

BUILDING EMPATHY THROUGH DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

In addressing the complex matter of designers' empathy with people they are designing for, this paper advances 'dialogue' as a strategy for building and using empathy during designing. It examines why developing empathy is so difficult when users are absent, and explores the potential of dialogue to help address these difficulties, both at theoretical and at practical levels. The key characteristics and the challenges associated with this dialectical approach are presented.

Empathy, design-specific capital, dis-ability, inclusive design, people-centred design

1 INTRODUCTION

Central to successfully designed end products are consideration and implementation of the needs and preferences of people using these products. Whether designing apparel, artefacts or built environments, creating an intimate interface with the designed world is at the forefront. The design community has sought ways to understand and engage with people in order to enhance these interfaces; *e.g.*, involving people in assessing designed artefacts (Cross 1971), involving anthropologists in interpreting how people perceive and interact with artefacts (Squires & Byrnes 2002), designing collaboratively with people (Day & Parnell 2003), or developing personas based on research into the average user (Pruitt & Adin 2006).

Our study adopts yet another approach by involving real people as experts in the design team. Besides further enhancing usability, the aim is to develop a strategy to exploit the capital of users—in particular persons with a disability—so as to complement and enrich the capital of designers. It builds upon the authors' work on cultural capital (Strickfaden & Heylighen 2007, 2009A) and inclusive design (Heylighen 2008).

This work recognises that designers (like all people) gain capital during education, practice and personal experience. In his book *Distinctions* Pierre Bourdieu (1984) presents the notion of cultural capital by examining the depth of holistic environments. Bourdieu looks at individuals, interactions, and sociocultural environments through an integrative theory of capital, field and habitus. Bourdieu expands on the meaning of capital by using the term beyond the typical economic connotation as a metaphor to include cultural, educational, social, symbolic and honorific connotations. Basically, Bourdieu explains capital as an individual's ability to exercise control over one's own future or that of another. However, for specific issues in designing, such as those involving others who are considerably different from themselves (*e.g.*, children, elderly, disabled), designers cannot rely on past experiences, therefore a deepening empathy with others is required.

This paper argues that if designers truly want to develop empathy with users, they need to build an ongoing and significant dialogue with them. It begins by presenting the difficulty in developing empathy when users are absent. Empathy is the ability to understand, be aware of or be sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another. From this, the notion of dialogue is advanced as a strategy towards developing and maintaining empathy throughout the design process. Dialogue is an exchange of ideas and values, involving speech and conversation. We conclude by discussing lessons learned about dialogue, and by indicating directions for future work.

2 REALITY OF DESIGNING

Although designers have come a long way to involve people as users while designing it is still considered a challenge to develop empathy when they are absent. This is largely due to designers having little

exposure to others but also because designing leans towards being a designer-centred activity. For example, Morrow writes that, “Architects design their own image, often centralize their own experiences of space and marginalize and negate the experiences of others.” (2000:43). She indicates that a wide range of people (*e.g.*, persons with a disability, single mothers) are excluded while designing due to compounded problems such as homogeneity in the backgrounds of designers and design culture, but also because there is a lack of depth in designers’ analysis strategies. Compounding this is the fact that people are rarely present during designing despite research that indicates their presence during design process being essential (Ostroff 1997).

The notion of designing as a designer-centred activity and the way that students perceive absent people are explored through two empirical studies. Both are ethnographic studies observing design students while designing. The first study aims to investigate influences on process and to explore design cultural environments; the second one aims to document designing towards a reflexive analysis. The studies reveal the relationship between student designers and other people as users.

The first study (Strickfaden & Heylighen 2009B) involves observation *in situ* of two groups of senior design students, who are focusing on user-centred design principles while designing: 12 third-year BSc students in the UK, and eight MDes students in Canada. Each group is observed from the onset to the completion of one design project. The findings of this study indicate that other people are characterised and defined so generically that they are devoid of gender and age, let alone more specific attributes such as (dis)abilities. Surprisingly across the two groups the students never demonstrate an intimate knowledge of other people in general, nor do they show any understanding of the variances in people’s preferences and needs. Many participants even admit explicitly to working from their memory of an age group or a certain experience with the kind of artefact they are designing. Even worse is that the students do not stop to question or even consider that they may be mirroring their own assumptions and creating generalisations about people. The central finding of this work is that students are driven predominantly by what they perceive as their teachers’ needs (the major stakeholders in their projects), which seems to impair their ability to perceive other people beyond a superficial level.

