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IDSE 102 Position Paper 2

Designing “with” to leverage collective creative capital

Describe the role of ethnography in design, and argue a position on designing “with” vs. designing “for”.

Tools vs. Mindset

We can learn a great deal from Sanders & Co. about co-creation tools, Gavers & Co. about cultural probes, Forlizzi & Co. about design research tools within a product ecology...But without a proper mindset to accompany the use and application of these design research tools and methodologies, they 1) lose their power and 2) become in danger of being misappropriated.

A fundamental criteria of whether one is designing “with” or designing “for” lies in the relationship between the designer and the end-user, their respective roles within the design process, and how designers view end-users.

It's tempting to define designing “with” vs. “for” based on the methods used during a particular design project. For example, we might say that:[1] a designer who never does any user research is designing “for” a potential customer without any basis for what the end-user truly needs; someone like Bill Gavers designs “for”, but at least he is sending out cultural probes, soliciting stories, and then designing for the end-user based on the insights he himself has gained from the research; someone like Jodi Forlizzi conducts all kinds of user research throughout the design process and thus designs “for” while attuned to the user's actual needs and desires according to how s/he interacts with a product's ecology; someone like Liz Sanders posits a way to design “with” using co-creation methods that give frameworks, tools, and voice to end-users and furthermore proposes a shift in thinking to design for the improvement of the quality of life over *generations*; and of *course*, someone like Chris Le Dantec designs “with” the homeless when he conducts field work and photo diary studies, involves the homeless and caseworker publics in the iterative design development process, and designs a system framework that enables these publics to communicate and grow their knowledge base after the designers have left.

However, if we equate methods with design state...does that mean you are automatically designing "with" the end user when you choose to conduct a participatory interview during the research phase of any design process? After all, you are soliciting other opinions and attempting to synthesize their ideal dream states to inform your designs. Certainly your choice of methods comes with some baggage and some inherent assumptions about the role of the end-user; choosing a co-creation method automatically presumes that someone besides the designer has valuable ideas to contribute to the design process—and you inherit this assumption if you adopt that method. But does this mean that you also respect the user? Does this mean you empathize with the user?[2]

Even if you use ethnographic research, co-creation activities, and cultural probes throughout your design process, you will probably still retain control over how that information is synthesized, how much weight you give to participant feedback, and how your designed artifact or system will leave your hands and enter the world. You retain your role as designer. What would it mean to question even that: your role as a designer?

Power Roles

Think of some traditional superior–subordinate relationships: parent–child, boss–employee, teacher–student. Assumptions are made that the former knows better than the latter, and we typically act upon these assumptions accordingly: we defer to those above us; superiors hold both the decision-making powers and the responsibilities that come with that.

A different mindset (or at the very least a shift in mindset) is required on the part of *both* people involved in the equation to change the established power relationship. As children start to grow up and particularly when they reach the “real world”, parents start to cede some of their control over their offspring. No longer can they tell a child what to do and expect compliance. The weight of their opinions and advice now depends very much on the mindset of the child and how s/he views the relationship. The parent's role may shift to one of trusted advisor. In this case, the defined role of a “parent” evolves, but the parent will always remain a parent in the relationship.

In the case of a boss-employee situation at a small company, moving responsibilities around and changing people's mindsets may necessitate changing out roles as well. If both “boss” and “employee” start making decisions that affect the company, if they share the benefits and risks of those decisions, do they then both become “co-owners”? What if one continues to write the checks? What if one person's name is attached to the name of the company? If the company is small enough, the actual labels might not matter as much, and people will split decisions and tasks based on their own needs at the time. The roles do not have to dictate how the power is allocated, and the labels may become moot. However, public perception and internal politics may require a new order of business cards with new titles that convey the new relationships. The role of “employee” can shift over time to one of "manager" or "partner" which mirrors a change in the relationship between the involved parties.

The designer—user relationship may share with the teacher—student relationship the fact that existing structures preclude major shifts in mindset. Though philosophically, teachers may believe that they are co-learners in a classroom with their students, in practice it would require an upheaval of the system for teachers to give up control of curriculum and how time is spent during, essentially, the taxpayer's school day.[3] Teachers may become “learners,” but the structures are set up so that students aren't empowered to become “teachers” themselves. Teachers will remain “teachers” and students will remain “students” unless the system itself changes.

Let’s consider the criteria and factors involved in shifting a designer—user relationship by looking at a different relationship shift: actor—spectator.

