reach rewarding conversations easier.

1. Be few.

Be two or three active conversation partners in one conversation. My experience tells me it is easier to feel free, take time, and be secure enough to have a rewarding conversation with a low number of participants.

2. Take time.

It takes time to get into a conversation. I recommend that you have at least one hour, preferably two, for the conversation.

3. Share of yourself.

Don’t be afraid of sharing from your experiences and your thoughts. It is through sharing we learn from each other. As for any living being your experiences will be limited. Being born in Scandinavia raised by a single mum, will automatically rob you from the experience of being born in India raised by a mother and a father. If you are a man you will never experience to have a baby growing inside your body. Despite of the many choices we have, there are many things we can never experience because of nationality, sex, age, and circumstances outside our control. We learn through the lives we are living- and by sharing- we can learn from experiences we will never have. The best way to get other people to share from their life is to start sharing yourself!

4. Be honest.
Say what you mean- not what you think is expected. It does not mean you are suppose to say everything you are thinking about at all times- you are still a person that has to consider your fellow human beings as in any other point in your life. But it means that you are free to talk about whatever you are sincerely interested in. You don’t need to talk about flowers with your grandmother if you are not interested- try explaining why you’re so hooked on World of Warcraft. Your grandmother might be sick of talking about flowers as well. Talk about what you are interested in, and trust that your conversation partner will have something to say about the subject. By being honest to your interest and thoughts, you can get more back from your conversation partner, as you conversation partner can give you feedback on the “true” feeling or experience rather than a smooth surface of it.

5. Listen.

Listen to what your conversation partner is saying. Stop hearing what you want to hear. Only through really listening it is possible to get close to an understanding of the other. Listen to yourself. By listening to yourself you can hear your thoughts out loud. You might be surprised what you hear.

6. Be curious.

Be curious of your conversation partner. Without curiosity there is no point in having a conversation in the first place. Ask about things you do not understand, or things you want to know more about. Only trough listening you can possibly know what to be curious about.

7. Be open.

Try to stay open to thoughts and opinions- even though you don’t agree. Try to see things in different views. Be open enough to challenge yourself. Be open enough to change your mind.

8. Trust.

Trust you conversation partner. And trust yourself.

9. Think!

Use time to think during the conversation. It can be hard to express thoughts, and you conversation partner might give you a new perspective. Don’t be afraid of pauses. Take the time to think.

10. Disagree.

Disagreeing only means you share various opinions. Disagreeing is fruitful. When giving resistance your conversation partner is forced to specify clearer what she/he is thinking. The formulation can contribute to a new understanding for both of you.

11. Dare.

Dare to ask. Dare to share. Dare to be honest. Dare to think. Dare to disagree. Dare to be private. You are always in charge of how much you want to share.
12. Relax.

It is only a conversation! Being relaxed contributes to dare being open, curious, honest and to disagree.

13. Forget.

Forget the setting you are in, and the role you normally play in relation to person you are talking to. We all have patterns we follow in situations and roles. Try to forget them. Forget what you think you are expected to do. Forget you are on the train, on a family birthday, or at school. Forget you are talking to a stranger, your mother, or to your idol. The freedom will make it easier to talk about what you find interesting that day, rather than what you think is expected in the setting or with that person.

14. Find a stranger.

Find someone different from yourself. When talking to a stranger that do not know you, you will have to express yourself more precise. This can give you new insights. Have a conversation with someone different from yourself. With a different culture, age or profession you are more likely to get a perspective far from your own, and learn to things you never even thought about.

(You can find a video explaining rewarding conversations and the guidelines attached in the physical copy and at the webpage.)
3 Methods and work process

This thesis is based on a number of experiments which naturally involved many participants. In this chapter I want to look at and explain what I find important to focus on when I work with participants and some of the methods I have used. I have also participated in experiments myself and I will discuss some of the benefits I have observed. Finally I have aimed at creating a transparent process to make it easy for others to criticize and use my work.

3.1. Experimenting creates the path I am walking on

I believe in experiencing through experimenting to reach knowledge. During the thesis I have used most of my time doing experiments because I strongly believe in reaching understanding through experience. The first period of time I allowed myself just to be “interested in conversations”, a formulation which indicate a dangerously vague project. Through experimenting I quickly started rejecting, and understanding what I was interested in. At one point during the process I shared my concern of “not being able to read enough” with a colleague, whereupon he asked; “so, how do you know what to do?”. I know what I do by doing. I know where to take my next step because I have feedback from the previous experiment. “In the most generic scene, to experiment is to act in order to see what follows” (Schön 1987, p.
70). Through experiments – I see, I understand, I know- what works, what to reject, and how to continue the process of work.

“In the designer’s conversation with the materials of his design, he can never make a move that has only the effects intended for it. His materials are continually talking back to him, causing him to apprehend unexpected problems and potentials” (Schön 1987, p. 63).

What Schön (1987) is explaining here is that when working with a material, the material will have its limitations and possibilities, which will affect the work you are making. The work will be formed in a process between the designer and her/his material. Schön is referring to physical material, but I will argue that “material” just as well can be experiments. An experiment is always “talking back” by showing how unexpected things occur, or ignorance of another- which gives directions for further work. For each experiment I “sketch” by putting up a situation, involve participants, and choose a framing. I usually have an idea of the outcome, but as Schön describes, the material will show unexpected problems and potential. “Problems” however, can just as well become potential. Working with the material, working with the experiments, and the limitations and the possibilities it creates- is the work itself.

3.2. Participatory design

Throughout this process I have worked with participatory design, which means to involve future users in the process of creating the design. Firstly I tried to reach users that had the same interest as myself in having conversations. Later I involved a group of the participants for further experiments aiming at a future design, in which they functioned as experts in the field (Löwgren 2007, p. 8). I addressed my participants as knowledgeable stakeholders, and that I wanted to take part in their thoughts (Krippendorff 2006, p. 63-65). During the workshop (4.4.) I said; “...you know this better than me now in some ways, because you have been participating in it, and that is why I would very much like to have you with me to see where we are going further (...).” I have worked to include the participants and make them feel like co-designers by taking their ideas and opinions seriously (Monk et al 1993, p. 21-38).

3.2.1. Ethnography

Ethnography is based on participant-observation, and does not only observe what a culture does, but also what they experience doing (Dourish 2001, p. 59). Besides getting information how participants act in a situation, I have had an ethnographic approach, finding how they experienced the situation. This information has been collected through interviewing and surveys.

3.2.2. Interviews

The interviews happened, with one exception, over the phone. This was a practical matter, as I wanted to do the interview close in time to the experience they had, in addition to the fact that several participants were in a different city than myself. During the phone interviews I took notes, which I expanded afterwards to make sure I could understand them later on. The main reason for taking notes was to save time, in contrast to record the interview and later transcribe it. At all times I try to follow “rules of thumb when interviewing”, for example by letting the participant speak without interruption, never complete sentences or answer my own
questions (Blomberg, Burrell and Guest 2008, p. 971). I avoided yes/no questions as long as it
was not something I wanted a clear answer to. Most of the time I did ask all of the questions I
had written down, but I do try to be flexible enough to jump around, to add, or skip a question
based on what my participant answers.

3.2.3. Establish a relaxed environment

The participants are valuable in my work, so I try to establish a good contact with them from
the beginning. In every situation with a participant, either as an interview over the phone or
a workshop where we are physically present, I try to create a place were the participants feel
their thoughts and opinions are welcome. In participatory design I see it as my responsibility
to create an open and relaxed environment that my participants feels comfortable in. So, when
I have been planning for experiments such as a workshop (4.4.) and a conversation day (4.9.) I
have intentionally avoided classrooms, and “lab-like” spaces, for the benefit of apartments and
other relaxed spaces.

3.3. Channels for reaching participants

Regarding this work the “right” participants are the participants that is interested in these
experiments, regardless of age or profession. The invitations used to attract participants have
been posted on social networks such as Underskog and Facebook. In addition I have mailed
everyone on my contact list, which have included both Norwegians and Swedes. Finally I posted
physical posters before two of the experiments took place.

Undeskog and Facebook

3.3.1. Undeskog and Facebook

Both Underskog and Facebook are social networking sites established in 2004. But while
Facebook is worldwide and enables anyone to create a membership, Underskog is mainly for
Norwegians, and you need to receive an invitation to become a member. During the four
years I have been a member I have received one invitation. Underskog was created as a tool
for informing about culture happenings across disciplines. The idea was simply to create a
communicative tool so that it would be easier to know what happened when, without having
to be knowledgeable within that discipline (Westvang, Skogsrud and Staubo 2009). The “population” is therefore mostly people within creative professions such as culture, design, music and art. On Facebook there are people from all kinds of disciplines, and there has even been an explosion in businesses establishing consumer contact through Facebook profiles. Facebook and Underskog both have profiles, personal messages and events, but the networks are used in quite different ways. When entering Underskog the events happening that day is the opening view (it is possible to view this without being a member), while at Facebook the “status updates” is in the centre of attention. At Underskog there is no such thing as status updates, but rather discussions which naturally go deeper into themes, in contrast to posting a short opinion. Because it is a small and closed community, and possibly because you have to be invited by a person within the community, it has created a digital society were people trust each other. The differences between the networks makes it easier to reach a bigger group at Facebook (as one naturally have more friends there), but throughout the experiments I got more participants from Underskog.

The two networks are very different to relate to as an arranger. At Facebook you can post that you will “attend”, “not attend” or “maybe attend”, while at Underskog you can either “attend” or “recommend”. Underskogs choices makes it possible to show that you like something even though you will not attend it, while at Facebook “not attend” becomes somewhat the same as not liking, which I believe, makes many people say “maybe” or even “attend” just because they like the event, or because they find it hard to reject. In two of the experiments I mainly used Facebook to attract people, and both times several people had chosen to “attend”, but most of them never showed up. Some of them even messaged me beforehand telling they were sorry they could not attend, but they did not change their Facebook status at the event- it still said they would attend. This makes it very hard being an arranger as you never know if the people saying they will attend are really going to attend.

3.4. Participating designer

To be able to understand what I am searching for I need to be participating in experiments. Therefore I have repeatedly placed myself in an active part of the experiments.

3.4.1. First hand experience

I had conversations were I actively attempted to reach rewarding conversation and I have joined public conversations which is part of the related work (2.2.1. and 2.2.2.). At the beginning of this project I knew I was after a certain type of conversation, but I was not able to formulate what it was at that point. Therefore I started with what Schön (1987) describes as an exploratory approach- where I was not looking for anything specific, but were I was trying to “get a feel for things” (Schön 1987, p. 70). Through experimenting I find that quickly get an insight and an understanding for what I want to avoid, in addition to things I want to take further. To start the process I engaged in first hand experience, and already after 20 minutes I had started to understand what I found uninteresting, and the first guidelines for reaching rewarding conversations (4.1.2. and 4.1.3.). Through experiencing I was able to start formulating what I was searching for. “What I hear I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do I understand” (Lao Tse). It is possible to involve participants in every step of your design, but there will be occasions were participants have contradictory opinions, and as a designer
you need to trust your own decisions in the end. Having an understanding and experience to refer back to, help making those decisions. It is through experience I build the ground for what I want to achieve. First hand experiments in addition to physical research of related works gave me a feeling for things that are difficult to get through reading. When experiencing I will get a subjective feeling in the situation, in contrast to when I read about a project where my feeling will be lead by the authors description of an experience. This does not mean that I need to be participating in every step, or in every part of the process. Rather am I a true believer in what I define as “in and out perspective”.

3.4.2. “In and out perspective”

“Hence the designer has to oscillate between unit and the total, and-(...)—he must oscillate between involvement and detachment” (Schön 1987, p. 64). While Schön is referring to the dynamic role of being close and focused on a detail, as well as being able to take a step back to see the bigger picture, this is, in my opinion, also applicable to the idea of a designer participating in her/his own experiments. Being involved, could in my opinion, mean to be participating, while being detached would mean to observe other participants in experiments. To be able to shift perspectives, from within a situation (when experiencing it), to observing it from the outside (by observing other peoples experience), makes it easier to understand the problem or area from several angles which again is helpful when trying to grasp a complexity. This is what I call being “in and out”.

3.4.3. Support your experience by others experience

Doing first hand experience is helpful for reaching a broader understanding, as long as you fit the imagined user group. It is nevertheless not recommended to go “in and out” within one experiment as this will probably lead confusion, in contrast to understanding. It is also crucial to involve participants to support or dismiss your own experiences, which helps avoiding blindly trusting yourself. But in the end you are the designer, you will have to make choices and therefore it helps to have a feeling and understanding for the problem or area.

3.4.4. Creating a transparent process

I have tried to keep the process as transparent as possible so that other interested, researchers or students easily can comment on or critique my work. In addition I have tried to keep the outcomes of the experiments visible, but it always a matter of bringing relevant information to the table, so I have naturally focused on the findings that was important to me. For the physical exemplars of the thesis I have attached original interviews, surveys, playbacks from the conversations and experiments were the participants has allowed me to do so. It is also possible to access the blog I kept through the process.

3.4.5. Blog for feedback

I wrote a blog post every day throughout the process. The reason for doing so was that I was hoping this could become a public feedback tool, whereupon I could get comments, critique, feedback or tips from fellow students, teachers or (if I would be really lucky) a stranger. Therefore I started out writing about what I did, why I did so and what I got out of it. This was also a way for me to have a dialogue outside my mind and a reminder to write every day. first problem occurred during the second experiment. Earlier, when inviting potential participants,
I had written my blog address on the invitation, which seemed like a good idea at the moment as they could become familiar with the things I had been doing so far. But after starting up the experiment I realised that I had several participants involved over a longer period of time. And that I could not write about the findings in the blog, as the rest of the participants could potentially be affected. It was important not to lead them in any direction, and the set ups for the different conversations differentiated slightly from each other. I continued writing the blog, but I had to hide a lot of information, which made it less useful in the way I had imagined. As time went, and the process changed, I wrote less and less. Becoming restricted to what I could write, in combination that I only received three comments in a couple of months made me stop writing. If you’re able to keep a process transparent while you’re doing experiments, I believe blogging can be a very useful tool for colleagues to keep track of what you are working on, and easily give you comments.
4 Conversation experiments

In this chapter I will explain the ten different experiments I have done throughout my master thesis. For each experiment I will explain why I did the experiment, and what I was expecting, or hoping to achieve. Then I will go into what I did, and end up with a short discussion of the outcome of the experiment and how it lead me to the next step in the process.

This imagine shows when I did the different experiments. The yellow lines points to first-hand experience, while the green ones involves participants. The big block shows the arranged conversations which happened over two moths.

4.1 Conversations with strangers in the street

I wanted to get started experimenting to be able to get an understanding for what I wanted to work with, and so I did. I will tell you about two conversations I had with strangers on the street, and what I learned from having them.
4.1.1. Exploring conversation

Without preparing what to talk about, or whom to talk to, I went in the park outside my house with a dictaphone to try having conversations with strangers. This was an exploratory approach (Schön 1987, p. 70), and although I had no concrete expectations of the outcome, I was hoping to get an understanding for what kind of conversations I was trying to achieve. I also wanted to see if strangers would accept having a conversation being recorded, and if they would allow me to use the recording further in the thesis. I had prepared a paper for the occasion; “Confirmation I,..................approve that this conversation can be used as Åste Laberg pleases (for example: blogs, sound sculpture, exhibition, website)”. They could choose to be anonymous or credited with a full name. In addition I asked for contact information so that I could get back to her/him in the future. It did feel like a lot to ask from a stranger I just met, but at the same time I saw it as necessary to be able to use the recordings if I found it of importance to the project.

“Confirmation I,..................approve that this conversation can be used as Åste Laberg pleases”

4.1.2. A short conversation with an old lady

First I approached an old lady (which felt safe). I told her I was collecting conversations, and asked her if she would have a conversation with me. Her reply was that she could not have a conversation with a stranger- unless we talked about the weather. So we talked about the weather for some minutes. As she was about to leave, I asked her to sign the paper I had prepared. I told her then that I was a student at Malmö Högskola. When she heard I was a student, she opened up and started telling me about her grandchild; he was moving away because he had been accepted to a school in another city. This meant he would not come and
visit that often, which she found rather sad. From claiming that it was impossible to talk about anything but the weather with a stranger, she switched, and shared personal information when she found a common ground. She signed the paper, but did not want to give me her contact information, as she could not see any point in doing so.

4.1.3. A short conversation with a woman

Next I approached a girl in my age (around 30 years old). She was playing with her daughter at the playground, and was happy to have a conversation. We started out by talking about why she had the day off, and naturally, about where she normally worked. During the fifteen minutes the conversation lasted there were several silent moments, which I found unsettling, and was desperately thinking; “What now? What shall I ask about?”. In other situations I am not afraid of a pause in a conversation, but I had approached her for a conversation, and then I did not know what to say. This made me uncomfortable. Every time she was the one asking me about my project or my life. She was the one pushing the conversation, and I was left feeling that I had put myself in awkward situation. Her child was constantly begging for attention, and after a while she started crying because we were talking, which made me feel more uncomfortable than ever. I got her to sign my paper, and withdraw myself thanking for the conversation—realizing that I had forgotten to record it.

4.1.4 Outcome from an exploratory approach

Despite of the fact that I was unsure of what I was looking for, I did find some guidelines for further work. After talking to the elderly woman I found that she opened up when she got to learn something about me that she could relate to. This made me conclude that it can be helpful to have a common starting point. In second conversation I realised that this was not the type of conversation I was after. During the conversation I felt uncomfortable, because I had “interrupted” a strangers life. The woman and myself, where at this place for different reasons; I was there to have conversations, but she was there to play with her child. Even
though she was somewhat able to do both things at the same time, I did feel like I was in
the way. This made me decide that future conversations had to be in a relaxed setting, where
the ones having the conversation would be there for the conversation itself. During the
conversation I was constantly wondering when the conversation would end, and this made me
realise how important it is to have time for the conversation. I had became become nervous
of not having anything to say, so I found that it might be a good idea to have some themes
prepared, so I could start up more easily, or continue a conversation after inviting a stranger
for a conversation. The last note to myself was to keep my curiosity for people. The experiment
made the conversation feel forced, which made me forget that I am sincerely interested- even in
strangers.

