Organizing Commons in Time and Space with Framapads: Feedback from an Open Community[5]

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Abstract

Commons are also a narrative issue, something collectively told and shared. In this discussion paper, we critically examine our use of a collaborative technique called Framapad. As an open community, RGCS has used hundreds of pads to co-document its events and practices. This practice, both when successful and unsuccessful, has been key in the constitution of our own commons. Here, we analyze the process, contributions and limitations of pads in the life of our community.

Keywords: Framapad; commons; narrative commons; co-documentation; organizationality of commons; openness.

Introduction: pads as process or destination?

Since 2016, the RGCS network has organized numerous events: board meetings, general assemblies, workshops, seminars, symposiums and walking ethnographies are just some examples. For the bulk of them, we set out to build a collective memory with the use of a collaborative text editor called "Framapad" (framapad.org). Framapads enable collective notes to be taken during events and thus greatly facilitate the creation of "real live narrations" of an event. This open text tool has become a very important part of our practices because it makes it possible not only to summarise an event in real time but also to display and oppose different thoughts and opinions generated by an event's participants. For some of us, framapads have even become part of our everyday practices of teaching, research and management in academia. But what exactly is a framapad and how is it related to our community's ethos and collaborative practices?

Framapad (framapad.org) is a public instance of a collaborative real-time text editor which allows multiple users to simultaneously edit and contribute to a document directly on the Web. It is a free and open-source tool based on the software Etherpad (etherpad.org) that was developed in 2008 and released as open-source software at the end of 2009, when the company behind it was acquired by Google to serve their service integration platform, Google Wave. Google released the source code for Etherpad under the Apache License version 2.0 on December 17, 2009. Since then, there have been many organizations hosting "pads" servers on the web, including the French NGO Framasoft (framasoft.org), under the name of Framapad. The Etherpad foundation is the guardian and repository of the Etherpad software. After the release of the software as open source, users and programmers of Etherpad created the Etherpad Foundation to coordinate further development. Their website maintains a list of a growing number of sites that run the Etherpad software (see the official list at https://github.com/ether/etherpad-lite/wiki/Sites-That-Run-Etherpad). In this paper, when we refer to Framapads (or pads), we describe the use of the Etherpad software hosted by Framasoft. There is basically no difference with any of the dozens of hosted instances of Etherpad. Framapad facilitates online communication and collaboration, allowing users to share ideas and work together in real time. Framapad also provides various features such as a color code and name for users, revision history, time-stamped changes, and the export of documents in various file formats. Overall, Framapad is a powerful tool for online collaboration and communication that offers a range of features and capabilities to enhance the collaborative writing process.

It is now time to take stock of our learning experiences with Framapads: Are there certain practices and techniques we could share with other communities? In particular, how can the narrative practice of the pad contribute to the emergence of commons? What matters most in deploying pads for collaborative purposes, the process or the destination?

RGCS is a distributed network, involving people from different fields, different countries (24 countries on all continents), and different practices. It is inspired by open science practices and the idea of contributing to alternative ways of working and doing research. Obviously, it is through common activities that we became a community. And pads have been an important aspect in the life of RGCS. Here, we would like to collectively explain how.

1. The challenge of collaborative writing: From juxtaposition to co-elaboration

1.1 Challenges of collaborative writing

Collaboration is not spontaneous and needs to be nurtured and practiced. Many educational systems are not predisposed to truly collaborating, that is to develop ideas and projects together interactively. Studies of collaborative writing processes using pads or wikis suggest that what happens when using such tools for

collaborative purposes is far from obvious and requires a rethink of fundamental concepts and practices of authorship and collaboration.

1.2 Classical issues and problems encountered

Most of the time, participants in our events ask the same questions:

- Am I allowed to modify, change, or erase part of the text written by others?
- What will you do with the text?
- While coordinators of the pads are also concerned with similar questions:
- Do we need to have a system that tracks authorship and the type of contributors (similar to GIT in programming) or should we remain anonymous?
- Is there a hierarchy of legitimacy, or, in other words, will hierarchical structure be evident in the contribution flow?
- How can we move from the addition of bits of text without context, stylistic alignment, fact checking, etc. towards something that has both shared meaning and structure?
- How can we encourage generalized participation and avoid the tendency of only a few people becoming the scribes for everyone else?
- Is the content of the pad at risk of becoming either just a repository of fleeting notes or a sedimented knowledge object that will gradually move beyond the pad and gain a life of its own? Under which conditions is either scenario likely to happen?