The second study observes an interdisciplinary team located in Europe. The team consists of three students trained in architecture and one trained in sociology, all post-graduates working towards a PhD degree with various interests in disability studies. These students are collaborating on the re-design of an inclusive office space in a historical building and are in an early phase of designing. Along with being given a generic design brief that defines the need to develop an inclusive space, the students are given, for reference, several books on design and a visual image bank of projects (with and without inclusive design aspects); moreover, they are introduced to a user/expert (Ostroff 1997) with mobility limitations, whom they can consult. Not so dissimilar from the first study, even with heightened awareness towards disabilities, these students consistently default to their own perceptual frameworks and personal capital. Interestingly the sociology student acts as the conscience of the group by interjecting questions and persuasive reminders of how a space may be perceived, interpreted and experienced by other people. Of even more interest is the fact that the students do not investigate the majority of provided resources, *i.e.*, one of four of the students look through all books, two of four glance through some, none of them look at the image bank, and none of them consults the user/expert.

These studies act to remind us that student actions in the reality of their design environment may not spontaneously involve considering or trying to understand the user, let alone attempting to empathise with another person. In other words, designing for an absent audience holds some major flaws as it seems highly difficult to develop empathy without people being present. In the first study other people remain positioned at a distance and untouchable—simply “someone” or “anyone” else (Strickfaden & Heylighen 2009B); in the second, the design students default to their designer-centred approach (a reflection of training) while the student from outside design tries to involve the user throughout the process. These cases indicate that users are not central stakeholders in the design process, suggesting that people from

outside are potentially marginalized or even negated. As such, our findings are in line with Morrow's (2000), who also found that building and maintaining empathy is challenging particularly when the user is absent.

3 ADVANCING DIALOGUE

Judging from our two studies, designing for the absent other is not as natural a process as imagined. One explanation for this is that designers are encultured into a specific system of values and beliefs; they are developing a particular kind of capital (Strickfaden & Heylighen 2007), involving a specialization in language and education (Wilson 1996). This design-specific capital is at the heart of being a designer; however, it involves a particular way of engaging with the world (and others). To begin, designers in general take an artefact-focused approach while designing, which situates other people at the periphery of process. Second, is that engagement in the design process encourages focusing on use and usability (Bowen & Chamberlain 2008), only one aspect of people's engagement with artefacts; and on people as research subjects—the central thrust of current user-centred design approaches. In view of this we advance dialogue as a vehicle to restore the relationship between designers and the people they are designing for. As a strategy, dialogue may aid in exploiting the capital of users to complement and enrich the capital of designers. The following section characterises the essence of dialogue and offers a first view of the challenges this approach may face in practice.

3.1 Essence of dialogue

According to Devlieger and Froyen dialogue is a method of exchange that enables sharing and autonomy simultaneously whereby disparate parties explore and unfold without any attempt at changing the other party (2006:20). Dialogue facilitates a critique of various habitual and material conditions of the particular persons involved. In this way, engaging in dialogue means that the deeply rooted basic nature and worldview of these persons is revealed. Three aspects are worth considering here: involving people as experts, making meaningful connections, and preserving identities.

Dialogue allows people to become an integral part of the design process as user/experts who engage with the world from an alternate perspective (*e.g.*, a person with visual or hearing impairments uses different senses than ordinary people; as a result s/he is able to detect misfits or appreciate qualities that most designers are not aware of). Thus, key to dialogue is that, rather than being on the outside or periphery of the design process, people become part of it and are in the inside of designing (Heylighen & Devlieger 2007).

When entering into a dialogue connections are made by engaging collaboratively with people towards a common goal, most often a design project. Collaboration is about the cross-fertilization of ideas and an interweaving of activities that involves individuals using their existing knowledge (Brown & Moreau Yates 2000). Mutual respect and genuine concern for others must also be created (Jarrett 2000). In other words, there needs to be a symmetry in creating dialogue where all parties are getting to know each other's abilities, perspectives, habits, circumstances and values.