4.2. A number of conversations

In this chapter I will go through some conversations I had during the process. First I will give
some background on how I worked, with whom, and why I chose this approach. Then I will go
through two of the recorded conversations I had with people I have known for most of my life,
four recorded conversations I had with people that work with conversation in their profession,
and one unrecorded group conversation. I will discuss the findings from the conversations in
the end of the chapter.

4.2.1. I need to talk

The first experiment had given me a couple of pointers, but I needed to have more conversations
to understand what I was after. To begin with I started to record conversations with people
that I have known more or less my whole life. Thereafter I contacted two people working in
the swedish radio, a family therapist, and the founder of Conversation club. All of them are
involved in conversations through their profession (or interest when it comes to the founder of
Conversation club), but I was first and foremost interested in them as conversation partners. I
did, however, prepare some questions and themes that I wanted to talk about. At last I joined
group conversations to see if it would be of interest in my work.

4.2.2. I want to understand

There were four reasons that I had these conversations. 1) I needed to be an active conversation
partner to understand what type of conversation I was trying to achieve- and to be able
to define it. 2) I hoped to find guidelines to help me, and others, to achieve this kind of
conversations more easily. 3) I wanted to see if it was possible to record, and then capture a
moment which I found eye-opening, and if so, could others hear the same thing as I did? 3)
Would the conversation be affected by the recording?
I chose to have recorded conversations with people I know well, because I could experience if/how the conversation, or my conversation partners behaviour, changed in any way when being recorded. I contacted professionals, on the other hand, because I wanted to learn more about conversations in general. Two of them are professionals within radio, and have contributed to my interest for this work. This made me believe that we had a solid potential for a good conversation. The group conversation I attended was simply to see if I was interested it.

4.2.3. Conversations with friends

Åse is my grandmother and we have had conversations throughout my whole life. We have an established form of conversation, mostly relating to what we have done lately, or what other family members have done. We rarely go into politics, philosophical issues, or very personal matters- we have what I define as “safe conversations”. I wanted to see if the conversation changed in any way by recording it, and if I was able to change the conversation from what we usually have.

Åse

The conversation took place in her apartment. It was an 2-3 hour long recorded conversation, and we ate breakfast at the same time. Åse hesitated to let me record the conversation, but I could not notice any difference in the conversation itself. One time I tried to challenge both of us by asking her a question that I only partly wanted to know the answer to: “Do you feel alone?”. Even though it was satisfactory to ask a question I was sincerely curious about- it did not change the conversation as such. The majority of the conversation was about family and weather as usual.

Linn and I know each other very well, and have done so for 24 years. We have a very similar approach to life, and our reflections are alike. She understands me better than anyone else, which is probably because we have similar perceptions. Linn rarely gives me any mind blowing
new perspectives, as her thoughts are not far from mine. I do, however, often experience a greater understanding of my own thoughts through speaking them out loud, which I believe is because I can be totally honest in the things I am sharing with her. She also gives me confirmation, or advice on choices I make.

Linn and I had a three hour long recorded conversation at my parents home and while walking in the forest. It was a standard conversation for our relationship. We talked mostly about the problem of balancing a profession of interest, versus having an income. We are both in a situation where we have chosen professions we want to have, but which have turned out to be so many things we did not sign up for, which again makes us question if this is the profession we want to have. In the conversation we gave each other recognition and understanding of the problems we face, and tried to “talk away our problems”. By sharing thoughts, and understanding that you’re not alone makes the “problems” and thoughts less overwhelming. This was, however, not a “mind opening” conversation in any way. The recording of the conversation did not change it in any noticeable way. When later listening through the conversation I was surprised by the way I expressed myself. I was very imprecise, and at times I hardly understood what I meant myself. But Linn did. She knew what I meant- with or without words.

4.2.4. Conversations with professionals

Tinken works as a family therapist together with my mother, and I believe I have met her briefly some years ago. Her job is to help teenagers and their families in their difficulties by having conversations. I wanted to talk with someone that believed in the conversation as such, and to see if it was easier to reach a rewarding conversation with a person that uses it as the main tool in their profession.

Tinken and I had an 80 minutes long conversation in her office, where about one hour was recored. We reached a rewarding conversation quickly- and in several ways. She gave me new perspectives on old thoughts, which made me re-think some of my older perceptions. One specific example was when we discussed the feminist movement in the seventies. I am frustrated that we do not have equality between men and women in Scandinavia today. My frustration is partly based on the feminist movement in the seventies. In the seventies there was so much focus on the differences between men and women, and such a big movement working to change it, and create an equal society. But what happened? Forty years later we still have different salary based on our sex. Tinken, on the other hand, said; “What if we hadn’t had that in the seventies? Imagine what the differences would be like today then?” So, while I have viewed the feminist movement in the seventies partly as a failure- because it showed us that even though a huge number of people, women and men, fight for a cause for years- it is impossible to make the difference one is aiming for. Tinken made me realize that even though not everything became equal, they managed to come a long way, and that without the feminist movement in the seventies we would be living in a much less equal society. That fact was something I thought about for weeks afterwards, it was a new, and positive perspective on a piece of history. Other than that I found it to be a rewarding conversation because I took the time to think, and to express my thoughts.

Tomas is one of the hosts for a program called Ring P1, a program that has inspired my project, and where he has the experience of constantly listening to peoples opinions. My expectation was attached to his profession, I imagined he could see the world from several angles- and therefore get a broader perspective on the world. I was generally curious of Tomas as a person,
I meet Tomas in his office for a one and a half hour long recorded conversation in Göteborg. Tomas started up the conversation very directly, and I found the absence of “small talk” refreshing considering we did not know each other at all. The conversations structure became unequal in the sense that he was the one talking, while I asked questions and only few times shared my thoughts. I withdraw myself because he was so dominating. The things he said however, were interesting and he gave me several new perspectives so I still found it to be a rewarding conversation. One example was when he talked about being in the spotlight, either on radio or on TV. According to him many hosts were of the impression that they had to be the same “character” every time- which again could make it very difficult because everyone has different days, different moods, different opinions- in general we are rarely the same person day after day. The illusion that a host, or a politician, had to pretend to be the “same person” every day was something he saw as problematic because it limits the person, but also because it affects a society when only showing “good”, “funny”, or “serious” hosts and politicians. Tomas missed the human aspect, and wanted politicians to more often admit not having answers, or that they simply had a bad day. This, among other things, I could agree to, and I found it to be a refreshing view that I had not heard before. It felt like I had arrived to a “wise man” that had life knowledge he wanted to transfer to me.

Richard was introduced to me through a common friend who told me he is running the project called Conversation club. I was interested in the project, and it was obvious we shared some interests in conversations. I expected to learn something about his project, and talk about the qualities of conversations.

Richard and I met at a cafe in Lund and had a recorded conversation for one and a half hour. Richard told me about Conversation club, and how he had become interested in inviting people that did not know each other for conversations. His idea is that it is liberating to talk to
people you do not know, and that you can share things in a different way that you would with your closest friends. During our conversation I felt we were able to somewhat challenge each others thoughts, and he gave me perspectives I had not considered before, which made the conversation a rewarding conversation in my point of view. One concrete example was how we act in conversations with friends. Richard was of the opinion that he had friends that he could only talk to about more superficial things with as movies and games. In my opinion this is not framed by the themes of a conversation, but rather a way of having a conversation. We had a balanced conversation in the sense that we both talked and listened- and took each others opinions seriously.

Susanne is a radio documentary maker. I have listened to most of her documentaries, and read a book she has written about having conversations. I am inspired by her work, and expected to have an interesting conversation. She has after all, reflected on conversations and recorded many conversations over years.

We met in Susanne’s office for an hour recorded conversation. Susanne had, as expected, many reflections around conversations. I noticed that I could more easier go directly into the core of what kind of conversations I was after, because she knew what I was referring to without me having to explain that much. This made me secure and helped me formulate my thoughts around my project- slightly more precise than ever before. Susanne asked me many questions around my project, and we ended up having an balanced conversations in the sense that both of us talked and asked each others questions. We did, from my point of view, have a rewarding conversation.

4.2.5. Conversation club

Conversation club took place in Richard Hylerstedt’s apartment on a wednesday evening. We were eight participants, all invited by Richard. I was curious to see how the conversation would play out, and if it was possible to have a rewarding conversation with that many participants.

The conversation was an unrecorded event and lasted for about three hours. One thing was clear within a short amount of time; we were too many participants to be able to have a rewarding conversation. It was difficult to be able to speak ones mind, as there was always several others wanting to talk as well. I found myself being eager to tell my opinion on the theme for discussion, rather than to reach new understanding together. We did jump quite rapidly from theme to theme, which in itself was exiting, but it was more a fight of opinions, and did not give any room for the calmness “thinking and talking” needs. About half of the people where very active, and the other half rarely got the chance to speak at all. By having such a big group makes it hard to keep balance in between the conversation partners. It was an experience that I enjoyed, but the conversation was not rewarding.

4.2.6. What was (hidden) in the conversations?

When listening to the conversation with my friend, Linn, I realized to which extent I was expressing myself unclearly. At times I could hardly understand it myself! Over years of friendship, and many experiences and conversations, we have common references. Friends, or people that have known each other for years, can communicate with a much less precise language because we have a common history. My hypothesis became then that if this were true that through a close friendship sloppy expression appeared, then the opposite was possibly true; when talking with a stranger you would be expressing yourself more precisely. And precise
A formulation is necessarily closer to the original thought. By expressing it out loud it helps you create a greater understanding for what you are thinking. This means, by having conversations with strangers it can possibly help you understanding more of your own thoughts.

A long relationship contributes to a relaxed situation, and therefore a relaxed conversation. A relaxed conversation makes it easier to be honest and express what you mean. This is another way getting closer to you thoughts - by saying what you are thinking - rather than pretend because you are afraid of not being accepted. However, a conversation with a stranger, where the atmosphere is less relaxed, can make you more concentrated and alert, helping you sharpen your mind. I found that I put more expectations on myself and on my conversation partner when we were strangers, than when talking to a friend. One reason is of course that I had planned to meet the stranger for a conversation, and that I will probably never see them again. This contributes to a bigger expectation of the situation and the conversation, as you want to get as much as possible from it.

Linn, my friend in the recorded conversation, is probably the person I feel understands me better than anyone, but she is not one I rapidly get new understandings from. When talking to people that have similar perspectives, their thoughts are not too far from each other - and therefore will not be different enough to become mind opening. The mind opening perspectives appear together with friends (or strangers) that think differently from me. Their thoughts are further from mine, and are therefore able to give perspectives that I would never be able to reach myself. It was in the conversations with Tinken and Richard where we gave each other resistance by questioning views and thoughts. Questions and resistance helps re-thinking your opinions. This again can make you think differently, or gain new understandings.

The balance in the conversation is important, and by balance I mean about an equal amount of time to speak. The conversation with Tomas was a unbalanced conversation. He was talking, and I was listening. I did manage to pose questions, and sometimes I pitched in an opinion, but I found it hard with such a dominating conversation partner. One reason for Tomas to dominate the conversation might have been because I contacted him to have this conversation. I was interested in talking to him. This can be understood as I was there to receive knowledge from him. The set up for the conversation, who contacts who in a situation like this is might affect the conversation. The unbalanced conversation, however, provoked the thought of having a conversation situation were one functioned as a storyteller, another as a listener. I worked further on this in the experiments “record and listen” (4.6.) and “conversation day” (4.9.).

The recording of the conversations did not change the conversations noticeably. In the conversations with professionals I had no previous relation to, it was hard to say if their behaviour changed because I did not have anything to compare it to. The conversation with my friends however, I did not notice any change of my friends behaviour, nor in the conversations subjects. To record and capture the moment when I gained new understanding turned out to be possible. In all of the conversations I had with professionals this happened for me, but in different ways. When I later listened to it I got the same feeling as I had during the conversation. My pattern of thoughts was following the same road, and I experienced a “new” (which was not new anymore) understanding as I had during the conversation. I could actually re-experience the feeling of understanding something I had not understood before. This made me curious if it was possible for other people to hear the same things as I did. Could they, as I, find the same things mind opening or rewarding? Would we have the same, or different understanding of the conversations itself? I researched this further in the experiment “listening at home” (4.7.).
One thing I got confirmed through the group conversation was that it is hard to have a rewarding conversation. With many participants the conversation easily becomes a fight for opinions, and at its best I found that a participant could adjust their statement, after listing to another participant’s opinion. To think while talking, or to take time to express oneself was difficult because there was always someone in the group that had something unsaid. I found myself frustrated for not being able to talk more about one subject, or not getting more time to talk, despite of the fact that I was one out of the four people talking the most. This confirmed my initial suspicion; that it is harder to have a rewarding conversation with many participants.

Having these conversations made me get an understanding for the qualities I was after in conversations. I found patterns that made the conversation rewarding, as well as the opposite. When a quality appeared I tried to recognize which circumstances contributed to its appearance. In the three conversations with Tinken, Susanne and Richard I found we had an equal respect for each other, and gave each other space to speak out, but still challenged each others thoughts. We did not have any particularly clashing, but not neither did we just accept each others thoughts. This patterns was re-formulated to guidelines, which I named “guidelines for reaching rewarding conversation” (2.4.5.). They are meant as a help to easier reach a rewarding conversation. Many of them will seem obvious, but can easily be forgotten if you are not conscious of them.

(Sound files from conversation with Tomas and Tinken is documented in appendix 2 in the physical copy.)

4.3. Arranging conversations

In this chapter I will explain how I invited and arranged conversations between strangers. Firstly I will go through three arranged conversations, and reflect upon the differences between them. Thereafter I go through the next four conversations, before I discuss the findings from the whole experiment.

4.3.1. Do people want to meet strangers for rewarding conversations?

I wanted to know if my interest in rewarding conversations was shared by others. I had slowly started to experience that some people understood very well what I meant when I talked about my fascination for conversations. So I decided to try arranging rewarding conversations between strangers. There were several questions I wanted answered: are people interested in having rewarding conversations with strangers? Is it then possible to arrange rewarding conversations between strangers? I also wanted to understand if it made it easier to have a rewarding conversation between two people being quite alike, or different from each other? And would it be helpful having information about each other before they meet?

This part of the chapter is divided into four parts. First I will briefly introduce the experiment by showing the invitation sent out to get participants. Then I will walk you through seven arranged conversations, divided into two groups of three and four. Within these parts I will tell you briefly about similarities and differences between the two people meeting for conversation, and why I chose to match them. In addition what I expected of the outcome...
of the conversation. The information they received about each other varied, and I will go through what the different participants got to know about each other. The two parts will be slightly differently organized as the second part contains more differences between the setup for the conversations. In the end of each part I will discuss some of the findings concerning the conversations. Finally I will discuss findings and results from all of the experiments.

### 4.3.2. Invitation to join

In the invitation I briefly defined what a rewarding conversation is, “...that makes you think, re-think, see things differently, wonder and understand”, as well as what you could benefit from having a conversation: “By formulating words, sentences and opinions out loud it is easier to understand what you are really thinking about- additionally, new people give new perspectives, and have experiences that you can learn from”. I asked potential participants to write something about themselves, and alternative to define any wish of whom to talk with. Finally I pointed out strongly that this was no form of dating, but conversation for the conversations sake. The invitation was posted at Underskog. Then I mailed the invitation to every Swedish and Norwegian person on my address list. I asked people to pass it on to whoever they thought might be interested. After two days I had four participants, and within the next three weeks I had 24 participants.

### 4.3.3. Matching participants

Within the first week I managed to arrange conversations for six participants which then became three arranged conversations. Three of these six participants are friends of mine, and know each other, so I had to split them up into different conversations.

I matched the conversation partner based on the information they emailed. There were three friends of mine participating, and I have years of knowledge about them, which naturally
gave me more information than what they had written to me. From the response to the invitation I had information about their age, profession/studies, nationality, a few sentences about themselves and about who they wanted to meet. The first conversation was a match between two people that were quite similar, in age, sex and profession. The next was between two people that were very different in profession, their life situation was different and 19 years separated them. The last conversation was somewhere in between, different sex, different profession, same age group. This was the closest to a blind date, and I was curious if that would make any difference regarding the conversation.

The initial idea was to ask all the participants to record their conversation, and let me listen to it later on. I gave them the opportunity to stop, or delete the recording at any point. Out of the first three I asked, two said yes, and one was hesitant, but said she would think it through. Alexander, one of the participants, responded that recording the conversation would change the whole conversation. He argued that even if he was allowed to stop the recording at any point, he would be self-conscious, which would change the conversation into something else than if it was not recorded. This made me rethink how important I found the recording, and I reached the answer that at this point I found the conversation itself that was of importance. At this point the most important thing was that the two people involved in the conversations had a rewarding conversation.

As mentioned I searched to see what effect, if any, a different amount of information about the conversation partner would have on the conversations between the participants. They received a sign so that they would be able to recognize each other, and the first name of the person they where meeting, the amount of information affect the conversation, and if so: how? In conversation 1 and 2 the four participants involved received two parts of the information that their conversation partner had sent to me earlier when applying for an arranged conversation. The information received was under the headings: “some things about myself” and “who do you wish to talk to?”. The participants in conversation 3, however, did not receive any information about each other.

One example was Julie writing about herself and whom she would like to talk to, which Mathias received before the conversion

**Some things about yourself:**
(This can be anything from education and profession, to properties, what you find important in life, experiences you have had and so on)

*I have relatively newly graduated and stand in the middle of the past and the future. Don’t own an apartment, sick of the TV-business before I even started, and do not have a boyfriend. Use most of my time wondering about how the rest of my life is going to be and who it will contain. I wish I wasn’t depended on money to feel good, but have realised that it is like that actually. Want to travel more, learn to sail, find peace to read books and enjoy the present.*

**Who do you want to talk to?**
(Feel free to be specific, but remember that this is new, and that the number of conversation partners will be limited. Please write several wishes.)