1 Long live the semi-colon.

2 And what does it mean that we even have to continue calling another person a “user”?

3 There are “un-schooling” movements afoot.

A Different Lens

Sometimes I find it helpful to look at design concepts as they might apply in a different field. Through drawing parallels between roles and actions, we can start to unearth processes, mindsets, and emotions that might otherwise go unnoticed within our own habits and perspectives within a familiar field. In this case, I would like to look at the idea of designing “with” vs. designing “for” through the parallel world of theatre. Just as there are movements toward involving the end user or client in the design process, there are proponents who aim to involve audience members in the creation and performance of theatre.

[Figure 1] charts a breakdown of roles across a spectrum of theatre experiences.[4]

Questions to Consider (for Figure 1)

- What is the Actor giving up when s/he becomes an Actor-Facilitator?
- What is the Actor gaining when s/he becomes an Actor-Facilitator?
- What additional skills are necesary for an Actor to become an Actor-Facilitator?
- What is required of the Specator to become a Spect-actor? To become an Actor-Facilitator?

What Theatre of the Oppressed Looks Like

Theatre of the Oppressed as developed by Augusto Boal typically involves a theatre troupe, a group of actor-facilitators, leading participants through a theatre experience that helps them to quesion their assumptions and rehearse solutions to social problems. More intensively, this would also involve the theatre troupe going into a community and working with participants to define the social issues and problems within that local context that the theatre experiences will address. The process looks something like:

- Theatre games to get to know each other.
- "Priming" activities/games to build trust.
- Theatre games, methods, and image-work to col-

4 My training is in design, not in theatre. While there are caveats to the fidelity of information I may proclaim concerning design theory, even more caveats apply to my interpretations of theatre history and theory. For full disclosure, here is my limited experiences with Applied Theatre. For most of these experiences, I would consider myself as being on the "audience" or "learning" side of things, but in the spirit of Theatre of the Oppressed, everyone ended up participating and doing and even facilitating.

- Intro to Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop with Julian Boal. As a group, explored issues of gender equality as a means to learn both methods of and how to facilitate Theatre of the Oppressed workshops.
- Theatre Action Project (TAP): teaching artist training in applied theatre and pedagogy of the oppressed techniques/philosophy
- Theatre Action Project (TAP): observed a 4-day performance of Courage to Stand with Austin fourth graders (http://theatreactionproject.org/prog_ip_cts.html)
- Owl’s Nest Retreat (women who use arts to engage community) where the faciliators and many of the participants teach or lead Applied Theatre programs. We used Forum Theatre techniques and activities to define and work through issues of bureaucracy, life balance, and gender equality.
- Audience member of Changing Lives Youth Ensemble (show about internet bullying) and Voices Against Violence (show and facilitation about abusive relationships/power struggles)
- Watched: *Jana Sanskriti: Theatre in the Field* documentary
- Read/Applied: *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue* handbook by Michael Rohd full of theatre games

[Figure 1]

THEATRE	Traditional Play	Epic Theatre (Brecht)	Improv	Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal)	Theatre of the Oppressed Training
Role A	Actor	Actor	Actor-Facilitator	Actor-Facilitator	current Actor-Facilitator
Role B	Spectator	Spectator	Spectator + Idea-Shouter-Outer	Spect-actor	future Actor-Facilitator
Who defines topic?	Actor	Actor (using audience research)	Spectator	Actor	Actor-Facilitator
Who creates production?	Actor	Actor	Actor	Actor + Spect-actor	Actor-Facilitator

laboratively define a local social justice issue.

- Theatre troupe creates a play or scenes that addresses the social issue that includes the roles of: oppressor, oppressed, and by-standers.
- Theatre troupe performs a play once, with a negative ending indicating current conditions.
- Actor-facilitators stop the action and discuss the scene and issues with the audience.
- Theatre troupe performs the scene a second time, with the added factor that at any time, an audience member (who Boal termed a "spect-actor") can yell "stop" and take the place of an actor on stage to try to change the course of events.
- Continued discussion of whether interventions worked, why or why not.
- Repeat scenes as necessary. (Over short-term and long-term.)

Theatre of the Oppressed Goals

The goals for the "spect-actors" are not that they will necessarily that they will also become actors (although some will be inspired to that course of action). The goal is for people to be able to practice and rehearse revolutionary actions that they can use in real life. The goal is to present scenes that have real-life correlations, so people can practice the actual words they might use or how they would actually act in a future situation. I have seen a TAP "Courage to Stand" production where fourth graders stepped up to the stage to realize that confronting a bully would only make them another target, whereas power in numbers, befriending a target, or distracting the bully might be better tactics. UT's Voices Against Violence productions allow "spect-actors" to detect warning signs of abusive relationships, to question their own role in preventing abuse, and to rehearse methods of supporting friends who may or may not be aware of their own abusive relationship. We can only learn these things through experience and practice.

