

Include 2009

Who are they?

Student voices about 'the other'

Megan Strickfaden and Ann Heylighen, K.U.Leuven, Belgium
megan.strickfaden@asro.kuleuven.be

Abstract

In addressing inclusive approaches in design education, the study reported on in this paper aims to understand whether and how design students are trained in focusing their interests on the people they design for. To this end, we explore how design students perceive and refer to 'the other' while designing. Two ethnographic studies provide insight into how 'the other' is characterised and defined, and how students talk about and address other people during design. The findings reveal challenges involved in students' encounters with others and, as such, may further inform discussions about (learning to) design for those with needs beyond the normative.

Keywords

Design education, people-centred design, 'the other'

Introduction

Inclusive design necessitates design approaches that are human-centred instead of designer-centred [1]. In order to design inclusive artefacts and environments, designers must understand real people in their everyday and not so everyday lives [2]. These people show a diversity of preferences and needs, which may considerably differ from the designer's. Design students in architecture, for instance, tend to become increasingly remote from the way lay people describe and prioritise architecture over the years of their studies, gradually taking architects' language codes, stylistic preferences and rituals [3]

Designing artefacts or environments that embrace the diversity of preferences and needs of real people requires going beyond the 'usual suspects' and not sticking just with your 'user' [2]; it requires genuine interest in 'the other', which may refer to different dimensions of diversity, e.g., age [4], gender [5], disability [6,7] or ethnicity. For instance, when students at the University of West-Australia designed housing for an Aboriginal community, the prevailing notion of design turned out to yield projects that entirely ignore indigenous housing needs [8].

Furthermore, the very act of designing forces the designer/self to encounter and confront audiences, *i.e.* other people. Often, however, these encounters involve absent or even imaginary people, especially in design education where there is no real client [9].

Our study explores whether and how design students are trained in focusing their interests on the people they design for. Two ethnographic studies provide insight into how design students perceive and refer to 'the other' while designing. It presents how 'the other' is characterised and defined, so as to better understand how students talk about and address other people during design. Our findings demonstrate that, although

principles of participatory or human-centred design are being taught, they are not always fully understood and definitely not fully applied by students during design.

2 The other

Theorists studying the range of individuals within society have looked for ways to better understand the idea of 'the other'. It is key to continental philosophy (e.g., Hegel, Fichte, Lacan), where 'the other' is considered as the obverse of the self/same [10]. Issues around the notion of inside/outside [11] are relevant because individuals begin from the perspective of the self/inside while comparing differences to those outside [10]. Although individuals are part of groups (also considered insiders) there are always similarities and universal differences within, meaning that the ability for an individual to identify with others who are similar (e.g., in age, gender, ethnicity) holds a greater sense of comfort. Even so, the simple act of perceiving 'the other' always ends as a confrontation. It can be likened to encountering other people in our daily lives: it is unavoidable and natural. Research demonstrates that actual connections leading to empathy with other people are further developed through closeness and an intimate understanding of the other's circumstances and lives [12].

It follows then, that designers *need* others to develop an understanding of and an empathy with people. The difficulty is that designers have to develop strategies to move outside of their own worlds of self/insider to design for those who are different/outsider. This is particularly challenging as designers, in general, tend to hold their audience at arms length, confronting them only in abstract or as ideals [13]. Rather than developing strategies designers may use to become more intimate with the people they are designing for, this study explores how design students actually perceive 'the other' while designing. This exploration provides insights into the challenges involved in students' encounters with others, which may further inform discussions about (learning to) design for those with needs beyond the normative.

3 Procedures

This research is based on two ethnographic field studies, each following a group of senior level students in consumer product design: one in the UK (3rd year undergraduate in a bachelor's programme) and one in Canada (1st year master's programme). Each field study involves objective participant observation, *i.e.*, the groups are unknown to the researcher, who is defined in the context of the study as investigating design processes. In an ethnographic study no leading questions are asked and only naturally occurring talk is recorded and analysed. Minimal engagement between the researcher and participants occurs during the studies, meaning that the resulting data are gathered in a relatively passive way.

Both groups are followed from the onset to the end of one design project where individual students are working towards a finished artefact. In the UK twelve male students are designing airline meal trays, in Canada four male and four female students are designing sports eyewear. During observation the majority of one-to-one and group discussions are videotaped, capturing real-time talk that occurs during designing. Over the course of six weeks in the UK, approximately 49 hours of talk are recorded and later

transcribed word-for-word into 159 pages. Over seven weeks in Canada nearly 75 hours of talk are collected resulting in 443 pages of transcripts.

One core teacher guides the UK group in a module titled *User-centred Design*; two teachers guide the Canadian group focusing on *Studio Practice*. All teachers explicitly ask students to consider the user. In the UK, students are given a full day to collect and report primary research gained via interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. In the first week, the Canadian students are expected to develop and present (verbally and visually) customer profiles, a specific approach to user-centred design. The UK students are designing for the average airline customer and in-flight attendants, the Canadians for a subculture connected to sporting, e.g., kayaking, skydiving or mountain biking. Inclusive design is not addressed explicitly in teaching or design projects.