*Don’t have any specific wishes, but I would like to talk with someone that want’s to talk about life. Preferably someone who has lived several more years than myself and that has made some important choices- right or wrong. And preferably someone who does not know me or my friends from before.*
Maybe someone that likes spending time in nature and that knows the area around Oslo. Or someone that knows sailing/ has their own sailboat.

In the interview after the conversations I was mostly interested to find out if they had a rewarding conversation according to my definition. The questions I asked regarding this was “Can you pick out some parts in the conversation where you found “something happening” (“... you got a new perspective, something got very weird, learned something new, got something new to think about, or if some things stopped totally?”). In other words- if there where any “good” or “bad” things happening?” And the second question I asked was simply “Did this give you anything?”. Secondly I wanted to look at the differences between the conversations, and how it was possibly linked back to the match of the partners. I interviewed everyone before and after their conversation.

4.3.4. Three arranged conversations

About an hour before the conversations were to take place everyone was positive, and looking forward to the conversation. Several of them also defined themselves as nervous, which most of the time was grounded because of the person they were about to meet. One of the participants, Tea, expressed fear of “meeting a weirdo”. Several also mentioned fear of not having enough to talk about, and that the conversation would be “without flow”. One participant, Julie, also talked about her fear of not being good enough herself; not knowing enough, not be interesting enough, not being able to ask the right questions, and she even considered to “read up on news” before the conversation took place.

Hanna and Emma. Two girls in the same age group, and with similar interest and profession. I expected the conversation to go well, in the sense that they would have enough to talk about, and understand each other- because they would probably share many of the same opinions. What I saw becoming the downfall, was that they where too similar which potentially could become boring. They could end up not being able to be curious enough of each other, or challenge each other- which could become a predictable conversation in the sense that they would not be surprised by each other.

This conversation lasted for about one hour. Afterwards Emma described the most rewarding part when listening to a story from Hanna’s life; “What it did to her as a human to get a kidney from a person she did not know. How she then changed as a person.” Hanna, on the other hand, described specific knowledge about the school where Emma is a student; “I got to learn a lot of new stuff about college in Oslo, how they do things in the education.”

Mathias and Julie. The second conversation had a “higher risk”. Mathias is a 48 years old carpenter, while Julie is a 29 years old documentary filmmaker. I got the impression that they had very different lives at this point- Mathias was established with wife and children while Julie was single and without a job. They did, however, have overlapping interests and experiences; like cross-country-skiing and East-Africa. Some of these interest were written in the description, and some that I knew from knowing Julie for many years. I wanted to see if a high risk became a high reward. If their personalities matched, I saw it potentially becoming really rewarding conversation.

This conversation lasted for three hours. Julie said afterwards that she got a thought she had never had before, by one specific thing Mathias had shared with her from his life experience; “Talked a lot about life, partner, and to grow older. That you get a lot back from
holding together though thick and thin. It was a new thought, even though it was not an aha-
experience.” Mathias found himself reflecting upon his own life as Julie had many thoughts
around the choices she faced in her life; “That gave me the most. Reflection. To think about my
own life. Can you choose? Do you have to choose? Do you want to choose?”

Alexander and Tea. The third conversation was the one closest to a blind date because it was
between a boy and a girl in the same age group. Alexander is 33 years old, studying for a master
in industrial design met Tea, a 28 year old actor. They were “pretty safe match”. Coming from
the same country, and being about the same age gives automatically a lot of the same reference
points; from “where you are in life”, to travels and music, to childhood cartoons. They have
different professions, but are both in creative professions where it is hard to establish oneself
because of lack of work. I expected them to “get along”, and saw it potentially to become a
rewarding conversation.

The conversation lasted for three hours. Tea pointed to perspectives Alexander had which was a
quite differently to her own views; “Something happened for me. (...) How will the society look
in a few years? Humans are basically selfish in my mind. Alexander believes in the goodness.
I believe that humans want to go forward, driven to advance, and therefore destruction.
Alexander thought about opportunities in the limitations. Which opportunities do you have at
that point?” Alexander referred to a very concrete new piece of knowledge that Tea had learned
from her brother earlier that day, which made him look differently upon a part of himself; “(...) her
brother is a psychologist, and had called her earlier that day, saying; I am reading about us,
divorced children; one of them makes a nest- has a long relationship and makes children, gets
married and so on. The other one has short relationships, can’t take another break up in their
lives. I am that last one”.

4.3.5. Results and reflections

I was happily surprised how “successful” the outcome was. All of the participants had
conversations within what I have defined as a rewarding conversation. Emma learned from
a story from Hanna’s life, and how she experienced getting a kidney from an unknown uncle.
Hanna got concrete knowledge from Emma about the school she attends. Mathias started
reflecting upon his own life, while Julie learned a new benefit from having a long-time
relationship. Tea referred to a view Alexander had which was different from hers. That made
her rethink her own ideas. Through Tea Alexander learned about divorced children from Teas
brother and applied the information on himself. In these three conversations there was an
exchange of concrete knowledge, new thoughts, new perspectives and reflections which is all
included in the framing of rewarding conversations.

Four out of six participants received description about their conversation-partner. Even though
two of the four participants expressed that it was nice to have some information to start up
the conversations, the two not knowing anything about each other where very pleased. Tea was
happy that she did not know anything about Alexander, and would even prefer to know less;
she suggested that it would be better if they would recognize each other by a sign pre-decided
by me- this was supported by Hanna. Hanna’s comment on this matter made me realize how
we create presumptions based on the information we receive, even though the information is
minimal; “You create an image. You create expectations. You do that no matter what. If I only
received a name I would still make ideas since I know someone with that name; “That’s a typical
Knut.”” The feedback regarding not knowing anything about the conversation partner, versus
knowing something was split, but I was intrigued by the fact that the two participants that did
not know anything about each other, Alexander and Tea, were so pleased with that situation.

The first conversation lasted for about one hour, while the second and the third conversation lasted for three hours. A longer conversation indicates that the conversation partners really enjoy the conversation. However, I will not claim that "a longer conversation is a better conversation". It could simply be that one of the conversation partners in the first conversation had an appointment to make. An indicator of the projects success is that they all said they would participate in this type of arranged conversation again.

One should be careful grading the different benefits you can get from a rewarding conversation, but when I compare the answers from the participants I find that concrete knowledge is, one of the less exiting input you can get from a stranger. In the first conversation one participant mentioned concrete knowledge as to what she got out of the conversation. This was also the conversation that was the shortest. These facts made be think that it was maybe so that the more similar the participants are, the less they have to give to each other. This again means that the more diversity there are between the conversation partners the more beneficial the conversation ends up being. When it came to the third conversation that was closer to a blind date, Alexander said that he wondered if the cute girl he met was single or not. Tea on the other hand expressed a relief not having to touch on the subject of dating.

Arranging conversations

4.3.6. Four more arranged conversations

At this point I wanted to test my hypotheses. Was the bigger diversity in conversation partners possibly a shortcut to rewarding conversation? And was it less scary to meet a conversation partner without having any information about her/him, and therefore no information to create any presumptions? The first and third conversation match became, however, between quite similar people. This was because I had to pick from the participants I had, based on when they
where available and were they lived. In the second conversation I matched two people quite different from each other. I was hoping to get a bigger understanding when it came to being a link between bigger differences and rewarding conversations. The last conversation was arranged based on a wish from one participant. She wanted to talk to “someone that can help me to see what is eatable in the city and so I can dare to start using it in my diet.” This took me on a long search, and ended up with a person around the same age, and with the same sex.

Because of a time issue I asked the participants to write a self report. Before the first conversation I asked the participants to self-report sending an email before and after the conversation took place. I asked them to write about expectations and fears, and to write about the conversation and experience itself. For the second and fourth conversation I asked the participants to email me before the experience, while I called them for an interview afterwards. For the third conversation I was only able to interview one of the participants after the conversation.

To move closer to one of my starting points; podcasts, I asked four of the participants to record their conversation. This was the second and the third conversation. The recording would possibly change the conversation, yes, but not necessarily for the worse. Just as well as it might make you more self-conscious and afraid of saying something politically incorrect, it might make you benefit from the formulations in the conversation. It might make you pick your words more carefully, make you formulate yourself more precise- which again can get you closer to your own thoughts. It was still more important that they had a rewarding conversation, and I told the participants; “The conversation will be recorded, but you and your conversation-partner, the possibility to stop the recording at any point. If it prevents you from having an open conversation I ask you to stop it. The recording will only be accessible to me.”

First of all I wanted to give my participants less information about their conversation partner. In the first and the third conversation the two people meeting did not know anything but the first name of each other. In the second conversation I tried giving out fake information. So, before the conversation they received a couple of fake lines about the person they were about to meet. I wanted to see if it would affect the conversation in any way and expected that even though they would receive fake information they would be able to start the conversation based on my “mistake”. This was an exploratory approach, as I had no hypothesis for the turnout. The last conversation was set up based on a specific wish from the participant joining the project. Naturally they then had a common interest, and knew that their conversation partner would have the same interest. For all of the conversations I decided a sign they would carry for them to recognize each other. This was either a black book or a red apple.

My main focus was still to understand if they had a rewarding conversation or not. The last conversation was of extra interest as it was different from all the other arranged conversations because it was based on a very specific wish. I was curious if having a theme, with one “expert” and one “apprentice” would have an effect on the conversation. Hierarchies between conversation partners can easily make a conversation unbalanced. And would they be able to keep an openness, touching on themes other than the one they had in common? Secondly I wanted to see if I could see any benefits from not giving out any information but a first name or a common interest before the conversation. I also explored if “anything happened” by giving out fake information about the conversation partners. There were two things I was interested in relation to recoding of the conversation; would they stop the recording? And, or, would the awareness of being recorded prevent the conversation partners in their conversation?

Elias and Ingrid. Ingrid 27 years old, with education within performing arts was meeting Elias
24 studying for text writer. I expected they would have a “safe” conversation, again based on a similar age and creative profession. Because I had already a strict time schedule I asked them to self-report before and after the conversation.

After they had met for the conversation I received a mail with expectations they had before, and the experience of the conversation. Elias defined the experience as “Weird at the beginning”, and “After a while it turned out to be a typical conversation between two people stuck in a situation and therefore have to talk to each other.” But he finished off writing “(...) It did go really well after a while, no problem keeping the conversation going, and it was also interesting to talk to her. (...)” Ingrid, on the other hand, had the first and only poor experience throughout this project; “I was very disappointed. It was strange, because it didn’t think I had any expectations. What really disappointed me was that it was so obvious that he didn’t choose this himself. He hadn’t seen the “commercial” at Underskog and been thinking “this looks cool/exiting/I wanna try this”. He said he had been pulled into the project by a acquaintance of you, and the disappointment lied in the fact that he was not a person searching for an extended world picture or anything like that. (...) In some ways I was hoping to meet someone like myself, or I mean, that joined it for the same reasons as myself. (...) He was nervous and told me he thought I would be from Elverum too and that we could talk about common acquaintances. I guess I expected a philosophical conversation about life;-) (...) Learned a lot. It was very exciting to meet ones expectations in that way.”

This was obviously not a rewarding conversation for either of them. Elias found the experience uncomfortable, but did, however, find it interesting to talk to her in the end. For Ingrid, unfortunately it seemed to be one big disappointment. From Ingrid’s report I can conclude that Elias did not know the framing of the conversation which became clear through his (according to Ingrid) expectations.

**Anders and Nora.** The two meeting for a conversation were Anders who is a 46 years old journalist, while Nora is 23 years old student. They were asked to record their conversation and received fake information about each other. The information were 3-4 sentences supposedly about each other- but in reality made up by me. The information was somewhat random, but I wrote “good at knitting” to create an expectation that the man was really a woman. Nora emailed me before the conversation: “(...) I expect wise words, and reflected themes, without a fear of awkward silence, because we will not be embarrassed when we are so fearless that we are in on this to begin with; (...) I expect a woman, when she/he wrote about knitting, but this is childish and old fashion, I know... (...) conversations are mostly giving anyway, and we will no matter what try hard, because we meet for the conversation (...).” Because of the age difference, I expected this conversation potentially to become a very rewarding experience for both of them.

Later that same day I did a phone interview with each of them. Both of them expressed great excitement and it was obvious that they had enjoyed the conversation very much. Anders commented; “(...) Then I expect that it was a totally natural part where we take and give and learn from each other, and learn about ourselves. Fantastic frankly and fantastic conversation about the important things. (...)” Nora supported his perception of the conversation; “It really became very personal. We discussed family relations. He has very different relations from me. He saw things from a parent perspective. We both got a lot out of it. Existential things. (...) Which choices he has made in his life, where I understood more of my own parents. An intimate and deep conversation with an elderly man. We usually have different roles to each other. I know mostly younger men.” Both of them referred to new perspectives related to several
themes. They shared of themselves which resulted in a very open conversation, and lead to a rewarding conversation.

In each of the interviews the participants were quick to comment that I had given them fake information, which they naturally believed was a unintentional mistake made by me. Nora said it was comforting to get the information before the conversation, because it was nice knowing her conversation partner was not a “fantasy person” (which is ironic because the information was fake). Anders was however sceptic to the fact that I had given them fake information. This had made him unsure of me as an arranger. He had got a professional impression of me until the moment they realised the wrong information about each other. This made him question if I was reliable, and he doubted for a second if he wanted to record the conversation. Despite of that they did record it, and they did not stop the recording at any point. The recording was, unfortunately of very bad quality which made it impossible to listen to.

Moa and Josefine. Moa is a 35 years old photographer, and Josefine a 42 years old coach and project manager. This was again what I expected to be a “safe” conversation. I did expect them to have an honest conversation, because I know Moa and she has a fairly straight forward attitude. They recorded their conversation. After the conversation I was only able to get an interview with Moa.

When asking Moa if she found that the conversation had giving her anything, she replied: “I think so. Maybe not the conversation itself, but that it was useful just to be there. Walk outside of the comfort zone. THAT gave me something. The conversation in itself? Yes, maybe. On certain levels she said unexpected things.” I will not define Moa’s experience of the conversation itself as a rewarding conversation, even though it is in a grey zone. When asking her how she experienced not knowing anything other than the first name of the person she replied: “I liked not knowing anything. That was almost the best part. It gave the most. (...)” Moa was yet another participant that expressed satisfactory not to know anything about the person she was meeting. In her case however, she expressed that she found the experience of meeting a stranger more rewarding than the conversation itself. Moa enjoyed challenging herself, and pushed the boundaries of her of her normal “comfort zone”.

When asking Moa about the recording of the conversation she replied: “I didn’t think that much about it. I did think about it when we turned to more sensitive themes. (...) maybe it stopped me a little bit. Yeah, maybe. I became self-conscious because I knew you where going to listen.” Here I want to pitch in that Moa and I are friends and we have only known each other for a couple of yeas. I later listened to the conversation and that made me sure that they had a rewarding conversation. They shared experiences from their lives that probably carry a lot of uneasy feelings. Both experienced a sibling dying, which they shared some thoughts around.

Amanda and Mathilda. The very last conversation, was formed by a wish from the participant when applying for the project. She wanted to talk to; “Someone that can help me to see what is eatable in the city and dare to start using it in my diet.” Amanda, a 33 years old PhD student, was meeting Mathilda that is knowledgeable on the area of “eatable things in the city”. I expected them to have a “safe” conversation as they where of the same sex and about the same age. They also had a theme which potentially could create a asymmetric relation, or make the conversation stay within the theme. They met at a site in the city and did not know anything about each other besides the common theme of interest.

On my question of what she got out of the conversation, Amanda expressed how she learned by formulating her own thoughts, and managed to get “a little bit” closer an understanding. Mathilda pointed out more concrete things like eatable crops, and about media and
communication, and concluded; “It is fantastic that people can meet and exchange information. A great value in that.” This was a rewarding conversation for both Amanda and Mathilda. On the question whether they had only talked about the theme, Amanda answered; “It was a lot around the theme. Different approaches to the theme; my approach, her approach. (...) Our conversation was very affected by were we where. Around the theme and around the place. On the cemetery we talked about our dead grandmothers. We were very direct. The theme does affect the everyday and life in a very concrete way.” And Mathilda expressed; “We did get into a lot of other stuff. About 40% was about the theme. But it was a lot of other stuff as well.” I asked each of them if they thought about Mathilda as the informant, and Amanda answered; “Not an informant. Before I meet her, she was a guide, yes, but it became very personal as well. A lot more as a conversation partner.” Mathilda replied similarly: “In the beginning I though quite a lot about it. But then we started talking about other stuff; media and communication, then Amanda became the expert.”

4.3.7. Discussing arranged conversations

In this part I will point out some things I saw happening during these conversations. Next, I will look at the recording the conversation, an unsuccessful conversation, and at having a theme for the conversation. At last I will sum up the most important findings throughout the the arranged conversations.

The fourth conversation was far from a rewarding conversation for one of the participants, Ingrid, which had a disappointing conversation. Her expectations was legitimate; “I guess I expected a philosophical conversation about life;-)”. This is what you could expect from someone joining this project. Elias did express that the conversation was partly boring, but he did, however, also say that he found it interesting to talk to her. So Elias had somewhat a good conversation. Ingrid pointed out the fact that Elias had never seen the “commercial” for this project, which meant that he only knew he was meeting for a conversation, and not that one was aiming for a conversation “...that makes you think, re-think, see things differently, wonder and understand”. In retrospect I believe he heard about the project through a common friend, which was probably why he had not seen the “commercial”, and maybe had a different interpretation of what this project was about. It did make me realise that knowing the set-up, which in this case is knowing what kind of conversation you should expect through an invitation, is of importance.