2. Framapads as organizationality: the importance of roles, fluid switching and trust

2.1 What is at stake?

Framapads can be a double-edged sword: sometimes, a brilliant collective knowledge creation tool, but at other times, simply a "waste of time" that goes directly into the digital dump. However, wasting time is occasionally a necessary and valuable thing, especially when alternated with fuzzy creative processes that are at the core of an open collective. In the last seven years we have definitely experienced and lived through both situations. Several attempts at using pads have been a disaster while other have led to great outputs that are still used and consulted today (e.g., most posts published in LSE BR, The Conversation, RGCS research notes or more simply posts published on the RGCS website were started and/or were finalized by means of pads).

The disasters happened either when people failed to engage with framapads, or when they did so in a very messy way. In the latter case, the readability of the final narrative was either very low or even completely incomprehensible. So, what can be done to increase the

successful instances of digital collaboration and decrease the "disaster" experiences incurring digital waste?

2.2 Solving the lack of collaborative writing practices

According to us there are three major issues at stake in the process of a Framapad: roles, fluid switching, and trust.

2.2.1 Defining roles in the narration

First, it can be difficult to kickstart a pad without allocating roles orally and/or within a chat. Such practices are necessary to start the Framapad and bring the digital collective endeavor into "existence" . There are four roles that we feel are necessary to allocate before an event:

- **Coordinators:** People giving directions and directionality to the narration can make a difference: What matters? What will matter? Coordinators constantly keep raising this question, keeping the focus on the subject of concern and guiding the narration. Sometimes, the coordinators already predefine certain headlines and questions in the Framapad before the start of the event, to smoothen facilitation.

Vignette 1: A testimony from a past coordinator
My experience derives from the role of coordinator of RGCS executive committee pads, which I have had the opportunity to perform on several occasions. Often the pads I coordinated were aimed at keeping track of the topics discussed during the monthly RGCS executive committee meetings. I noticed that, depending on the month, the most frequent contributors to the pad changed, as did their form and style. Moods and emotions are perhaps more present in collective writing than in other types of writing. Framapads thus become a good marker of the mood of the members participating remotely in the meeting.

The collective writing process in this case took place in two steps. During the first step, one person was taking notes of the discourse of another member of the meeting. In the second step, after having spoken, the second person came back to the pad to express more their ideas more precisely, whenever needed.

- **Scrollers:** There need to be people continuously scrolling up and down in the narration, to make it formally consistent, fluid and smooth. Adding transitions, providing a minimum homogeneity of style and coherence, correcting spelling errors, and sometimes adding context, or important elements of content.

- **Contributors:** Of course, there need to be people adding raw materials: What happened? People represent different points of view that need to be preserved and distinguished. In our events, there were academics (from different fields and different countries), entrepreneurs, managers, artists, students, and consultants, just to name a few. As these people have distinct lived experiences, it is important that their different points of view are expressed, both through the writing and the visuals of the framapads. This is connected to the fact that narrative commons need to be both a collective product and an individual or group expression at all times. Importantly, while all participants are contributors, having certain pre-appointed contributors enables a clearer idea of what the expectations for contributions are and thus enabling participants to feel a little "safer" when starting to contribute as well (see also our discussion of trust below).

- **Energy-givers:** Another essential category of people who provide a little light relief through humor. Making funny remarks acts as a kind of virtual "coffee break", an opportunity to unwind where they can simply relax and share a laugh together. This enables the maintenance of energy levels and connects the topic of the event to broader spheres in participants' lives.

2.2.2 Fluid switching between roles and practices

In The Netherlands, where one of the contributors works, Framapad is not well-known nor used. This causes an overload of "shared documents stress". Collaborations are performed via a myriad of different digital possibilities: Google Drive, Teams, Dropbox or simply by e-mailing word documents back and forth. Thankfully Framapad simply consists of a single clickable link, and not yet another password the contributor may have forgotten... Still, it is difficult and rather strenuous to keep track of which collaboration uses what digital technology. Adding to this stress is the continuous switching between Zoom, Teams, Facetime, and other video-conferencing software, as, again, every interlocutor has a different preference. It is overwhelming, like being a member of too many clubs, and having to keep track of when and where to do what.

In addition, even though roles can be appointed from the outset, sometimes attention drifts away. For instance, an "official" appointed contributor suddenly no longer contributes anymore because the topic becomes less engaging for them, a scroller gets tired of creating the glue of the Framapad and wants to contribute to an issue that is closer to their heart and a coordinator gets distracted by other issues and priorities. Consequently, the narration starts to get blurry. These are crucial moments for every Framapad and only Framapads that manage to "live" fluid switching, thanks to "resonance" between the different official roles and general

contributors, will manage to enter into a collective knowledge production phase.