Dialogue is the vehicle used to filter and transform information while preserving the identity of the different parties involved (Renders & Viaene 2006: 351). This preservation of identity involves respect for and a willingness to be open to differing viewpoints. For example, while architects are trained to focus on formal and visual elements within buildings, ordinary people have a more implicit relationship with space and experiences within (Morrow 2000). This means that architects need to be attentive to the fact that architecture is a dynamic, interactive process that evokes associational terms and responses to meaning (Brown & Moreau Yates 2000), which are typically elements lost to the trained architects. These differences of view can act as triggers of innovation rather than as sources of conflict.

3.2 Early attempts to build dialogue

Having introduced the notion of dialogue on an abstract level we now look at three attempts to build dialogue with others during designing. First is a series of introductory workshops that train persons with

a disability to work as consultants in building projects (Ringaert 2001). This initiative is taken by the Universal Design Institute in Winnipeg, Canada. Central to this initiative is the notion that persons with a disability have expertise by experience, and as such should be recognised as experts in projects that are created for their use; while emphasising that all experts receive monetary compensation for their wealth of knowledge and experience (*ibid*: 6.3). The workshops introduce the participants to issues around building projects that they would be involved with; for example, concepts around legislation, building codes and audit reporting are taught to the groups (*ibid*: 6.6). In addition, an empathy-building component uses simulation activities to expose participants to experiences beyond their own (*e.g.*, blindfolding a wheelchair user to simulate being blind). Second is a workshop called ‘Designing In The Dark’, where people who are blind or visually impaired enter into dialogue with design students (Froyen 2006). The focus of the workshop seems to be to expose students to people with disabilities to alter awareness and possibly influence future projects. Blind and visually impaired persons engage with design students while using tactile models, however, it is unclear how the dialogue unfolds. A study on the workshop reports that the disabled participants selected need “familiarity with the urban environment” (*ibid*: 335), which reminds us that capital differs between lay people and designers. The third initiative is a case study called ‘Living Rooms’ that uses critical artefacts to develop an understanding of the home to support independence and well-being in ageing participants (Bowen & Chamberlain 2008). This research recognises the value of artefact-centred approaches by using artefacts to provoke people into reflecting on context and is an approach that attempts to bridge the gap with the designers’ point of view. “Dialogue” (*ibid*: 38) is developed in a three-stage process where people are encouraged to share experiences and reply to a series of design concepts.

Ringaert, Froyen and Bowen & Chamberlain present groundbreaking ideas around user/expert while each act towards promoting dialogue in different ways by: acknowledging people’s expertise, indicating a need to ‘educate’ people about designing, simulating disability to encourage empathy, and using artefacts to mediate between user and designer. These concepts begin to get at the idea of dialogue; however, further research is needed on how exactly dialogue develops. Questions arise such as: How do we educate designers about other people to facilitate communication? How should mutual respect be encouraged? How do we shift the design-centred mentality to allow in user/expert? And so on.

4 CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE WORK

The reality of designing and our exploration into dialogue reveals a need for designers to connect deeply with other people; however, we also note that it is natural for a designer-centred approach to be taken. Designers seem to be accustomed to researching about people (taking information and using it without much regard for the other) and to using their own capital (prior knowledge, understanding, values). In addition, they are accustomed to taking an asymmetrical approach where other people need to understand design without a reciprocal understanding of the others’ perspective. This approach perpetuates being designer-centred because ultimately the designer is left to choose whether and what information s/he requires relative to other people.

In order to develop empathy with users, it is clear that designers need to be able to engage, listen and understand the outlook of other people, which means involving actual people in the design process. However, having user/experts present does not necessarily result in an automatic interchange between parties. First, a basis for understanding must be present in order to enable connections between people with very different capital. Given the rich diversity of people’s possibilities and limitations designers must continue to develop their understanding of people and the world throughout their career. Building capital is a natural phenomenon that broadens designers’ horizons; in this process they create images of the life-worlds of ‘others’ and a bridging between ‘us’ and ‘them’ occurs (Renders & Viaene 2006: 354). Various approaches to developing such connections include educating other people (Ringaert 2001), and using design models (Froyen 2006) and critical artefacts (Bowen & Chamberlain 2008) for mediating between parties. These approaches begin to illustrate how connections between different parties may be facilitated; however, future work is required giving details on how exactly designers can engage in deep and

meaningful exchanges or dialogues with people. One proposal is to look further to interdisciplinary teams for how to engage in dialogue: how do designers collaborate with other experts? Awaiting the results to this future work, designers and design educators can start off by preparing themselves for a profound shift in how to exploit the capital of other people and create a deepening empathy as a means to developing design-specific capital.

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