There was no doubt that the conversation between the younger girl, and the twice as old man was a rewarding conversation- they where able to give each other new perspectives. The conversations between the people most different from each other in age, profession and life I got the impression had a very good meeting. They were able to have an open conversation and seemed to put a lot of trust in each other even thought they were strangers. One thing that was repeated in the interviews after these conversations was; “we would never have met in other circumstances.” This might have been an element to why they were able to be that open to a stranger. Another point is that in “normal” circumstances we mostly meet people our own age, and are therefore used to follow certain unwritten rules in conversations. When meeting someone outside of your “normal” circumstances, the chances of meeting each other by coincidence are small, which again automatically creates a bigger freedom. In the opposite end of the scale I saw indications that the conversations happening between people more alike each other where more predictable, and what they got out of it was recognition and the general experience of meeting a stranger. It is in itself very plausible to get more out of meeting people different from yourself as they have other experiences and thoughts than your So by meeting
people similar you get recognition and while meeting people different you get new ideas and thoughts.

To record the conversation had no affect on the conversation itself. Anders described the recording giving him “a good feeling to know the conversation was passed on”. This recording was unfortunately impossible to listen to because of the quality. The other recorded conversation, between Moa and Josefine, I was able to listen to later on. Moa and I are friends, but not very close. This was probably why she explained that she “did think about it when we turned to more sensitive themes.” She knew I was going to listen, and noticed the recorder when talking about sensitive subjects. She did however, never stop the recording, but held back on the more sensitive subjects. The recording was in neither cases so dominating that they decided to turn it off, but it did prevent one participant from being open in more sensitive themes.

Having a theme for the conversation did not have any affect on the conversation. I had been sceptic to whether or not they would manage to keep the openness in the conversation, and to maintain the possibility to “go anywhere”. They both said they had talked about many different themes, even though the “eatable things in the city” was something they kept coming back to. They both seemed to have experienced an open and confidential conversation. The fact that they had somewhat teacher and a student role did not have any affect. Mathilda said; “But then we started talking about other stuff, media and communication, then Amanda became the expert.” This showed me that even though they had a theme as the basis of their conversation, they managed to keep it open for other subjects as well. During the conversation the roles had switched based on the theme they discussed, and together they had also managed to find eatable food none of them knew about before.

Throughout these seven arrangements there has obviously been contradicting data. The participants receiving information were happy for that, while the ones not receiving information were happy about. They were happy either way, which tells me that it is of little or no relevance. There was no obvious difference between the participants receiving fake information or no information when it came to the conversation itself. The two participants receiving fake information expressed it only lead to a mistrusting the arranger. Moa, that did not receive any information but the first name of the conversation partner said; “That was almost the best part.” As in earlier conversations this was another participant expressing having little information was preferably.

By the amount of feedback I received from people who wanted to participate I could quickly conclude that there is an interest in having rewarding conversations with strangers. Few participants showed any specific wish of whom to talk to. Most of the participants made a very open approach, and wrote things like “Yes to everything”, “No preferences” and “I don’t know”. Several also gave an description that fits most people; “I want to talk about politics and Norway in the world today and the world. Both philosophical and political is interesting. Age is irrelevant. But I want to learn something new. Get new perspectives. (...) So surprise me. A lot is exciting when you first get started...”. Only two participants had very specific wishes, Amanda, which I was able to find a conversation partner to, and one participant where I unfortunately failed finding a conversation partner suiting her wish. She did wished to talk to; “A woman that feels let down of a man who focus at his carrier or that travels too much. A woman that is considering to leave her man because he do not want to have children. A man that is considering to leave his woman because she is to pushy. Or a man that has left a woman because she was too pushy.”There is obviously an interest for having rewarding conversations, and that
the major part find it interesting to talk to “anyone” that shares that interest.

When asking the participants what they got from the conversation 10 out of the total 14 participants gave answers that fit my definition of rewarding conversation. Two of the other participants expressed that they had “good”/“interesting” conversations. One had a disappointing experience, and one participant I was never able to interview. All the participants were interested in doing it again.

Out of in total fourteen participants ten explained having rewarding conversations.

Looking at the outcome of this experiment I will claim that it is possible to arrange rewarding conversations between strangers. My participants did show an interest for, and a capability to, have rewarding conversations. Finally I will sum up some findings:

1. Strangers want to have conversations with strangers (several has expressed the relief of not dating-the positive surprise of “meeting someone I would never talk to in another setting”).

2. The participants take the responsibility for the conversation in situ (no one have expressed awkward silence, one did have uneasy feelings in the situation).

3. Through a pre-defined aim two thirds of the participants were able to reach that aim and reaching a rewarding conversation.

4. Four of the conversations have lasted about 2-3 hours, three of them for 1 hour - which indicate that they had a good conversation.

5. More than two thirds had a rewarding conversation. Everyone, with the exception of one, was pleased with the conversation- and have expressed they would do it again (even the one not having a good conversation).

6. Getting information, or not getting information about the conversation partner do not make any difference. Either do having a theme, or a topic for the conversation.

7. The more different the two meeting for a conversation is from each other, the easier it is to have a rewarding conversation.
8. Having a theme for the conversation or to record the conversation does not affect the chance for reaching a rewarding conversation.

(The interviews from experiment 4.3. is documented in appendix 1 in the physical copy.)

4.4. Chasing participants opinions

I had several ideas for possible development of the project, but I wanted to bring my participants into the design process, and learn from their experiences. I invited six participants for a workshop in Oslo. The workshop consisted of three sessions. Firstly I would ask the participants to write down keywords on post-its about the experience from participating in an arranged conversation. Part two was to have a brainstorming session, where the participants was going to come up with ideas based on their post-its. And part three was to show them six broad concepts, to get reactions and feedback. In this chapter I will present the process of the workshop, what the participants came up with, and what information I took further for continuing the process.

4.4.1. How was the arranged conversation?

Firstly I wanted to know what they liked and disliked when participating in an arranged conversation. I started by describing my design process so that everyone would “be on the same page”. Then we began the post-it session. I asked them to write down qualities, feelings or fears attached to the experience of meeting a stranger for a conversation. This could be specific things in the situation, or that arise before, in, or after the situation. They wrote for about 3 minutes, before I asked them to get up one at the time, place the post-its on the wall, and explain a little bit about what they had written down. The post-its where placed in two groups: one with “positive experience” and one with “fears”. Everyone were great producers of post-it notes, and after the first round, several went up to add some more things they realized during the session. I had three more questions that I wanted them to reflect upon, and put down on post-its; “what provides a good conversation?” , “who are good conversation-partners?” and “where can good conversations take place?”

These questions lead to a 30 minute discussion about situations where good conversations occur, and if it is a “good” or a “bad” thing to have pauses in conversations. We finished off the post-it session by organizing the post-its into twelve groups with a heading for each of them. I will go through the ones I found valuable.

Under the heading “Give and take” I found what I consider the most valuable information. Here I could see that my participants recognized several of the same qualities and possible gains of having conversations that I had been defining earlier. They defined the qualities in a conversation with the same words I do. To “learn something”, “reach a bigger understanding”, to see “new perspectives” are all parts of what I define as a rewarding conversation. This made me sure that more people than myself saw the potential of having conversations. “To communicate something, to be heard” refers to what you can get out simply by sharing your thoughts in a conversation. And “to dare, to risk, to show confidence” are parts of what I had defined as “Guidelines for easier reaching a rewarding conversation” (2.4.5.).
Give and take

It was a good thing she was attentive  
Learned something  
I reached bigger understanding  
New perspectives  
I got to communicate something, I was heard  
To dear, to risk, to show confidence

Under the heading “To get to know each other” the participants pointed out other qualities that I believe contributes to a rewarding conversation. To have an “open and honest” as well as a “long conversation equals a rewarding conversation” are again qualities I see contributing to a good conversation.

To get to know each other

Open and honest conversation  
To get to know each other vs. having a good conversation  
Long conversation = good conversation

Pauses where obviously a theme for discussion. While some was of the opinion that it was necessary to have pauses in a good conversation, others stated that there could not be any pauses in a good conversation. What I could conclude from this is that they had different ideas of what pause can do in a conversation- and that it is highly subjective if it is awkward or necessary. It can also be a shifting feeling according to the relation to the conversation partner. When talking to a stranger pauses can be experienced as awkward, while with friends it is okay.
Pauses

Pauses are awkward!
We don’t have enough in common
The longer pause, the more difficult it becomes to say anything
A pause means you are not having a good conversation
Pauses have to exist in a good conversation
It is delightful when two people can be silent together
Pauses are ok with a good friend

When looking at the outcome of “fears” I was surprised that there was most fear lying in the subject. They were mostly afraid of not being funny, nice or interesting enough themselves. The fear of the other was based on not being able to stop the conversation and “get away in a nice way” if the conversation partner would turn out to be boring.

I am afraid that you...

Afraid to start talking with someone who is boring
Afraid of hurting someone by breaking off the conversation

I am afraid that I....

Afraid of being perceived as stupid/boring
Afraid of disclosing more about myself than I actually want to
A wish to appear as a good person
Basic wish to be liked/accepted
Do not want to bother others
Loose control
The participants make order and headings for the post-its.

The participants had no problem sharing their experience of what a good conversations was, but the next three questions “what does a good conversation contain?”, “who are good conversation partners?” and “where can good conversations take place?” became complicated. The problem was that there is not one answer to these questions, it is rather the opposite; any answer. A good conversation can occur anywhere, at any time and with anyone.

4.4.2. Presenting concepts for reactions and feedback

The plan was then to continue with a brainstorming session. The problem was that “suddenly” the time had moved too fast, and there was basically half-an-hour left of the workshop. This made me decide to skip the brainstorming session, and go for the last part; to show them my concepts. The decision was made based on that my concepts where quite broad which would give room for the participants to build on them or combine them. They had a variation of qualities such as physical/virtual, listen/talk, control/no control, planned/impulse, physical sculpture/website. The six concepts were presented in the following order and with the same amount of information as presented here.

Emotion cards and “yes”, “no”, “what”.

For this session I had made what I call “emotion cards”, which was inspired by “emotion tickets”. The idea was that the cards would help them express their first thoughts. It was
an attempt to grasp my participant’s first reactions by getting them to throw one or more cards on the table. Next, each participant would explain closer why they had thrown those reactions. I had made fifteen simple faces, all showing different feelings, and wrote underneath what they were reflecting/showing. I printed them out on different coloured paper which I organized according to the feeling so that it would be easier for me to recognize when an idea got more “negative” or “positive” reactions. However, this was not something I explained to my participants, because I did not want them to be aware of “positive” and “negative” reactions. They also had three cards saying “yes”, “no” and “what?”. The point of this game was to try to keep the individual opinions in a group situation, and possibly it could be a way to get unexpected discussions.

1. The conversation bench/tree/lamppost

The idea was to mark objects/places in the everyday environment- for example “conversation three”. This would be a place you could go to if you wanted to have conversation with a stranger.

2. Website for meeting people for conversations

This is a website where one could find people who wanted to have good conversations. The idea was that you would find people based on geography and interest- and get in contact with each other for a conversation.
The first idea, having a “conversation bench/tree/lamppost” got mostly positive response. One positive quality expressed was that by having a place for meeting conversation partners would give the freedom to approach the place spontaneously, instead of waiting for a specific appointed day. It was also mentioned that it was comforting to be able to see the person before they approached the person to have a conversation with her/him.

The second concept, “website for meeting people for conversations”, was basically a digital version of what I had done as an organizer of conversations. This idea, on the other hand, got mostly negative response. One participant who thought it was a good idea stated “yes” to the idea, at the same time as she explained she would not use it- she just liked the idea.

Reactions to concept 1 and 2.

The reasoning for not wanting this website was that they would not trust a website. “There’s a lot of crazy people out there” one participant stated. During the discussion they came to the insight that one of my main functions, as the arranger for conversations, had been to carry the responsibility of matching conversation partners. They had to trust me, but did not need to take the responsibility for a good match themselves. A website, on the other hand, would change this. The responsibility and decision to pick a conversation partner would end up in their hands. It was a joint opinion that they wanted to have the conversation partners organized by a person-not by a system.

3. Conversation café

A conversation café would be exactly what it sound like; a café where you would go to have conversations with strangers.
4. Conversation symbol

This would be a symbol showing that you wanted to have a conversation. Another person with the same symbol is potentially a conversation partner. The symbol was possible to put on and off as you pleased. The symbol would only be understandable for others carrying the symbol, a secret club of people knowing what it meant.

The conversation café got purely positive response. Again they underlined the benefit of having a place to go to spontaneously when wanting a conversation, rather than having to wait for a specific appointed day.

Response to the idea of a “conversation café” and a “conversation symbol”.

The reaction to the symbol were variated. One participant suggested to mix it with the idea of a conversation café- and rather have a established café where you could use the symbol if you wanted to have conversations.
5. Website for listening and uploading conversations
This would be a website where you could listen to conversations between people, as well as uploading your own conversations.

6. Random conversation
A conversation wheel would be connected to Skype. You would use it as a “wheel of fortune”, and be matched up with a random person that wanted to have a conversation.

The idea of a website where you could be listening to conversations was popular. Everyone was sure they would go in and listen to conversations. When asking if they would upload conversation themselves they were more hesitant, but one participant made sure she would do that. The last idea “random conversation” was not popular, and I was informed that the idea already existed. Chatroulette was launched three months earlier and had 1.5 million users in March 2010.
4.4.3. Throw away ideas and create opportunities

Before the workshop I had imagined the website “meeting people for conversation” as a natural development, but that idea was dismissed within a couple of minutes. It was however reassuring understanding that the participants have the same understanding as myself when it comes to the qualities in a rewarding conversation.

The participants expressed the importance of a human intermediary, as well as they preferred not being the ones choosing who to meet for a conversation. During the discussions they returned to the issue of “low risk”. If we compare the “conversation café” to the website for “meeting people for conversations” they demand a very different effort from the participant. The conversation café was simply a public place where it was possibility to meet strangers that wanted to have a rewarding conversation. The website, however, demanded an active action from the user, deciding who to contact, and contacting a person to make an appointment for a rewarding conversation. While the conversation café might be challenging or risky in the way that you have no control over who might approach you- it will not take any more time than the time you choose to stand there. On the website for “meeting people for conversations”, on the other hand, you have to give information about yourself, arrange a meeting, and show up for a conversation at a scheduled place and time. If no one shows up when you wait in the “conversation café” you have only lost the minutes you used standing there. But if no one shows up at the arranged conversation, you have lost the time you invested, and probably some of your self-esteem as well. The more invested time and effort, the bigger the disappointment will be if the conversation partner does not appear.

In the post-it session they showed a lot of the fear that was grounded in themselves, but when looking at these specific ideas they started to talk about dangers of meeting strangers. They wanted the ability to see the person they were going to have a conversation with. The conversation tree, and the conversation café were situations were they had some control in the situation, as oppose to a meeting arranged trough a website.

Another returning theme was the ability of being spontaneous. They, with one exception, expressed that they preferred being able to be spontaneous, rather than having a scheduled appointment. The reason was simply that it is hard to schedule your mood, and knowing when you will be in the disposition for a rewarding conversation. This was another point for preferring a physical place over a website.

The concepts that received good feedback were “website for listening and uploading conversations”, “conversation café” and “conversation bench/tree/lamppost”. These ideas became the foundation for continuation of the project. The “conversation café” and “conversation bench/tree/lamppost” I saw as a indication for keeping a physical aspect. The idea of a website for conversations had been intriguing to me for months, and I decided I wanted to do some tests to see if this could be a future idea. First I needed to find out if there was any interest in listening to other people’s conversations.

(Sound files documenting the workshop 4.4. is in appendix 2 in the physical copy.)
4.5. Collective listening and continuation of conversation

The workshop showed that a website for listening and uploading conversations a good idea. In this experiment I wanted to see if people other than myself would get anything out of listening to a conversation I had found rewarding. Did it have any value for a person that had not been present in the conversation to listen to it? And, if so, how would they interpret what they had heard? At last I wanted to test if it was possible to continue a conversation based on the conversation they were listening to. In this chapter decided to further test the interest for a website. I will go through how the experiment played out, discuss what I got out of it, and what I choose to take for further testing.

4.5.1. Two friends listening

I invited two friends that had not had been involved in the project so far to listen to parts from the conversation I had with Tomas. It took place in an informal listening session in my kitchen over a glass of wine. The parts I choose to play up were picked out based on what I found most interesting during our conversation, which was six different parts, lasting from 5 minutes to about 20 minutes each. After each session they were encouraged to comment on or continue the conversation.

4.5.2. Playback and comments

The first part we listened to was a 20 minutes long. Already a couple of minutes into the session Filip wanted me to stop the playback so that he could comment on what they had been listing to so far. Filip continued the conversation by relating to the things Tomas was saying, to a discussion Filip and Oskar had previously. When Filip finished, I explained again that the idea was to listen through the whole 20 minutes before we talked. When 20 minutes had passed I stopped the playback. Oskar expressed he found it difficult no being able to talk during the listening session, and that he would like to have a notebook so that he could take notes about the themes being discussed- or to be able to stop the playback at all times. Oskar went through the “themes that had been up for discussion” in the conversation between Tomas and me, before he commented on each and one of them. I decided that for the next session they would be able to stop the playback whenever they wanted to, which again lead to many pauses. For the other, shorter parts, I went back to playing the whole session before they were allowed to comment.

During this experiment they both became surprisingly engaged, and both had a lot to say about the conversation between Tomas and me. It started out as a soft critique towards Tomas, as he was the dominating the conversation, and towards me, because I did not give him any resistance. As the listing went on, the conversation about the conversation became more and more a critical towards Tomas opinions and statements. Oskar and Filip were also memorizing the themes that was up for discussion in the conversation they were listening to. I did not expect, or want, such an approach to the listening. I had imagined an informal listening session where the conversation could continue as any conversation- without being restricted to talk about everything they had been listening to. Oskar pointed out that the setting we were in formed his expectations of listening; “We are sitting here listing, to later to be asked questions about it. It would be a totally different matter if I was only listening to it.” He pictured different scenarios that would make the listening a different experience; listening to it on the radio not
knowing who was having the conversation, compared to getting a CD from me which he would be listing to at home, or buying a CD, compared to finding a CD on the street.