Resonance in this context is a form of digital "listening" and nurturing "feeling" towards each other. The moment where people step in for each other to maintain the narration of the event. This fluid switching definitely gets easier as a core collective grows closer together. However, fluid switching could certainly also be trained (even though we have not gone down this road officially...) by intentionally generating a sort of presence-centred code of conduct where one leaves all their other concerns aside, does not check emails or any other digital distractions, to be truly present in the here and now: listening to what is said, and contributing to the written narration (even though it is normal that sometimes the mind drifts away...).

2.2.3 Trust in the process

Finally, a one further important point in this process, and certainly the most difficult one, is to actively trust: trusting others and trusting the outcome.

Trust in others is known as a process whereby one accepts one's vulnerability with respect to others' actions and intentions, which cannot be fully foreseen or predicted. It can be quite intimidating to openly write contributions and sometimes also contradict opinions in front of people one has never seen physically before, who one does not even know, who use a language that is not one's mother tongue or who seem "superior" or more "legitimate" than oneself (a student could be intimidated to contribute in front of a full professor, an activist in front of an academic, an employee in front of their manager, etc.). This trust issue is certainly the most complicated aspect to address in a collective writing endeavor because it touches our own vulnerability and goes far beyond role distribution or fluid switching. Giving a concrete answer to the issue of trust is difficult, but our feeling is that "trust" needs to be mainly carried and "diffused" by the organizers of the event themselves and the attached core collective. It is the collective's capacity to enable everybody to feel safe, to feel welcomed in the collective, to clearly show that all opinions count, and to ensure that no one individual assumes superiority over others.

Trust in the outcome: Another key issue is trusting the outcome. When one engages in a collective writing endeavour it automatically means that one does not take notes for oneself. Some of us already held discussions about this with students, who were very reluctant to have to give up writing their "own" notes of the event. They were afraid that the end product with the Framapad would be "inferior" compared to their "own" notes. Efforts to address this issue by the organisers at the beginning of

the event might help to overcome such resistances among participants and might even improve the outcome of the Framapad itself. The structure of the final document will certainly be very different compared to one's "own" notes, but the content is definitely also much richer and accurate than anything one could have produced by oneself. Trusting the outcome, others and the unknown becomes important in this process.

This dynamic of trust underscores in some way the underlying anthropological consideration of researchers as not simply knowledge contributors, but also as reflexive scholars. This, however may seem counter intuitive.

Vignette 2: A testimony from another coordinator
My experience derives from teaching an online course to PhD students during the COVID period. Thanks to my knowledge and participations in framapads during RGCS events, I decided to try it out as well in a normal online class setting. Right from the outset I shared the link to a framapad with the students via the chat function. I told them that this document was intended to constitute the collective knowledge of the class, to keep track of our discussions and reflections. However, I quickly noticed that only one person started to write, and after a while this person also stopped writing in the document.

At some point I interrupted my teaching, and asked what hindered them to write in the framapad. They explained to me that they needed to take notes for themselves because they also wished to add personal reflections maybe related to their PhD, and therefore couldn't take additional notes in the framapad. We then launched a discussion (which was not foreseen at the outset) about personal notes and collective notes and the differences, advantages, and disadvantages between the two approaches. It was not obvious for them initially how this collective note taking could be an advantage for them (for example by sparking new ideas they had not thought about or discussed in class), because most were convinced that individual notes and reflections were somehow of superior value. I managed to motivate some of them to take on the challenge to only take notes in the collective document (framapad) and not in a private document. In the end, the result was quite impressive and motivating because a significant amount of additional thoughts and resources were shared (besides the official content summary). I still read through these notes once a year. This allows me to retrospectively dive into the class discussions and to prepare myself mentally before entering again into a new classroom with new students (where the reflections and thoughts might be different!)

3. Framapad as political processes

3.1 Pads as publicity and public spaces
Very often, we distributed our Framapad link via mailing lists or social media. On each occasion, events and discussions beyond those contained in the pad itself would later have an impact on the content and discussions shared in the framapad community. People outside the community often came asking questions, making remarks, sometimes critiquing what was going on. Some of us liked to project the pad contents using video projectors during events or in the classroom. In both cases, a pad, as a narration, needs 'publicity'. People need to feel that what they write is likely to be read, seen, and used outside. It is motivating to see your writing and color code appear on the screen. This gives an amazing force and impact to the process of writing and the inquiry at stake in it.