So what does this have to do with Design?

Compare both the process and goals of Theatre of the Oppressed to Emily Pilloton's Studio H initiative, where she is co-teaching a design studio shop class to high school students in rural North Carolina. (http://www.studio-h.org/curriculum)

- Both necessitate local investment and engagement of the facilitators with the local community in both defining the problems and working toward solutions.
- Both shift the role of the traditionally passive observers to active participants throughout entire process.
- Both empower participants to rehearse skills they may need later on in life: With Theatre of the Oppressed, it's revolutionary words and actions. With Studio-H, it's critical thinking and design thinking.
- Both necessitate a shift in the role of the creator, a power and control shift, and a shift in mindset.

[Figure 2]

DESIGN	"Traditional" Design	Designing "for" 1	Designing "for" 2	Designing "with"	Co-Design
Role A	Designer	Designer	Designer	Designer-Facilitator	Co-Designer
Role B	Customer	User	User	User/Co-Creator during research phases	Co-Designer thruout design process
Who defines project?	Designer's Client	Designer's Client + Designer (using user research to inform insights)	Designer (using ethnography to inform insights); User becomes client	Designer + User	Co-Designers
Who creates end-product?	Designer	Designer	Designer	Designer with user input/insight	Co-Designers
Examples?	Most graphic design (tasking creatives to solve others' problems defined by yet others)	Jodi Forlizzi; Bill Gaver; Project H Hippo Roller (tasking creatives from afar to solve problems defined through designer's lens of user needs)	Samuel Mockbee/Rural Studio (importing creatives to solve local problems); The Life Straw water filter (creatives define local problem and solve)	Liz Sanders; Project H Learning Landscape; Chris Le Dantec (combining creatives with locals to define and solve local problems)	Liz Sanders; Emily Pilloton/Studio H (empowering local creative capital to solve local problems current and future)

Questions to Consider (for Figure 2)

- What is the Designer giving up when s/he becomes a Co-Designer?
- What is the Designer gaining when s/he becomes a Co-Designer?
- What additional skills are necesary for an Designer to become a Designer-Facilitator?
- What is required of the User to become a Co-Designer?
- How far can ethnographic design research get you in this spectrum?

Shifting Roles?

Obviously, not all designers will gravitate toward the right side of the chart. It's a whole different beast. If you do go there, you're no longer a traditional designer. Truly designing "with" means you take on an enlarged role of "designer-facilitator" or "co-designer". Suddenly "designer" also means social activist, educator, and facilitator on top of the familiar critical thinker, problem solver, researcher, and form maker. True co-design[1] requires:

- Respect
- Trust
- Faith
- Empathy
- Open-mindedness
- Flexibility/Adaptability
- Facilitation Skills
- Educator Skills

Design research and ethnographic research will get you part of the way there. The role of ethnographic research is to serve as a method for the designer to find the respect, trust, and empathy that are necessary for designing both "for" and "with". No longer is it okay to design in a vacuum of designers getting to decide what the public will consume, should consume, and needs to consume—specially if we are talking about design for the social sector. Using co-creation methods, and actually listening and valuing the voices of those whom you are designing for (and with) is another important step in moving toward the spectrum to designing "with".

However, the most important step is a change in the designer's mind. Are you working with people, for them, or for your client? Are you working toward improving the quality of life and sustainability of our world? How can we do this if our work and impact ends when we leave—as it often does when we design "for"?

I have been touched by the change I have seen and experienced at Theatre of the Oppressed productions. I believe if we want to truly have a positive impact on our world, we have to step back and reevaluate our industry and how we work based on how much impact we'll have on a larger scale. By larger scale, I do not mean tackling bigger problems in an abstract or inefficient way. I mean we need to ask if we are affecting change for one entity at one point in time, or can what we design and how we interact with people have a lasting impact? Can we create experiences and leave seeds that continue to grow[2] after we as designers leave the table? That is what Theatre of the Oppressed troupes do when they invest in a community for the longterm and empower spectators to question unjust practices embedded into their lives and then let them rehearse revolutionary actions in small ways in safe spaces over time. That is what Emily Pilloton is doing at Studio H by investing in that community and working with the next generation of thinkers that will have an impact on that community—this year and thirty years from now.

When we reach toward designing "with", we also aim to inspire change and empowerment among the people we are collaborating with. It's a position that humbles the designer: no you cannot solve the world's problems, but you can collaborate with others to leverage our collective creative capital to put a dent in those same problems.

1 I'm not sure there are any completely legitimate existing examples yet, even though Pilloton's "design as education" is pretty damn close. But how does that extend into the rest of the industry?

2 Shout-out to Dewey.