4.5.3. A new listening experience

While I had imagined a continuation of the conversation between Tomas and myself, they critique (mostly) Tomas’ statement, and his opinions. This was of course a “continuation”, but as he was unable to defend himself, it felt somewhat irrelevant. The conversation between Tomas and myself would probably be pretty different if we knew that everything we said would be “examined” afterwards. Tomas is talking to a person who hardly give him any critique, or resistance- because I felt mostly that I understood what he meant through his formulation. But when hearing my two friends getting a very different understanding, I became insecure if I really had understood what he was saying?

Oskar, Filip and myself are clearly three different individuals,- and with different opinions. What we agree or disagree on will necessarily be different from each other. Not only did we have different opinions about the things Tomas was saying, but we also heard, we received the words he was saying differently. As we all “know” everyone changes roles in different situations, and with different people (Thornquist 2001, p. 11). When playing the conversation out load, and listening together with Oskar and Filip, I noticed quickly that even my way of listening to the conversation changed because my two friends were present at the time. I listened differently from when I was listening to it by myself. By knowing the situation I was in, listening together with my friends, I made a different interpretation of the words being said than I had earlier. Not only will the situation, or the setting you receive the recording of a conversation change how you are listening, but also the company listening with you change what you hear. The setting and company changes how you interpret the conversation you are listening to. Not only do we change roles in different situations, but even what we see or hear; a conversation, music, a movie,- changes depending on who we are with- together with the setting we are in. The situation made me listen differently to the recording I had first hand experience of.

We had different understandings about the things being said in the conversation.
They did find it interesting to listen, which made me more sure that it is possible to distribute conversations I find interesting— for others to listen to. Filip’s comment, and suggestion for how the listening experience was changed depending on how he got access to the conversation, and the setting he was in triggered me to do another experiment. I wanted to try out one of his suggestions, and deliver a cd to a couple of participants which they could listen to at home. The chapter Listening at home (4.7.) is about that.

4.6. Record and listen

I wanted to continue the investigation of listening to conversations, and potentially continuing conversations. How would it be to have a conversation knowing it would be listened to right after it was finished? And would there be an interest of continuing or commenting on, the conversation during or after the listening? In this chapter, I present the invitation I used to get participants for this experiment, before I go through the experiment itself. In the end I will summarise and discuss the experiment and the findings.

4.6.1. Facebook leads to no one

I invited people to participate in this experiment through three channels. Firstly by emailing previous participants, friends, and Swedish speaking colleagues in Malmö. I emailed four participants that earlier had applied for an arranged conversation, and three out of four participants said yes to join this event immediately. Then I made a Facebook event, and invited all of my friends living in Malmö. Finally I put up a physical poster with information at Malmö Högskolas main library. This did, however, not lead to any new participants. The low number of participants forced me to change my original experiment.

Screen shot from Facebook the day before the event. Thee confirmed guests.
4.6.2. Record conversation, listen and continue the conversation

Including myself we were four participants, two of which had taken part in an arranged conversation earlier. The four participants were divided into two groups, and then placed in separate rooms to have a recorded conversation. One hour afterwards we stopped the conversation, and then exchanged the recording with the other group. Then both groups listened to the other groups conversation for about 20 minutes. One group, Moa and Sara, was told to stop the playback whenever they wanted to comment, or continue the conversation. The other group, Josefine and myself, were told to listen through 20 minutes of the conversation, and then talk about the conversation. We finished the experiment with a group session were we talked about the experiment.

Conversations were exchanged and commented.

4.6.3. Thumbs up. Thumbs down.

This is a part of a transcribed interview, were I have pulled out the parts I find interesting. Firstly I wanted to know how they found being a participate in the experiment.

Moa: “It was interesting, (...)”
(...)
I turn to Sara: “How did you find it?”

Sara: “I found it interesting. And it was very easy to talk in groups of two as well. It was easy to get a good and interesting conversation going, and it went well to lead one conversation over into another.”

There was a difference between the two groups when listening to the conversations, and I wanted how they found having the possibility of stopping the conversation for comments and continuation.

I ask Moa and Sara: “Did you pause it at any point or not?”

Moa: “Yeah, some...” Silence, then laughter.
Me: “Yeah, or...did it feel like there was a pressure that you had to pause for example...?”

Sara: “In the beginning!”

Moa: “It felt a bit weird in the beginning. I paused, and we talked about that.”

Me: “That you paused?”

Moa: “Yes, I found it weird: What does Åste mean? It feels a bit weird.”

Me: “Yes. Yes.”

Moa: “Later on it felt a bit more like; ‘Shit, what she said there was interesting...’ “

Sara: “Yes.”

Moa: “...what do you think about that?’ But it wasn’t that many times, but some.”

Me: “Yes. Yes. Would you rather have done it the other way around? Not have any pauses at all- only listened? And kept your mouth shut?”

Moa: “Yes, maybe.”

I ask Josefine: “Did you ever wanted to pause? (....)”

(.....)

Josefine: “No...I liked to just sit and listen. We/I got a consistency then.”

Later in the interview we continue to talk about the possibility of comments. And Moa expressed more of her thoughts about it.

Moa: “I almost believe more in that. To listen, rather than taking part yourself, you can have the opportunity in a way, (...) but when you said the thing about going in and commenting, I just felt; shit, I became so tired, it became like Facebook, you know, (...), can’t it just be these conversations? It doesn’t even need to be a long conversation, it can be, just like you said, a short piece of something. It would be so nice, just to be the third part listening, without giving any comments (...) There is something nice about that, with that, in my opinion, to preserve...that you can’t comment, because right now we live in a time where everyone should have an opinion, everyone should comment, and everyone has the right to do so until it becomes something like blah blah blah blah in a way. Thumbs up. Thumbs down. That doesn’t mean anything. So there is also something nice in it if it’s closed, but still open then, that everyone gets to listen, but that it is closed, the conversations are in a way like small....treasures- (...)

(.....)

Josefine: “What is the point of commenting?”

I explained to them that I was intrigued to give people the opportunity to comment because this would create conversations showing a theme from several perspectives. Ideally I was hoping that by somehow adding “voices” into a conversation would create a more nuanced picture and to show that every story is a part of another story. This would over time, I imagined, make a conversation complex, and reach closer to the “truth” of the topic; that “there are several
truths”. Moa made me rethink the idea.

Moa: “It almost become more like a page, that is more about opinions than about stories then maybe? (...) Because I am thinking that if it is more like stories, or people having conversations with stories, then it is very nice in that sense. It is more like listening in to some degree- there is an excitement in that in some way. Listening to a private conversation.”

4.6.4. Re-thinking commenting

The conversations itself went okay, but for my own part I had a hard time making it a rewarding conversation. It was late Tuesday evening, we were all tired, and I had a hard time keeping my curiosity and to think during the conversation. It made me realize that having a four hour experiment on a Tuesday evening is not only bad for attracting participants, but also bad for the participating taking part. Everyone liked to listen to the conversation, which I took as another confirmation to my idea of making a website for conversations.

Moa and Sara were the group that stopped the playback to comment and continue the conversation. They both expressed that it felt weird in the beginning, but that they got used to it during the experiment. So even though Moa and Sara accepted the act of stopping the playback-and found things to comment on-they did not find it intriguing. Moa expressed later in the interview how she found the possibility of commenting everything online tiring, and that she would prefer to keep the conversations as “small treasures”. Josefine questioned why I wanted to have the possibility of commenting in the first place. Moa’s comment, and Josefines question made me re-think what I wanted. Originally I imagined that it would add to the conversation, by bringing in another layer, another opinion. But, on the other hand, it did make the idea into something different. Did I really want conversations full of opinions? No. I was not that interested in sharing pure opinions. I wanted to share rewarding conversations. And rewarding conversations is about many other things than opinions. I was still thinking about the possibility of adding, continue, or linking conversations together- and I decided to make a survey to find out more about what my future users could imagine using. That is described in “Survey for website” (4.8.).

(Four sound files documeting the conversations in the experiment is documeted in appendix 2 in the physical copy.)

4.7. Listening at home

Intrigued by the suggestion from Filip (4.5.2.), I decided to make a CD and give out to two participants. The participants had earlier shown interest in the project, but had not been part of any experiments so far. I wanted to see how they found listening to conversations in a home environment. I gave them a CD with different tracks to two participants that listened to them at home. I wanted to see if 1) They found it worth listening to, 2) If they preferred listening to shorter or longer parts of conversations, and 3) If I could find any similarities in what they preferred listening to. This chapter will tell you what the CD contained, and how the participants responded. In the end I discuss the result.
4.7.1. The CD

The two participants received a CD with eight tracks. Six tracks were shorter pieces lasting from one minute to about nine minutes. Those pieces were from the conversations I had with Linn, and with Richard. The last two tracks were two unedited conversations- one with Tinken lasting for almost an hour, and the other with Tomas lasting for one and a half hours. I told the participants to listen to the CD, but only to listen through the parts they found worth listening to. Whenever they felt they were finished listening they would contact me, whereupon I would send them a questionnaire to answer.

4.7.2. Unusual good radio or unusually boring people

None of the two participants listened through all of the conversations, they both said they had “jumped around”. On my question on how they found listening to the pieces, Johanna expressed: “When it was interesting it was fun. Then it was like unusual good radio. When it was boring it was like being stuck with unusually boring people.” They both expressed that they have wanted me to edit the conversations more. Simon did, however, also wished that one of the conversations was longer.

I asked them to place the conversations in a order showing which one they preferred, and both placed the longer conversation within the top three on the list. Still, when asking them if they preferred the longer or shorter conversations, - their answers pointed in two directions. Simon said: “Liked the shorter conversations because they were not as comprehensive, but circled around on theme.” While Johanna answered: “The longer were much more interesting (...)” For the content in the conversation there were still not agreeing either; what Johanna found uninteresting, Simon found interesting. They were also disagreeing when it came to knowing anything about the people having the conversation beforehand. While Johanna saw that as an advantage, Simon liked the fact that he did not know anything about the ones having the conversation.

4.7.3. Longer, edited, conversations

This was only based on two people, and two people with a lot of contradicting opinions, so I did not put a lot of effort into these answers. What I took further was their comments about editing the conversations. I realized that the conversations might benefit to have some length (as long
as it is interesting), but not necessarily the whole conversation. So far I had only considered having short conversations, mainly surrounding one theme or one discussion, or having unedited conversations. I found that they had both suggested a good idea; longer and edited conversations.

At this point it was time to start making a website for conversations, but I was still unsure if there should be a way to comment or add a conversation about the conversation. I decided to send out a last survey to the participants that had been involved in the project so far.

(The eight sound files the participants received for listening to in experiment 4.7. is in appendix 2 in the physical copy.)

4.8. Survey for website

As the project started to reach its core- I started to find what I had been looking for from the very beginning of the project. Participants had now shown me through several experiments that it was interesting to listen to other people’s conversations. Personally I wanted to spread the idea of rewarding conversations. I was going to make a website. In this chapter I will talk about a survey I sent out to the participants, and the feedback I received. In the end I will discuss some of the choices I made for the website.

4.8.1. Quick questions

I did not have time to do a deep research concerning functions and lay out. But I did have certain ideas that I wanted to try out. But I still had many questions concerning the functions of the site. Where users interested in uploading their own conversations? Where they interested in meeting people for conversations in person if it required getting in contact using a website? What information did they want to have before listening to a conversation? And did they want the opportunity to comment on conversations through sound? I sent out a survey to everyone that had been actively participating in my project, which at this point were twenty-one people, and I got seven answers back.

4.8.2. Mediocre positive enthusiasm

The feedback concerning the main functions of the website; listening, downloading and uploading conversations was positive, but with a mediocre enthusiasm.

I had planned to make an website which easily showed the information of interest. Through the survey I learned there were three things that the participants clearly found to be the most valuable to know about the conversations; length of the conversation, language used in the conversation and themes discussed in the conversation.

4.8.3. Duration, themes and language

Several of the questions gave answers spread throughout the whole spectre from “not interested” to “very interested”. This did, however, tell me that there was no clear collective
opinion- which again made me trust my own ideas and decisions. Several of the questions became irrelevant later because of certain circumstances, which I will get back to in the chapter about the website (4.10.). I found it most valuable to know what kind of information they preferred to get about the conversations. It was the duration of the conversation, the themes in the conversation and the language(s) used in the conversation. Today this is the main information you can get about the conversations on the website. I have also crated a way to easily navigate between the conversations based on this information.

(A document showing all of the questions and answers from the experiment 4.8. is in appendix 1 in the physical copy.)

4.9. The conversation day

After experimenting with arranging private conversations, I wanted to create private conversations in a public space. I also wanted to create a group conversation which I failed to do earlier because of the low number of participants. Therefore I invited people to a conversation day. This was partly a test for the “conversation café”, an idea that received good feedback from participants during the workshop earlier. My hope was also that a conversation day was to put focus on the conversation website, and that I would have conversations ready for uploading to the site. I will shortly go through the invitation, before I go into where the invitation was distributed. Then I will talk about the event itself, and the outcome of the day. In the end I will discuss the whole event.

4.9.1. Promoting conversations

As in every other experiment I started the invitation by defining what a rewarding conversation have to offer. There were three different types of conversations that you could participate in during the conversation day; “conversation”, “bridge-building conversation” and “group conversation”. A conversation was simply a conversation between two strangers. A bridge-building conversation was between two people from different disciplines or lives I imagined would benefit from having a conversation. This could be policeman and a homeless person for example.

A group conversation was a conversation with several participants- but where only two participants was talking. The rest of the group would be listening. Everyone in the listening group could at all times become a talking conversation partner by switching place with one of them. This would make the previous conversation partner to a listener. I asked everyone interested to mail me so that I could plan conversations for the day. Everyone were also, however, welcome to show up spontaneously at the event and get a conversation. The time of the event was on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of May 2010, between 1 and 5 pm. As well as participants for the conversations, I asked for volunteers to help me out during the event.
To spread the invitation I tried several approaches. Once again all my Swedish contacts were spammed with an invitation to participate in conversations. I was able to send a short “commercial” through the student mail at K3, at Malmö Högskola. Then I made a Facebook event, and invited everyone living in Malmö. But this time I also sent a personal message to everyone I invited, and asked them to kindly forward the invitation to their friends living in, or close to Malmö. I also made an event on Underskog, well aware that most users live in Norway. Then I printed out the invitation and posted it in the staff room of the library at Malmö Högskola.

Four days before the event was to take place I had only three participants. This made me worried, and I decided to try posting the invitation in public places. I shortened the invitation and printed twenty of them. Then I made a flyer and printed about one hundred of them. On each poster I attached about five flyers. And then I went out to distribute my cause. Firstly I went to Rosengård (a suburb in Malmö), where I put the poster up at the local library and at a recreation centre. At the police station I was told that only information from the police was allowed to hang in the entrance, but he offered to hang it in the staff-room. I went into the city centre where I was just allowed to hang a poster at one high school and at the city library. It turned out that in most places it was not allowed to hang “advertisement” in public spaces. This lead me to continue asking for permission to hang posters in staff-rooms. I then went to another police station, the Modern Art Museum, the train station, a kiosk, the tourist office, the Swedish church, a second hand store and a café. And I gave a homeless man a bunch of flyers that he promised to give out to his friends. I was hoping to reach a diverse group of people through the different places where I went.
The posters with flyers where placed in various places.

There was activity in the Facebook event. About 15 people stated that they were attending the event, but I had only received four emails. Therefore I asked them, again, to send me an email or a message on Facebook if they were interested in participating. I did the same thing to everyone that put “maybe” attending the event, which at this point was about 70 people.

![Trying to get people to give me an answer about participation](image)

4.9.2. Facebook friends “attends”

The day of the event I had 19 confirmed guests on Facebook, and 66 guests “maybe” attending, and 250 awaiting reply. Six people had send me an email giving me the time they would be present at the conversation day, and what kind of conversation they were interested in. And I had two volunteers helping me. I had to plan so that all six participants were guaranteed a
conversation, but most of all I wanted to see if people were to drop in to the event. The six participants would then work as “ready at hand” conversation partners.

4.9.3. Space for place

The conversation day happened at Möllevången in Malmö where I managed to borrow a space with three rooms, and where it was possible to sit out in the sun. I prepared the space by reshuffling chairs and tables to create several small sitting groups. For the group conversation I had two chairs where the talking participants were to sit, while the listeners were left to sit on the floor on blankets and pillows. The idea was to create an environment where you could easily understand, by the arrangement, that the two persons sitting in the chairs where the ones that were allowed to speak. While the ones on the floor were only allowed to lie and listen to the conversation. In Dourish terms, I created a space with a hope to achieve a place (Dourish, 2001). I served coffee and tea, fruit, candy and cookies. During the day all conversations were recorded.

4.9.4. Group conversation and private conversations

The first conversation was a group conversation. Everyone that had arrived at this point, five people, participated. There were two conversation partners and three listeners. I did inform them of the “rules” of the game; only the two sitting in the conversation chairs were allowed to speak, but any one could at any point switch places with them.

Me outside the place of conversation day and two private conversations between strangers.

Eight minutes into the conversation, one listening participant wanted to switch places with one of the talking participant. The participant making the switch had become curious about the profession of the conversation participant and wanted to know more. Half an hour later several of the listeners added a comment to the discussion and broke the rules of the group conversation. I did, however nothing at this point, as I was more interested to see how and when the rules were broken than to make sure that they kept the rules. Then another “listening” participant switched place with one of the conversation participant. Ten minutes later the last switch happened. The group conversation went on for the rest of the conversation day, but the part of the conversation that lasted for three hours was only between two active conversation partners- and most of the time without listeners. During the first hour they had listeners, but...
as the “listeners” went on into private conversations, their conversation went on and became a private conversation as well.