3.2 Resistance and alternative inside and from pads
In our daily practices, using Framapads instead of corporately orchestrated tools like Google Docs or Dropbox, is also a political stance as it offers a decentralized and community-driven alternative that does not rely on corporate control or surveillance. Unlike corporate platforms, Framapad is a free and open-source software, which means that it is developed and maintained by a community of volunteers. It offers a more secure and private alternative to corporate tools, which may collect user data and use it for commercial purposes. It also means that the source code is freely available for anyone to use, study, and transform. Using framapads means resisting privatization on the one hand, but also forms of domination, on the other. Just as JOCO embodies a form of resistance to for-profit academic publishing, rankings, dominant thinking and practices, Framapad represents the exploration of alternatives to the dominant ways of organizing work in a context of digitalization, decentralization and open collaboration. Using Framapad for our work concretely shows how to organize digital commons differently.

The organization behind the pads we are using, Framasoft, is a prominent actor in the French scene for the development of open-source solutions (aka FLOSS: Free Libre Open-Source Software). Framasoft defends the values of popular education, digital empowerment and the deployment of solutions that aim to avoid control from the GAFAM (i.e., Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon et Microsoft.)and the model of 'surveillance capitalism' these corporations represent.

Organizing our collaborations thanks to Framapad is therefore also a political stance. Though participants might not always be aware of Framasoft's position, they are aware that Framapads are a free and open-source

solution that does not operate through a GAFAM network.

3.3 Framapad as alternative practices for academia

Framapad can help to promote a culture of open access, collaboration, and community-driven development, which is in line with the values and principles of scholarship especially in a context of growing transformations towards open science, favouring bibliodiversity and alternative evaluation models. As teachers, we have noticed changes in how institutions value knowledge production and acquisition. Written documents are increasingly being replaced by oral speeches; Individual essays are slowly being replaced by group work presentation. One explanation may be economic, as time requirements and the entailing teaching costs are expensive to institutions, and individual essays, for instance, may require a longer assessment time than a fifteen-minute presentation. Another reason may reside in competition between academic institutions. Oral performance became more important as institutions started encouraging the introduction of "soft skills" in program portfolios. Visual productions have also started to occupy an increasingly central role: Teachers and students are asked to format materials with brand identity visuals, just like commercial ads, and to upload them on the extranet. By accessing visuals and oral performances, students, just like consumers, can get what they expect and paid for. By adopting Framapad in class, we demonstrate our resistance to neoliberal methods of knowledge production in classrooms. Knowledge acquisition must not only be measured and performed with points, credits or money; By using frames in the classroom, we invite students to write and develop their thought by using a traditional method in a digitalized key.

3.4 Framapad and sociocultural diversity within academia and beyond

Framapad also offers alternatives to individuals (in particulars academics) who encounter difficulties to socially construct the self in normalized mainstream communities. How individuals speak and write differs greatly based on a wide range of factors such as personality traits, sociocultural background, or gender. Using Framapad may offer alternative modes of communication to individuals with low levels of power. In the classroom, we found that it helps shy students to create relationships with other classmates and with the teacher. Also, knowing that someone can help with grammar errors provides students with dyslexia more opportunities to bring ideas to the collective. From our experience, collective writing in pads also addresses the question of inclusivity within multicultural teams. Students from countries with different political ideologies may use Framapad as a neutral medium of collaboration. From our experience, we know that students from China may be reluctant to use Google tools, or Microsoft solutions. Therefore, opening a Framapad may offer promising alternatives for multicultural collaboration.

Additionally, Framapad use might also impact those who attend events such as our walking ethnography OWEE[7], as these events involve not only listening to presentations but are also also lived through the body, with the brain attempting to "translate" the oral information presented into written text, with the hands also becoming involved in this process. The side benefit of this "being present" through listening and writing might actually be to get more out of any event. For example, for those who sometimes have difficulties in just sitting and listening to long presentations and podium discussions without getting involved physically, collective Framapads can channel thoughts and help engage and maybe even retain more of each event thanks to the feeling of not being the only one(s) engaged in the cognitive effort of understanding.