During the day there were five private conversations happening. Despite the fact that I knew seven of the ten people participating this day, they did not know each other which made it possible to create conversations between strangers. The conversations lasted from half an hour to about an hour.

“Conversation (...) is embodied in the way that it happens in the world, through the engaged participation of two equally embodied people, and against a backdrop of an equally embodied set of relationships, actions, assessments and understandings. This background situates the activity of the conversation. The setting within which the activity unfolds is not merely background, but a fundamental and constitutive component of the activity that takes place” (Dourish, 1999).

4.9.5. Experience

During the day I had ten participants. Six of them I knew were coming beforehand. Three of them dropped in impulsively. And one of my volunteers decided to have a conversation. Out of the ten people six of them are friends of mine. Of the four people I did not know, only one “happened to walk by”, one had received information through email, and two had been informed through Facebook.

After the conversations I asked everyone to fill out a survey. The first question was; “What did you think about the conversation that you had?” They all seemed satisfied with their conversations; “stimulating”, “funny and interesting, but became somewhat an interview of each other”, “exciting”, “instructive and inspiring”. Only one answered within the framing of rewarding conversations, one said; “very good. New interesting perspectives”.

I wanted to know how they found the recording the conversation, and if they found that it changed their conversation in any way. One participants answered according to my previous theory; “I thought it was good because it made me concentrate more and speak clearer and more precise”. Three people responded that they had been conscious about it at the beginning, but that they forgot about it over time. One participant added “(...) Maybe I thought more about expressing myself more correctly than normally”. One participant found it problematic to be recorded, because he/she could not stop thinking about it. Otherwise they all found it “OK” and “Fine”.

4.9.6. Findings from the conversation day

There were three different types of conversations I had planned for the conversation day. The bridge-builder conversation unfortunately became impossible to carry out. The problem was the low number of participants which forced me to spend my time on getting more participants,
rather than trying to find specific participants through the Yellow pages.

The group conversation functioned pretty well. A couple of times the rules were broken, and I choose not to interfere just to see what happened. Both times it happened it was in form of a comment from one of the listeners, which at one time lead to several of the listeners getting involved in the conversation, before they turned back to becoming silent listeners again. Most of the time they did stuck to the rules. This told me that it was a possible form of conversation, but that it was somewhat unnatural, and that it lead to the active participants becoming a little nervous at times. They talked mostly about their professions, movies and similar topics, and kept the conversation “safe”. An hour into it they had not really had a rewarding conversation. This was probably because the two talking participants are not only having a conversation with each other, but had to entertain an audience as well. In a situation like that it is very easy to become self continuous, and nervous. Contradictory to a group conversation were everyone participates, the silent listeners presence put pressure on the ones having the conversation.

It is hard to say anything specific about the private conversations. But one thing I noticed was that there were several that I found ended surprisingly quickly, most of them only lasted for about half an hour. One did, however, last for three hours (originally the group conversation).

4.9.7. Atmosphere

These thing are not easy to specify or to put my finger on, but I did notice a somewhat weird tension in the atmosphere during the day. It started off with the group conversation which made everyone participate in some way or another, which was positive. This became then the conversation that “set the mood” which might have been unfortunate as it was closer to “a conversation with a stranger” than a rewarding conversation.

In retrospect I believe that my own role as a organizer created tension at times. None of us (including me) did know how the day would turn out, so we all had to act in situ (Suchman 1994). From the arranged conversations I had seen how the participants took the responsibility and managed to have rewarding conversations without any more guidance than my invitation. Therefore I expected the same thing here.

Several participants did however seem a bit “out of place” and did not really knowing what to do. After a couple of private conversations I talked to some participants about my work; I explained what a rewarding conversation is (even though it had been explained on the invitation), and some of the guidelines on how to reach that more easily. One of the participants seemed surprised, and said he just had a conversation he normally had with people he did not know, and did not try to come any “further” than chitchatting about “safe” subjects. He had another conversation were he tried to get closer to what I had told them.

4.9.8. What made this atmosphere appear?

Why did the participants manage so great during the private arranged conversations? When the Conversation day created an, at times, strange feeling? I have a couple of hypothesis; for one part I believe it mattered that there were several people present. Even though people were having private conversations (not group conversation) they were in a place were everyone around knew about their situation; we all knew that they were strangers and that they were trying to have a decent conversation. I do believe this contributed to greater self awareness. This
again can make it harder to dare to “let go”, and challenge the usual type of conversation with a stranger. They had to relate to the rest of the participants (and the organizer) before, partly during, and after the conversation. A new situation can become even stranger when there are other people around you not knowing really what this is about. I mean, they had the invitation, they knew what was going to happen, but it was a situation non of us had ever been in before. Not even I knew how it would play out, and we all had to adjust as the event played out.

I did give them the opportunity to join group conversations or private conversations as they arrived. Because this was a situation they had never been in before, they did not know what it meant, nor how to respond to it. This might have contributed to the insecurity. Perhaps a more sterile arrangement would have been beneficial. In some ways I suspect that my presence was also making the participants trust themselves less than if they would be in that situation on without me.

In one of the conversations I listened to I found that one of the participants did use several of the guidelines for a rewarding conversation. She was honest, asked difficult questions, and shared from her own private experiences— but her conversation partner gave practically nothing back. He, on the other hand, was evasive, did not share, and did not really ask any questions.

I know I want to continue working with arranging conversations, but I am unsure if I will do more events like this. I believe that if there would have been more participants, thirty or forty, the group would have become big enough, so that the self-awareness could have become replaced with a collective strength to have rewarding conversations.

(The group discussion in experiment 4.9. is in appendix 3 in the physical copy.)

4.10. Website for conversations: www.samtal.be

From the very beginning I have wanted to distribute rewarding conversations. I want to make them assessable for everyone, and I want to make it possible for anyone to contribute. According to Krippendorff a designer needs to “consider possible futures (...) evaluate their desirability (...) and create and work out realistic paths from the present towards desirable futures, and propose them to those that can bring a design to fruition” (2006, p. 28-29).

This means that as a designer you need to test and evaluate before you present them to a group of people that can realise that potential. Based on the findings from the experiments I have created a website. The website is programmed by Zakarias Laberg on instructions from me. In this chapter I will explain the activities you can do on the website, and how to navigate through it. Then I will talk about some of the options I faced when making the website, and explain the reasoning behind the choices I have made.

4.10.1. The websites main purpose

There are three main activities you can do on the website is; listen/download conversations, upload conversations, and be informed when and where there will be a event were you can meet strangers for conversations. When entering the site you will see a heading, which simply says “Conversation”. Underneath the heading there are four small oval circles, where it is written
“Theme”, “Language”, “Duration” and “Member”. On the op left corner you can choose one of two languages; Norwegian or Swedish. On the left-hand side there are three circles, “Listen”, “Upload”, and “Meet for conversations”. And on the right hand side you find “Into”, “Mission”, and “Tips”. In the middle of the page there are circles in different colours and sizes. These are the conversations. A conversation stays on the page two months after being uploaded, and the longer it has been there, the smaller the circle gets.

The conversation website.

By a clicking on a conversation (a circle) a speech-bubble will appear. The bubble contains information about the conversation; the themes of the conversation, the language used in the conversation, the duration of the conversation and the member that uploaded the conversation. You have the choice to either stream the conversation or download it.

Another way to navigate, and find information about the conversations, is to press the different oval circles underneath the heading. If you, for example, press “Themes”, the circles representing the conversations transform into text with the themes of the conversations. If you press “Duration” the conversations will be transformed and show the duration of each conversation.

On the left hand side there are the three main actions for the site. “Listen” is the default. If you press “Upload” the first thing you come to is a page that explains a bit about what kind of conversations the page is for. You will need to log in, or become a member to be able to upload a conversation. The idea with the last circle “Meet for conversation” is to create events where people will have the opportunity to meet strangers for conversations. This can for example be in form of a conversation day or a period of time when I will arrange conversations at a certain place.

The three circles on the right hand side are there to inform the user. At “Intro” I have made a video that explains, in short, what I mean by rewarding conversations, and some things too keep in mind for reaching a rewarding conversation more easily. At “Mission” there is an text where I explain the reasons for having rewarding conversations. And at “Tips” there are links to free editing programmes.
No matter what button you press, the action will take place in the middle of the page, and the circles on both sides are always present. This is so that you can easily “jump” from one activity to another without having to go “back”, or search to find it. There are two exceptions where the whole page becomes covered. This happens if you choose to listen to a streamed conversation, and secondly if you try uploading a conversation.

4.10.2. …and the reasoning behind it

The website has a colourful and cartoonish style. I took the freedom to make the layout in my personal style, with bright colours, and drawings made by me. It is purely a selfish decision. I generally think there are too much plain layouts on websites, and I wanted to introduce a playful, and different layout.

Almost daily I am annoyed at the complication level on websites I have to use. They are often build in a linear model, where you are forced to move from A to B to C to D, in opposite to jump from A to D. I wanted a website where the user easily could jump around in a landscape, rather than going “back” and “forward”. There are, however the two exceptions mentioned earlier. One when listening to a streamed conversation, and secondly when uploading a conversation. The reason I choose to cover the whole site when doing these actions is because these actions takes time, and the user needs to understand that they can not do other actions while waiting for the completion. If the user press another action while waiting, for example, on their conversation to upload, the upload process would be interrupted, and they would have to do it all over again. By covering the whole site, and telling the user it takes some minutes to complete the action, they will hopefully understand that they can not do other actions on the site in the meantime.

Through the survey for the website the participants expressed three things they found most important to be able to navigate the conversations. This was themes, language, and the duration of the conversation. Despite that some of them also expressed a wish to know somethings about the conversation in form of a written text, I choose to keep the information about the conversations to the minimal. The reason for doing so was because I wanted participants not only to listen to themes and people they believe they are interested in- but just as much listen to what they might not be interested in. By listening to a broader spectre, they might get insights
they would never get if they had been reading about it beforehand. I am sure it makes a number of users not listening to any of the conversations, but it might also make some users listen to people they otherwise would have rejected. If they, however, have a favourite member that upload conversations from time to time, they can easily find her/him by pressing “member” on the oval circles underneath the heading. This makes the member uploading the conversation visible.

In a time where we distribute ourself as brands through social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn and Underskog- I find the opposite more interesting. It was important to me to make the users profiles discrete and to put the conversations in the centre of the page- symbolic and literally. As I explained earlier regarding the decision of not having information about the conversions, the decision of not having a profile with an image and text for each member, was partly based on the same principle. I choose not to have profiles because I did not want people to judge the conversation partners on a picture or the information they had written about themselves. I want my users to listen to each other. My experience listening to documentaries about people have made me realize that not knowing, not being able to judge a person on age, looks or profession makes it much more interesting to listen to. Your idea about the person is build through listening to what the person is saying. I am even hoping that by not having comments, not having much information, or strong profiles- it will lead to more people listening to people they otherwise would not listen to. But I do realise it can just as well lead to frustrated users, who want to find things they are interested in faster and will possibly stop using the website.

4.10.3. Rejected possibilities

I wanted to have the opportunity for participants to meet each others to have conversations. The experiments have shown there is an interest, and so do the response from the survey. The problem is, however, to make a system were users could trust each other through a website. In the workshop I have found that my participants are not interested in meeting a stranger for conversation without having a human being as the organizer in between. But could there still be a way to trust a stranger through a digital system?

CouchSurfing is a digital system that manages to create the necessary trust for strangers to meet in the physical world- and even live together. This is created and maintained by the members giving feedback of their experiences. Couchsurfing also has a friends system, were they encourage you to carefully add friends; “not just a random assortment of acquaintances and former schoolmates.” Unlike Facebook there is no shame in having 3 friends- and most users seems to have between 2 – 20 friends. “Friending” in CouchSurfing is also much more complex than on Facebook; there are seven different gradings of friendship- from “haven’t meet yet” to “best friend”. When searching on profiles of people I know, I noticed how carefully they are to state what kind of relationship they have to each other. Another icon used for safety is “vouching” which is indicating a strong bond between members. Again, they underline to the carefulness in using this icon (or showing your bonds). When choosing to give this to another member means that you are behind the other member- and all of her/his actions. Anything the member does, good as bad, will be reflected on the member vouching for her/him. This has lead to little use of vouching- you only use it if you really mean it. It is also possible to leave comments about a member, which is a good indicator of other peoples experience. However, you are not able to see how many that has “been on someones couch”, so it’s impossible to know the percentage of “good” experiences. CouchSurfing leaves in the end the responsibility to you,
and writes, “Individual judgement is the most important safety measure! All of CouchSurfing’s safety features and all of the information available on member profiles are designed to help members make educated decisions about who they’d like to interact with. By reading messages carefully, looking at profiles thoroughly, reading references, and communicating clearly about guidelines and expectations, individual CouchSurfers can interact according to their own personal comfort level.”

Another option I considered was to have a closed, exclusive membership that made it possible to meet other members for conversations. The idea was to invite all of the participants that have joined my project, whereupon they would receive two invitations to give to friends they trusted, and which they believed was interested in having conversations with strangers. This would mean that every person you meet would be trusted by, and connected to, another member. Underskog is a good example where you experience a trust that is impossible on Facebook. There is a spirit of giving and sharing, which I believe only is possible within a closed community. Through an exclusive membership the community would spread far outside my circle, but still be a pretty safe way to meet a stranger. It would create a closed community, but hopefully as friends invited friends it would spread to a descent amount of people, and by time have a group of diverse people.

When discussing having membership with my programmer it did, however, turn out to be a complicated matter. One option we discussed was the possibility of having two kinds of membership; one that everyone could join which made it possible to upload conversations,- and one that you would need invitation to join, and that would make it possible to meet members for conversations. But it would take the whole website to another level of complication. How would the members get in touch with each other? Would we then need to create a profile for members to get in contact with other members? Everything is possible, but with such limited time it was impossible to develop a clever system for supporting meetings between strangers. Did the website really needed the possibility of meeting strangers for conversation? And if so, would users really get in touch with each other? The answers from the survey showed that the participants was more interested in getting in contact with conversation partners through the website, while the interest for having conversations with strangers through Skype was spread over the whole spectre. In the workshop participants had emphasized that they preferred knowing as little as possible, and even that the arrangement was “out of their hands”. They claimed that getting in touch with other members through a website was too demanding for them. There were too many things going against the idea at this point, so I decided to KISS the project. Keep it simple stupid, I told myself, and decided not to have the possibility of meeting strangers for conversation. Because the possibility of meeting strangers through the website made the website so much more complicated, which again would weaken the core idea of the website; the conversations. The reason I still write about it is because there are clearly an interest for it, and it might become an option in the future.

I did think about the possibility of giving comments to the conversation in form of sound files, or even remix the conversations. The reason for this was that I wanted to open the conversation for anyone who wanted to add an opinion, or comment on the things said in the conversation. To remove the power from the conversation partners, and open it up for everyone. This would, however, change the conversations. In the survey for the website, a participant following a big part of my process suggested exactly this; “Having the opportunity to cut and edit a conversation would be important to me. Take out 30 seconds where there was something cool, something that others should listen to. Or for the participants to be able to make a mash-up of sound clips, create new conversations, in some way. It would be fun as well. It would be a
new genre. Sampled conversation.” When reading this I visualized a “hip, quick, cool” service, 
where the point was maybe rather to be funny, than to create a space for diverse perspectives. 
Moa expressed her concern in an earlier discussion; “because right now we live in a time where 
everyone should mean, everyone should comment, and everyone has the right to do so until it 
becomes something like blah blah blah blah in a way. Thumbs up. Thumbs down. That doesn’t 
mean anything”. The focus has been rewarding conversations throughout the whole project. 
By adding the possibility to comment, or remix conversations the whole idea of a rewarding 
conversation become something else. By keeping the conversations in their original format, 
there would be space to resonate around the perspectives, rather than an “opinion fight” 
which I could see happening by remix or commenting conversations. In my opinion it is still 
possible to continue a conversation, or comment to other conversations,- trough uploading a 
new conversation. This gives equal possibilities to everyone that has access to recording and 
uploading, rather than being dominated by a few number of people that knows how to edit 
sound.

In the future I hope to get more people interested in arranging meetings where one can have 
conversations with strangers. This would make it easier to have a regularly option for the users 
to meet strangers. Another possibility is to again look at ways to safely meet strangers. For the 
conversations itself I expect that I have to continue uploading conversations, and encourage 
others to do the same, as I have not made a project that one can be active simply by updating 
your status.

During the development I had several ideas that would make the site complex. Adding 
comments, text, contact with members, and edit each others conversations. But in the end I 
removed everything that could contribute to making the site unclear, and only the core idea was 
left. A combination of being able to listen to conversations, and share your own. And being able 
to join events where one can meet strangers for conversations in a safe environment.

(The conversations uploaded on the conversation website is in appendix 3 in the physical copy.)

4.11. To sum up

Through the process of these experiments I have gotten an understanding of which qualities I 
am trying to achieve, and how to more easily reach those qualities when having conversations. 
This is verbalized in a set of guidelines. Several of the qualities and guidelines has also been 
confirmed by the participants who attended the arranged conversations.

There is an interest for having rewarding conversations, and participants are willing to 
meet total strangers. The amount of information they receive about each other before the 
conversation is less important, but I found an indicator of that it is easier reaching a rewarding 
conversation with someone who is different from yourself. The definition used on the invitation 
seemed to improve the chances for reaching a rewarding conversation, not only by attracting 
interested participants, but also to help them to focus on the situation. The participants has no 
problem taking responsibility in the situation, and preferred being in charge of the duration and 
themes of the conversation.
In the workshop the participants showed interest for listening to conversations, and found a website for distributing conversation intriguing. They also liked the idea of a conversation café, and would, in general, like to physically meet strangers for conversations, but underlined the importance of a person organising the meetings, in contrast to a website where one could get in contact with each other.