4. The unfinished business of organizing commons with pads

4.1 Framapads and RGCS: What have we learned so far and what are other spaces for future reflection?

The literature on the adoption of collaborative technologies suggests that the patterns of use of collaborative technologies are closely connected to the culture, identity, collaborative dynamics and routines of the group or community deploying them. Since its creation, RGCS has been deeply involved in exploring and exploiting the materiality of physical encounters as well as the possibility to co-live and co-experiment the living space of the city. On the one hand, Framapads constitute an attempt to give continuity to our joint exploration of the sociomaterial world beyond events such as un-conferences, workshops or OWEEs, in a permanent space where we can explore new dimensions, create relational safety and learn new things about our community. On the other hand, however, the virtual space differs from the physical spaces of which our community is so fond, and thus may afford new reflections about who we are and who we can become in the future.

As with many other collaborative technologies, Framapads provide visibility, editability, persistence and association. In a growing community such as RGCS these

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7 Which stands for Open Walked Event-based Experimentations.

affordances can play a key role in strengthening the community identity, and forging relationships between new and old chapters. In particular, as new members join RGCS, they can be facilitated in finding a place and space for their unique knowledge and practices; As ideas become more visible, hopefully also our knowledge of who the others are, and what new avenues we can explore together, will be strengthened. Most importantly, Framapads provide occasions for structured interaction, especially through engagement with other ideas. Considering the fluid and constantly growing nature of RGCS, editability and association can play a key role in structuring our interactions and practices, as well as strengthening our sense of identity. Finally, in an ephemeral collaborative environment consisting of experiences, the persistence of written texts, schemes and drawings can help us build the foundations of our knowledge repositories and metaknowledge about our distinctive knowledge and skills. This collective work is an initial attempt to explore such a potential endeavour.

It is also noteworthy, however, that collaborative technologies constrain existing practices, knowledge and social relations, especially if these are strongly grounded in physical spaces and bodily interactions. For instance, collaborative technologies often create new expectations, goals, communication rules and social norms about virtual interaction which in turn require people to reassess their pre-existing collaboration strategies. Furthermore, physical and computer-mediated spaces may enter in competition, and the boundaries between the materiality and visibility of each space become blurred.

This can be somewhat disruptive for RGCS members. Firstly, if Framapads become a diffused social practice, social norms must also develop around their role and use. Yet, in large and fluid communities such as RGCS this can be a delicate and complicated process; Secondly, if frame pads do become a collective norm and social practice, goals and expectations for virtual contributions within our community may become burdening and burgeoning over time. Alternatively, hopes of distributed collaboration and generalized participation may turn out unrealistic, especially given the behavioral visibility afforded by Framapads, causing threats to our community's identity. Lastly, making our knowledge more explicit and connective can also divide, exclude or marginalize those parts of RGCS that are strongly grounded in experience and thrive on tacit knowledge. It is thus important to use occasions such as this to inquire about who we are, and how Framapads revise, complement or extend our visions and common concerns with the phenomenology of space and time, sociomateriality and digitality.

4.2 Back to the narrative process

In sum, using pads to create common knowledge is a key aspect of the organization of commons. To some extent, and if we only consider this specific process, it can be considered as a powerful tool of scientific writing, to be taught in our 'writing skills' seminars from a productivist perspective. Yet, it is important to consider pads as one side of (the many-sided) coin of organizing commons.

RGCS is a living community, meeting regularly physically and online, sharing a common vision of what collaborative spaces are or must be. This community, shaped by its many 'discussion arenas' enables the use of pads in the organization of commons, but not exclusively as the only way possible. It is our contention that promoting pads as a prioritized way to organize commons is not sufficient. By contrast, we propose pads as an additional opportunity to elaborate together as to what we do, what we think about and what we do research on, as well as a means to collectively produce a statement on what brings us together as a community. From such a perspective, using pads for organizing commons represents unfinished business, an ongoing project constantly nourished by the necessity to associate pads with other discussion arenas, tools, narratives and visuals.

Conclusion: what mattered in the pads we implemented?

In the end, pads have been and still are very important techniques and practices for RGCS. In cases where they proved effective, they always required an element of organization to make the collective text happen. Interestingly, even when they fail or are forgotten about, immobilized in repositories and databases we never use, they leave traces of experience which remind us that the process itself is very much alive. Framapad is thus not only a way to promote a culture of open access, collaboration, and community-driven development, in line with the values and principles of open science, but also a means to explore and concretely embody alternatives to dominant forms of organizing. Last but equally importantly, pads live in our experiences as emotions, affects or atmospheres, and thus never eclipse, somehow becoming a collective, cognitive, and bodied engagement which is radically different to the traditional codes of writing in academia, consulting and the managerial world at large.

Framapads help to open and question the traditional time-space organization of our activities. Their indeterminacy, fragility, playfulness and openness make them an essential form of expression in efforts to advance the development of the digital commons.