Recording of conversations is unproblematic, and I did record several moments where I reached an understanding in a rewarding conversation. Much evidence shows that it is interesting to listen to a playback of a conversation, and that longer, but edited conversations are preferred. When listening to the playback of a conversation, I experienced a difference in my understanding of the things being said when I was listening alone versus listening together with friends. It also is clear that different people interpret what they hear differently, down to the meaning of a single word. When researching which conversations the participants preferred, they-despite of many contradicting opinions-agreed on two conversations in the top three placements out of eight possible. This indicates that it is possible to recognize quality in a conversation despite of subjective opinions. Regarding the amount of information about the conversation (before listening to one) and the conversation partners, the opinions point in several directions.

During the conversation day, I found that it is possible to carry out a group conversation with two talking participants, and several listening participants. All of the participants accepted recording of the conversations, and the survey showed that most of them did not mind it. This could, however, be one of the reasons that I found the participants being partly insecure in the situation. Another reason could be my, and other participants’, presence. Several participants suggested afterwards that a group conversation where everyone participated, could have helped to get the conversation day started.

A website for rewarding conversations is created, and it has three main functions; listening to/downloading conversations, uploading conversations, and to find information about future events focusing on rewarding conversations. The website for conversations is a design proposal, at the same time as it mainly an ongoing experiment in extension of this project. In the next chapter I will look upon the findings and discuss them in relation to each other and related works.
5 Reflections

In this analysis I want to take another look at the guidelines I present in the background (2.4.5.) and I ask myself if they are really necessary for accomplishing rewarding conversations, or if they could have the opposite effect. In the next part I want to compare the arranged conversations to the conversation day and try to find some reasons for the different outcomes. Next, I will go into the recording of the conversations, as well as the experience of listening to them. Finally I will look at the methods used in the project with a critical view.

5.1 Having rewarding conversations

One can experience having a rewarding conversation in an asymmetric relations, and without following any of the guidelines. In this part I want to discuss the guidelines, and to look at similarities discovered by the participants during the workshop (4.4.).

5.1.1. Symmetry

I earlier claimed that one need to have a symmetric relationship to be able to have as good conversation as possible (2.4.4.), but this is not necessary the whole truth. Even though rewarding conversations ideally have a balance between the conversation partners, a rewarding conversation can as well occur in a situation were one is actively talking, and the other is actively listening throughout the conversation. When I had a conversation with Tomas (4.2.4.) I wanted to have a symmetric and balanced conversation, but I found it difficult because Tomas were dominant and talked most of the time. Despite of that, I had a rewarding conversation, because Tomas gave me insights, and new perspectives which I was thinking about weeks after the conversation. When I later asked him how he had experienced the conversation, were he answered “it was interesting”, which can mean just about anything.

5.1.2. Actively listening

As Thornquist (2001, p. 129) expresses, actively listening is necessary for getting close to an understanding of what your conversation partner is sharing with you To engage in a conversation, which is also your conversation partner, you need to be actively listening. It is not, actually, necessary for experiencing a rewarding conversation. You own words might give you a new perspective, which means that all you needed to reach a rewarding conversation was someone listening (or giving the illusion of listening) to you.

5.1.3. Guidelines are guidelines

Several of the guidelines are so obvious that it can be hard taking them seriously, and most will have a negative effect on the goal to have a rewarding conversation if one choose to follow them
uncritically. To encourage you to think during a conversation for example, can seem ridiculous because it is so obvious. Asking you to be honest, can create situations were you say too much, and create a distance between the conversation partners, in contrast to getting closer. To ask you to forget which situation you are in, and what relation you have to a person is not only impossible, but can also easily create huge conflicts. There is a reason that we normally adjust our behaviour according to the environment we are in. A disagreeing conversation partner can easily become an annoying conversation partner. Having to fight against someone constantly having the opposite opinion will probably never develop a rewarding conversation. To find a stranger, and the trust that person seems straight out foolish!

But when I ask you to think, I what I mean is not only to have brain activity, but to consider and reflect upon the things that your conversation partner is telling you. To give space for new thoughts to occur, rather than answering as a reflex. When I ask you to be honest, and to forget, it is to challenge yourself and your surroundings by bringing up what you are truly interested in, in contrast to talking away on another deadly boring subject. When I ask you to find a stranger I do not mean any stranger, but a person that will help you to get a different perspective from what you usually have. And when I ask you to share of yourself it is to remind you that opinions and experiences are not dangerous to share- even with strangers.

As you understand, there are no “rules” for when a rewarding conversation will occur. It is impossible to give any guarantees for when one or all conversation partners involved will have a rewarding conversation. Everything is depending on the persons involved in the conversation, the setting they are in and how they choose to act in the situation. The aim of the guidelines is to reach more rewarding conversations, not to throw away all your common sense. Like anything else you will have to trust yourself, and what feels right in the situation. Most of us have, nevertheless, several conversations a day, and I think these guidelines can help changing some old habits. And I do believe that a symmetrical relation creates a stronger base for the conversation partners to reach a rewarding conversation, and that actively listening is beneficial for both conversation partners. And I do believe firmly that by using the guidelines, the chances for having rewarding conversations rapidly increases.

During the workshop, the participants recognised several of the qualities of a rewarding conversation. They mentioned new perspectives, learning and understanding. They also mentioned qualities similar to those within the framing of the guidelines; to dare, to risk and to be open an honest. The participants showed by defining these, an recognition for some of the same qualities.

5.1.4. A meeting is also rewarding

There were several participants that did not mentioned any of the qualities within the framing of rewarding conversations, but which still claimed having a good experience. Moa, as one example, found that she got the most out of challenging herself to meet a stranger (4.3.6.). And during the workshop the participants expressed that having a conversation with a stranger on the street was valuable regardless of what the conversation was about. The idea that all humans, friends as well as strangers, are living in this world together, was confirmed when speaking to strangers on the street. The importance lied in the action of being able to talk to a stranger, not in the words being exchanged. Therefore a meeting, can be rewarding, despite the fact that the words exchanged only is about how sunny it is that day.
5.1.5. Are rewarding conversations an embodied action?

While Dourish (2004) points to the conversation as embodiment action I want suggest that this is not necessarily true for rewarding conversation. While embodied action is, an action we do without much reflection, for example answering our phone, or saying “good morning” to our colleagues, rewarding conversation demands a level of reflection within the situation. This does not mean that you have to reflect upon the action of having a conversation, but rather to reflect on the things being said, and the thoughts in you mind. Rather than asking people to perform an embodied action, I ask for a change in an embodied action. To make a embodied action into a conscious action. What I ask of people is not to satisfy with their embodied conversations, but to challenge it! To think! And develop! Over time, with practice, I believe having rewarding conversations can become part of an embodied action.

5.2. Arranging rewarding conversations

After receiving 24 applications, and seven arranged conversations I concluded that people are interested in meeting strangers for rewarding conversations. Everyone of the participants did say they would do it again, even the one person having a disappointing conversation. When later arranging the conversation day ten more people participated in conversations. Not only are people interested in having rewarding conversations, but they are willing to meet a stranger at a cafe that has the same interest. In this part I want to discuss how it is possible to control qualities in a conversation without being present. And I will look at the differences between the arranged conversations and the conversation day, and discuss what might have contributed to the differences. At the end of this part I will look at related works and how it differentiates.

5.2.1. Quality through definition

Through the seven arranged conversations (4.3.) there were over two thirds defining having experiences within the framing of rewarding conversations. This means that it was possible to arrange conversations between strangers- and that they were able to reach the type of conversation I wanted them to have in situ (Suchman 1994) without my presence. When I started arranging conversations I did not have any guidelines, and barely started defining what type of conversation I was referring to. The invitation briefly defined the type of conversation I was referring to; “.....that makes you think, re-think, see things differently, wonder and understand”. During interviews after the arranged conversations I found that the participants and I have many similar thoughts, and several participants mentioned qualities I was just starting to define myself. So how is it possible that two thirds were able to have a rewarding conversation?

There were probably several reasons for this. The definition on the invitation probably attracts a group of people who recognize and appreciate these qualities. Secondly, I believe that the pre-definition helped the conversation partners in reaching a rewarding conversation. It is impossible to plan the course of the conversation itself- as the conversation happens in the situation (Suchman 1994). This means that as an arranger I have no power to affect the conversation in situ, as long as I am not participating in it. But there is an possibility to “control” a situation I am not attending by defining an aim before the meeting takes place.
conversation partners both had the same goal; they wanted a conversation that made them “think, re-think, see things differently, wonder and understand”. The defined aim will most likely help the participants to keep focus on the reason for being there, and will necessary try reaching the definition. This again makes the participants fulfil the original definition. The invitation did not only attract a group of people interested in this type of conversation, but it became a defined aim in the situation. By defining what one should expect to experience in a situation- the participants will bring identical aims to the situation. This again, makes them easier reaching the aim.

One conversation became a disappointing experience for one of the conversation partners. Ingrid was disappointed because the conversation was something other than what she expected. She was “expecting a philosophical conversation about life”, but the conversation partner, Elias, to talk about “common acquaintances” (4.3.6.). By looking at Elias’ expectation, it clear that he probably never read the invitation for the project, which again, was confirmed by Ingrid after the conversation took place. Their different aims and expectations for the conversation, lead to a conversation he found very uncomfortable at times, and that she found disappointing.

5.2.2. Situation matters for the conversation

Despite the fact that the “conversation cafe” was a popular idea among the participants during the workshop (4.4.), the similar conversation day, did not seem to be the ideal place for reaching rewarding conversations. As Krippendorff (2006) points out, the designer have to evaluate socio-material consequences of the design. This means to see how a situation, a place, behaves, is based on the design. And ideally, to find out why. When comparing the number of participants having a rewarding conversation in the arranged conversations versus the conversation day, there were clearly more of them happening in the arranged conversations. On the conversation day only one of nine answered within the definition of a rewarding conversation, compared to ten out of fourteen in the arranged conversations.

While I had expected the conversation day to be an event where several rewarding conversations took place, as an extension of the single arranged conversations- there were bigger differences happening. Despite of the fact that the definition of rewarding conversation on the invitation was identical when getting people to participate in the two different experiments- several participants seemed to be somewhat insecure of what the conversation day was about. This was expressed indirectly and directly at several points during the day. The first time I noticed it was during the group conversation. The conversation was a classical conversation between two strangers, and despite that the conversation partners switched regularly, the conversation was mostly about work and movies. Later on three participants and I discussed conversations as such, and I explained some of the guidelines I had formulated. One participant, that just had finished his conversation, showed his surprise. He had, he explained, a type of conversation he usually have with a stranger, and had not at all focused on any rewarding conversation. Finally, in the survey I asked everyone to answer after their conversations, I found only one participant answering within the framing of rewarding conversations.

The main difference between the arranged conversations and the private conversation during the conversation day was the setting- the place. “A room- a delimited geographical area- is also a sociocultural room” (Hall 1977, Gullestad 1984, Connerton 1989, Bourdieu 1990, 1995, cited Thornquist 2001, p. 33). This means, that within a geographical area there are social norms that one have to relate to. The actual space, the physical assumptions for the conversation day was
good. There were three rooms, and possibilities to sit outside. There was room to be private, without having to worry about listeners, and there was tea and coffee. Despite that the space was made for conversations, it became difficult to make the place for rewarding conversations; “(...) that place can’t be designed, only designed for” (2004, p. 91). What Dourish means is that it is not possible to design the place, as that is constructed in the situation by the people present. The culture, the “rules” for what is normal within a space is constructed by the people present in the situation. In retrospect, I believe that my presence was one of the main reasons why there was such a low number of rewarding conversations.

In the arranged conversations I learned that the participants involved took on, and were happy to take on, the responsibility for the conversations. One of the questions I asked the participants after their conversations was if they wanted more guidance in form of themes, or if the duration of the conversation was pre-decided, but not a single participant wanted that. Everyone preferred taking the responsibility themselves, and reasoned it that it is hard to know for how long they preferred to talk, or what you wanted to talk about before they were in the situation. This made me secure that the participants were capable of handling taking responsibility in most decisions themselves as long as I arranged the meetings. When it was time for the conversation day I saw my role as before; I was there to match people for conversations.

On the conversation day I was present in a fairly small space with nine participants. I suspect that my presence contributed to participants expecting me to take more responsibility for the conversations as such, while I, who already had experienced that other participants managing by themselves relied on the participants. In the arranged conversations there were only two participants present which therefore forced the participants into taking the responsibility, they had to carry the responsibility for making a rewarding conversation. At the conversation day, on the other hand, I was present. In a situation were one person is in charge, a leader, it becomes possible for the individuals not to take responsibility. Uncontentiously they might have expected me to help them get a rewarding conversation. Though I was physically present during the conversations, I was not taking any active part in the conversations. The participants still had to take the responsibility in the conversations. In the arranged conversations the participants appreciated their responsibility (and freedom) in the situation, but on the conversation day I found that participants had difficulties having rewarding conversations.

Another reason why the arranged conversations and the conversation day became so differently was the presence of other participants during the conversation day. In the arranged conversations participants met in public, mostly at cafes. Even though there were a lot of people around them they were the only ones knowing that they were strangers trying to have a rewarding conversation. They had nothing to loose, and whenever they choose to leave the situation it would stop existing. The conversation day, on the other hand, was created only for the purpose of having rewarding conversations. And everyone present knew it. In the private “arranged conversations” they were in a situation where they only had to relate to their conversation partner. During the conversation day the participants were surrounded other participants. This might have contributed to difficulties keeping focus on, and have the courage to have a rewarding conversation. I believe that this situation, being in a space were there were many participants present created a self conscious situation, which again, made it much harder to dare to challenge the conversation which one normally have with a stranger.
I wanted to have what Dourish calls accountability. Accountability in ethnomethodology is, simply explained, when a group of people share the same set of understanding of language or of action within a community (Dourish 2004, p. 79). But Dourish also say that it is impossible to design a place, because it is created by the people present. I see these two things closely connected. Through designing accountability the place will follow. The creation of a place is the accordance of what that is possible, and expected to do within a defined space. Through giving participants guidance in what one expect them to do (accountability in a space), and help them to do so (by guidance), it can probably become a place (a sociocultural space). This means that I believe one can design a place, through preparing participants expectations before the day/event, and/or controlling participants within the space.

5.2.3. Social networks affect

I started out by claiming that one can arrange for situations by creating expectations through definition. At this point I want to discuss if the two different social networks I have used in this process can have contributed to the differences in the arranged conversations and the conversation day. When arranging conversations I used Underskog as the main source for getting participants, while for the conversation day it was Facebook. The definition of what a rewarding conversations is was described in exactly the same way in the two invitations. But if we compare Facebook and Underskog there are some obvious differences. Underskog do not have updates like Facebook, only “threads”, which is different discussions, events and requests,- all of them are possible to comment, and a comment can be anything from three words, to a whole page. Underskog is a network that expects you to engage, and to write and read a different amounts of text than Facebook, which expects you to “like” and share your life by writing a few sentences. When posting the invitation on Facebook I noticed that the invitation stood out in terms of the amount of information it contains compared to other events posted there. One participant even asked me to mail him telling him how he could contribute, as he found it to be too much information to bother reading it. The nature of these two networks, the “societies” in which these invitations for the event were posted, affects how the participants
perceive the invitation. So, my hypothesis is that the users on Underskog reads the invitation closely, because that is expected, while at Facebook it is an unusual amount of information, and the users are more likely to glance over it. If this is true it did necessary play a role on the participants on the conversation day, because they did not have the collective pre-defined aim for the conversations as the participants in the arranged conversation.

5.2.4. Questions are crucial

The last point I want to make considering the differences between the outcome of the arranged conversations versus the conversation day, is about the methods I used to tell if the participants has had a rewarding conversation. Firstly there were differences in how the question was formulated. Secondly, in the case of the arranged conversations I made interviews over the phone, while on the conversation day the information was gathered through a survey. After the arranged conversations I interviewed participants over the phone, and I asked them; “Can you pick out some parts in the conversation where you found something happening” and “Did this give you anything?”. But on the conversation day the participants answered the question through a survey, and the question was “What did you think about the conversation that you had?”. The questions were demanding different answers, and an answer through a piece of paper will supposedly become shorter than when giving it through speaking. Most of the participants at the conversation day answered that it was “interesting”, one of them defined it as “instructive and inspiring”, another “stimulating”. It is only my definition that makes those answers impossible to be within the framing of a rewarding conversation. The participant answering “stimulating” might have meant something similar to what I mean with “new perspective”. Looking at the subjective definition of specific words, do however, demand another level on the project. My point here is that the method, the differently defined questions, and the subjective definition might have contributed to make the gap between the ability to reach a rewarding conversation in the two settings seem much bigger than it actually were.
5.2.5. Looking back at related works

I want to discuss some of the related works regarding arranged conversations, and I will go into some of the similarities and differences. In my opinion I have, through the work of trying to create rewarding conversations between strangers, created situations which so far have been unexplored. Conversation club is a project similar to this, because it is trying to create “good” conversations. The difference is that this is a group conversation, and I have found it difficult to create an opportunity for everyone involved in a group discussion to have the possibility to talk. Levande bok is another project in which the main focus is conversations, but their main goal is to create an understanding for fellow citizens. The biggest difference between our work is that they create an expected asymmetric situation by inviting people with a certain interesting background, in which the visitor are able to meet. I, on the other hand, is of the opinion that everyone carries experiences of interest, and have focused on creating symmetric conversations. Dialogue piece was a project focusing on conversations, but participation demanded being in Lozano’s sphere, which at that point was the art world. She was also present in all of them, which makes this work closely related to the first experiments I did were I had conversations with friends. CouchSurfing and my work separates in a lot of ways, and most explicitly by how our focus is different. Their work is about getting strangers from around the world to meet, and to spend time together, while I have been trying to get strangers to have rewarding conversations. I am sure that many of the meetings created by CouchSurfing leads to rewarding conversations, but it is not their main focus. Their ability to involve people from the whole world is something I will carry with me for future work. Chatroulette is a project with a aim to creating conversations between random people in real time online. It is difficult, however, to make sure that the random stranger you meet through your webcam is interested in conversations. The next three projects that I will talk about, I hope to make a part of my future work.

During the conversation day I prepared for a bridge-builder conversation, which was influenced by the project Code 33 where the artist Suzanne Lacy created arranged conversations between teenagers and police officers. I was unfortunately not able to create an “bridge-builder” conversations, but I wish to test this a form of conversation in a future project. In general there are very few conversations happening across different groups of people with different disciplines, ages or politic beliefs.

“Most of the time you hang out in circles where everyone has about the same background and interests as yourself. But if you happen to start talking to people who come from completely different circumstances or a completely different culture you will discover to your surprise that... yes, we actually function in fairly similar ways. We think in the same way, we have the same fears, are both afraid to die, both afraid to live” (translation by author) (Björkman 2009, p. 157).

Conversations creates understanding, makes us recognize our similarities, and accept our differences- which I believe is beneficial for a future society. Rirkrit Tiravanija has, through art installations invited people to eat together, created spaces in which interaction and most likely conversations, between strangers takes place. What I find problematic is that this is happening in galleries, and the audience visiting a gallery is most likely already a part of the art world. Despite of the fact that I found few participants having rewarding conversations on the conversation day, I am interested in testing to create accountability in a space,- and try to create a place were rewarding conversations is a natural part of the sociocultural room. To create meetings, and rewarding conversations, between people that would not meet in their normal social circles.
The biggest difference between these works and my own, is that I have not only focused on creating conversations, but on creating rewarding conversations. My goal has been to create a certain quality in the conversation happening between two strangers. I have also to recorded conversations for distribution and sharing of knowledge outside of the situation were the conversation happened, which I will look more into in the next chapter.

5.3. How to spread recorded conversations

In this part I will talk about recording conversations, and the participants the reactions to being recorded. There next I want to talk about listening to conversations and how we put different meaning to things being said down to the definition of a single word. The listening experience do also change in relation to who you are listening with. Then the website is up for discussion, and I will mostly focus on two main decisions; should it be possible to comment on conversations? And should the website make it possible to meet strangers for conversations? In the end I will bring up some of the podcast mentioned in the background chapter (2.2.5.), and look at what makes this website differently from similar websites.

5.3.1. Recording

To record rewarding conversation is possible, as well as capturing rewarding moments. When I asked participants to record conversations I was surprised that so many were positive to be recorded. When arranging conversations I asked four participants (two conversations), to record their conversations. They had the opportunity to stop the recording at any time, but no one choose to do so. One of the participants said it was “good feeling to know the conversation was recorded”. Another one said she became aware of the recording “when we turned to more sensitive themes.” When I meet people for conversations everyone said it was okay that I recorded the conversation, only my grandmother was slightly sceptical without defining why. During the experiment “record and listen” (4.6.) everything was recorded and this was unproblematic for the participants. While in the experiment “collective listening and continuation of conversation” (4.5.) both participants were sceptical to be recorded, but still accepted it. Before the “conversation day” (4.9.) I used the invitation to inform that all of the conversations were to be recorded. The aim was to create a “bank of conversations” which
possibly could be uploaded on the conversation website. After the “conversation day” I asked
the participants how they found the recording of the conversation. Three answered that they
did not mind, two said they had been very aware of it in the beginning, but then forgot about it,
and two said they believed they had formulated themselves more precise, and found that to be
a good thing. During the process I have only had two participants refusing to be recorded, one
of them had an unrecorded conversation, and the other choose not to participate. The last one
said, “It feels as these conversations demand that one have to be private in front of an audience.
(…) I can not get anything out of the conversation in this way, I would experience it as I was
staging myself.” The reason for recording so many conversations was partly because I had to
know if people, participants, were willing to record their conversations. This is crucial because
I want people to contribute to the website recording and uploading their conversations. It is,
however, some steps between letting another person record your conversation and to take the
initiative to record and upload a conversation.

5.3.2. Participants in charge

Every time I have record a conversation (either I have been participating or not), I promise
everyone involved that they will be contacted, and that they will be in charge of when and
were the playback is used. This is important so that the participants do not have to restrict
themselves because of the recording, but it is impossible to say how, or if, the conversations
would have been differently had they not been recorded.

5.3.3. Listening

Through three experiments which focused on listening (4.5., 4.6. and 4.7.), I found people are
interested in listening to others rewarding conversations. Everyone of the participants said
they liked listening to the conversations. In the workshop (4.4.), the website for conversations
was the most popular idea. The survey, however, showed that there is a moderate interested in
listening and downloading conversations; they were more interested in getting in contact for
physical conversations, which I will come back to later on (4.8.).

I was interested to see if it was possible for two people to hear the same things. This could
mean that it would be possible to create a rewarding conversation rewarding for several people.
But I realised that the understandings we create by the things we hear depends on who we
are. During the experiment “collective listening and continuation of conversation” (4.5.) it
became clear that it is impossible to make a group of people hearing the same things because
we interpret things differently down to a single word. At one point Filip criticized Tomas (in the
playback) because he was indirectly saying that to be “humane” was a positive (in relation to
other humans). In Filips opinion there were nothing throughout the world history pointing to a
“humane act” was necessary a “good act”. I had, in the conversation with Tomas, not reacted to
the word, because I understood a “human act” to be an act that takes humans in consideration
firstly,- before money and power. This made me realise that we carry different understandings
down to single words,- which means we most likely can not hear the same things. In the
experiment “listening at home” Johanna and Simon did, despite of many contradicting
opinions, choose two of the same conversations on first, second, and third placement out of
eight possible placements. These were the two conversations I preferred as well. This made me
believe that it is possible to recognize quality, despite that our subjectivity will determine what
we hear.
When I listened to a conversation I had participated in, I was able to hear, and re-experience the situation in the conversation. At one point I discovered a new perspective, and also this, was possible to re-experience later on at home. My thoughts followed the same pattern as when I sat there listening to him with the two of us physically presence. One could say that I re-experienced the same “new” understanding- all over again. Therefore it took me by surprise, that when I shortly afterwards played pieces of the conversation in an experiment (4.5.)- I heard the conversation from another perspective than when I had been listening alone. I interpreted the statements differently, and became more critical because I expected my friends to do so. By being in a social context I heard the conversation differently from what I had before, which again gave me other perspectives than it had ever before. This make me believe that the place, not only plays a big role when arranging conversations, but also in what we hear. Within a place we will naturally relate to the people present in the situation, and not only change our role within to the situation, but also change how we perceive information. This makes it very difficult to study ethnography (Dourish 2001, p. 59) because our opinions will be changing from situation to situation.

5.3.4. Website

One of the hardest decisions of what to include on the website or not, was if there would be a possibility to comment on conversations- through sound. As I have explained earlier, the participants had several opinions pointing in many directions. Another idea I had was to have the possibility to connect conversations that somewhat was a continuation of each other, or with similar themes. I believe that any of them could be a “successful” version, that a number of people would have found entertaining or interesting. But I realised that it was important to me that the conversations was kept as they were recorded. This would not give any participant an easy way to contribute by giving a comment, but it would make sure that the ones using time on recording, editing, and uploading a conversation was in control of their conversation. And anyone are free to upload a new conversation commenting on themes or statements within other conversations.

In one hand I am so found of the conversation because it carries so many possibilities, through affecting a situation in the moment. On the other hand, I am trying to capture that, closing it, and distribute it. The reason for testing the possibility to comment a conversation came from a wish to be able to show a bigger picture. In a conversation there are only two (or few) voices present, but by making it possible to comment upon, or add to, the conversation within the conversation,- it would help creating a much bigger and complex picture.

When I introduced comment on the conversations I changed the experience of listing at the same time. Oskar and Filip wanted to have the opportunity to stop the playback at any point, as they saw it as their responsibility, it seemed, to comment on all of the themes throughout the conversation. Moa and Sara, on the other hand, expressed that it felt weird to stop the playback to comment to the things that had been said. Filip later expressed it like this; “We are sitting here listing, to later to be asked questions about it. It would be a totally different matter if I was only listening to it.” Through the survey one participant suggested re-mixing of conversations, and several of the participants were “interested” in commenting conversations by sound. Moa pointed out that she was sick of the “possibilities to comment”, and wanted the conversations to be like “small treasures” which was what I choose to create. I was not interested in creating an online Ring P1, which would be focusing on different opinions, rather than conversations.
Similarly was the dilemma of creating the possibility to meet strangers through the website. The survey showed a greater interest in meeting strangers than in listening and uploading conversations. CouchSurfing shows that it is possible to create safe meetings, but the participants in the workshop was negative to the idea of meeting strangers they had contacted through a website. Their argumentation was not only that is it impossible to know for sure that one can trust a stranger, but they also wanted to be spared from the decision of whom to meet. When discussing the conversation cafe however, the general opinion was that it was beneficial because one had the possibility to look around, and decide whom to have a conversation with. When I suggested to have a conversation sign, a simple sign indicating that one wished to have a conversation, they were sceptical because they could be approached by “anyone” (who was part of the Conversation club), and this would again, put them in a vulnerable situation.

In the end, it was the limited amount of time that made me chose not to go through with it. I point out possible options for making these meetings possible in the “discussion for the website”, and I hope to create a system in which users can maintain in near future. What I imagine for the future at this point is a closed system which spread through invitations, and which will help keeping the focus on rewarding conversations rather than any conversation.

On the website I chose to define what a rewarding conversation is through a video. If you would try to upload a conversation there will be a text asking you to watch the video. This is an attempt to make users upload conversations with substance, rather than “any conversation”. I have used the method that Schön describes as “see-as and do-as” (1987, p.67). The method is to be able to transfer knowledge reached in one situation over in another, similar, situation. In other words, to recognize a new situation as a similar situation you been in before, and then to apply the knowledge learned in the last situation into the new situation. In the arranged conversations (4.3.) I found that the definition used on the invitation created an expectation which helped the participants to reach a rewarding conversation in the situation. On the website, I have defined what type of conversations you can expect to listen to, and also what I expect the user to upload. I am hoping that this definition will contribute to more people having rewarding conversations, as well as listening to them, and recording them. To sum up I am trying to control the users (participants) in situations I am not taking part in.

The website was launched in May (2010), and have now been functioning for about three months. During that time I have only managed to edit and upload three conversations, mainly because of another massive workload (read: thesis). These conversations are conversations that I have found rewarding, two of them in which I have participated, and one which took place on the conversation day. No one has so far uploaded a conversation, but there has been activity on the site. Some of the statistics are doubtful, but what I can say for sure is that there have been 111 downloads of conversations during this period. Naturally, the activity peaked in June, and was rather low in August. I am ready, however, to continue the work for rewarding conversations as soon as I finish writing about them. I am hoping for a future where there will be several contributes, and several rewarding conversations.

There are functions I am pleased with on the website, as well as there are things to be improved. I am very pleased with the low number of functions, the simplicity of the site. In my opinion the conversations are clearly the focus of the site, and though it takes time, it is easy to download and stream a conversation. I have not been able to get any feedback (not taking in consideration friends and family) from users yet, but in my opinion one of the biggest problems is the time it takes to stream or download a conversation. There are most certainly several improvements to be made, and besides from the time consuming stream/download I find that the aesthetics partly interrupt with the information which obviously is problematic. I prefer that the members
profile is close to invisible, but I am not sure that opinion is shared by many. In the survey there was a clear interest in the possibility to send messages to other members, which might be introduced at a later point.

5.3.5. A new path?

This time I want to discuss the website and how the possibility to listen to rewarding conversations is different from other public podcasts. StoryCorps, which record and collect conversations between two people, demands that you record in their studio. They also edit down a forty minutes recording to five or ten minutes, which I suspect is to keep the conversation within frame of one theme. On Stuff you should know, Josh and Chuck continue to have conversations about stuff they have researched, an naturally keep within a theme, with the exception of (many) digressions. Their conversations are always rewarding to listen to, because I learn through listening, but their focus is clearly on scientific knowledge, rather than life experience. To be able to join Sommar i P1 you have to be invited, and it focuses on storytelling. Ring P1 demands you to throw out an opinion and argue for it, and fast, because there are always people in line waiting. Dokumentärredaktionen is similar as they often use conversations as part of the documentary. It is, however, mixed up with storytelling and music. The main difference between these works and my own is that I am giving the opportunity for anyone to add their conversations, and the conversations are created by “regular people”, not by trained hosts or invited celebrities.

5.4. A critical view

I have worked within an area I did not even know the name of when I started to work. The design process have been to explore a set of variations, to handle and test complex situations (Krippendorff, 2006). I have worked closely with a number of participants, and some of them are my friends. I will therefore point a critical view to the participants and discuss if it is problematic to have friends participating in a design process. I will also take another view on what it means to be a participating designer, and finally the situations I create when I involve participants.

5.4.1. Networks for reaching participants

My main sources for getting participants were two social networks; Underskog and Facebook. All of the events I posted reached first of all my friends, and then friends of friends. At Underskog however, the event will show on the calendar. This means that every member sees it, and also that non- members can view it as the calender is assessable to everyone.

Earlier I have claimed that the more different people are from each other the more easily they can have a rewarding conversation. But one have to remember that these data are based on a limited group of people. Most of Underskogs users are within the culture business, and most of my friends there are designers, artists, musicians, photographers,- it is a limited group of people.

Despite that Facebook now have more than 500 million users (according to themselves), there are people I will not reach through posting events on social networks. This is especially the
older generation, but also others that choose not to participate. Before the conversation day I tried to attract people outside my group of friends (and friends of friends), and bicycled around the city to hand out posters and flyers. Despite of several enthusiastic reactions, no one came.

Therefore, one have to consider that this research have been conducted within a limited group of people considering age and geography, specificity the participants were between 21 and 53, and lived in Oslo and Malmö.

5.4.2. Participating friends

When using my own network trying to involve participants I will naturally attract some people I know as well. Several of the participants involved in these experiments are friends of mine. I have, however, always made sure that they participate because they are interested in the experiment. I have welcomed friends that have been interested in the experiments itself, either it has been to participate in conversations, or to listen to them at home. In two occasions I had friends contacting me because they “wanted to help me with my project” as the main argument for joining the experiment. I immediately replayed that I was not interested in having them in my project because I was only interested in participants who sincerely wanted to talk to strangers. If one is involving people taking part based on the wrong foundation it can only lead to misleading data.

There are two occasions (johan, conversation with friends) were I specificity asked friends to participate, which I have made transparent in the description of the experiment. First when I had conversations with friends, but also an experiment in which we listened to a conversation together.

5.4.3. ….and participating designer

I, the designer, have participated in several of the experiments, and I have based some of the findings on my experiences. Through my experience I decided what rewarding conversation is, and wrote the guidelines for how one can easier reach them. The participants in the workshop did, however, confirm several of the definitions and guidelines. One finding which I only have based on my experience is when I listened to a conversation and I experienced that my understanding of the things expressed in a conversation changed according to the situation. This finding is only based on this experiment, and would need further testing. The rest of the findings from the experiments is based on participants experience, observations and surveys.

5.4.4. Relaxed situations are stressful

I have been very focused on creating relaxed atmospheres in the experiments. I am always offering food, cake and coffee. This is a method for getting the participants to relax in the situation, and be able to share of themselves either it is in a workshop or on a conversation day. It has, however, also created a messy situation. During the workshop I created a situation were I found it difficult to take a step back and observe what happened in the situation, because I had too many things to keep focus on. In several situations I was not only leading the workshop, but also participating in the conversations. This made it difficult to observe what that happening with in the group. What I earlier introduced as an “in and out perspective” (3.4.2.) was impossible to have at this point, because I was in several roles at the same time. Despite that I argue for designers to involve themselves in experiments, to get a feel for the situation, I will also
recommend to, as long as it is possible, keep one role at the time. Having several roles at once makes it impossible to shift between the unit and the total, which means to be able to be close and within a situation compared to be able to take a step back and observe on distance (Schön 1987, p.64). The sensibility one gets for the situation by participating, is exchanged for a mash between roles in which makes it hard to understand what is going on in the situation. Somewhere between the pie, salad, post-its and discussions it was hard to keep track of what was really going on.
6 Conclusions

The findings in this thesis is grounded in experiments; through observation of participants, on feedback from participants through interviews and surveys and first-hand experience of the designer. The following conclusions are based on empirical groundings- and is therefore a legitimate scientific knowledge contribution (Löwgren 2007).

I have shown that there is an interest in meeting strangers to have rewarding conversations, and I have created a set of guidelines for easier reaching rewarding conversations. There are indications that it is easier to reach a rewarding conversation with someone unlike yourself.

Furthermore I found that it is possible to arrange rewarding conversations between strangers, and it is possible to affect how the conversation turns out by giving the participants certain expectations in advance. This will make the participants trying to achieve the expectations, and consequently be more likely to reach them. In private conversation between two strangers, two thirds are capable of reaching a rewarding conversation without any guidance in the situation. On the other hand, a public event with several participants and a arranger presence, will demand more guidance in the situation for the participants to be able to reach rewarding conversations. Naturally it does seem beneficial for the participants to have conversations with strangers in a situation without other participants and an arranger presence to be able to reach rewarding conversations easier. The amount of information received of the participants before they meet to have a conversation is irrelevant for the outcome of the conversation. Also, the greater difference between the conversation partners the easier it is to reach a rewarding conversation.

It is possible to record a rewarding conversation and re-experience a rewarding moment by listening to the playback alone. The understanding of what you hear will change depended on if you are listening alone or if you are in a situation with other people.

Through several experiments I have shown that there is an interest in listening to strangers conversations, and that longer, but edited conversations are preferred. Everyone will have a different understanding of what they hear, down to the level of a specific word. This means that it is impossible to create recorded conversations that will be rewarding for all listeners. It is, however, possible for listeners to recognize quality in a conversation, regardless if they find the conversation interesting or rewarding. Most people are willing to record their conversations, but this does not mean that they will record and upload their own conversations on a website.
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