4 Student voices

The resulting data sets are rich in detailed nuances that provide snapshots into the values, language and interests of the students and teachers observed. The data reveal how complex it is for students to move outside of their comfort zones towards less designer-centred approaches. Interestingly, the data illustrate that both groups take a similar approach to confronting and handling the absent audience despite the highly different teaching approaches, background experiences and geographical locations.

4.1 Students and teachers observed

For the most part both groups of students speak of ‘the other’ very generally, using words like “people”, “everyone” or “someone”. Interestingly the UK students rarely mention “users” or “customers”, while the Canadians frame discussions around terms like the “user” or “audience”. In addition, both groups typically refer to ‘the other’ as ungendered using “people”, “someone” and “everyone”. The Canadians frequently use the word “you” to refer to someone other than themselves. For instance, in discussing the experience of kayaking a student says, “*Well it’s because you are upside down in the water and it’s even worse when you are paddling*”. This is a clear example of a student’s attempt to differentiate from himself and build empathy with an imagined user. The all-male UK group speaks most often of males, referring to females only three times. The mixed-gender Canadian group is more balanced in their referencing of gender. Even so, the word “guy(s)” is used most frequently, while “girls”, “he/she” or “male/female” are used less often. Another significant observation in Canada is that female students are more apt to speak about males, balancing their discussions between genders, while male students mostly speak only of males. Both groups infrequently mention children—two times in the UK study and more often in Canada. The term “kids” is used often by the Canadians but refers to youths or those younger than the designers.

Along with naming ‘the other’ as generic, people’s needs, desires and feelings are highly generalised and easily connected to the students’ own values. The UK group has only four in-depth discussions about the experiences of people; yet, these too are generalised. In Canada there are some testimonials from actual people about how individuals experience the sports they are designing for. Unlike in the UK, students speak consistently of experiences, which may be expected as the design brief focuses on sub-cultures. Both groups tend to polarise people’s experiences into two distinct factions. For example, one UK student says, “*It comes down to the type of user.*”

Whether people want to be served or do they want to be active in the part of the service". A second student states that the people they are designing for want either "functionality" or "experience". And finally, a Canadian student talks about "hard-core motorcyclists" versus what she calls the "weekend warrior". Of these two groups she says, "... they are two distinct subcultures. The weekend warrior—it's generally someone with a mid-life crisis who wants to rebel a bit".

Although both groups are asked to perform user-centred design, all students typically default to what they find comfortable, using information about people close to them to understand the other. A UK student explicitly says, "*I started with flat and family and friends*"; and a Canadian student contends, "*my brother used to do that*". Interestingly, all students across both studies reference family and friends consistently when queried about their user group.

Both groups speak infrequently of cultural differences related to geography or ethnicity. In the UK there is a discussion about the Jewish tradition of eating Kosher food, and the only non-British student says "*Britain is just a throw away culture. We don't recycle anything. We just tie it up and put in a big black bag and throw it out the door.*" When the Canadians are discussing motorcycle helmets, a student brings up the example of "Nazi helmets"; and when discussing surfing another student says, "*nobody wears sunglasses except one crazy German guy we saw*". Cultural differences are thus used in a dramatic way to express how something is unusual or outside of the norm they are designing for. Surprisingly, neither of the groups refer to people with different capabilities—be it physical or mental, permanent or temporary.

4.2 Variations/nuances

Evidently, each group shows distinct nuances specific to inside culture. These are attributed to differences in group make-up, leadership and the flow of conversation. Although the majority of references to 'the other' are generic, the Canadians are more inclusive in that they reference a broader range of people. For instance, they refer to "old people" and "seniors" as a representation of aging groups in society. They also attempt to attribute their audience with more idiosyncratic characteristics, such as "Mr. Personality" or "Average Joe".

Other than family and friends, the UK group does not refer to specific personalities; however, the Canadian group discusses famous people from film, television and sports. Various Canadian students use the ideal of movie stars such as "Marlon Brando" or "James Dean" (relating to motorcycling) and real life surfer "Kelly Slater". These famous personalities aid the students in giving life to their audience, making them an individual they can identify with. Even so, references to famous people are relatively infrequent compared with generic ones.

Another notable difference between both groups is the overall manner in which they discuss people. That is, the UK group has a tendency to discuss individual people whereas the Canadian group discusses groups of people.

5 Discussion

Despite being at the senior level, the students observed in this study do *not* or *rarely* reference 'the other' spontaneously in a way that illustrates intimate knowledge of other people; nor do they demonstrate any understanding of the variances in people's

preferences and needs. Both student groups predominantly identify with themselves as the user, suggesting a designer-focused strategy towards 'the other'. Many students even admit explicitly to working from their memory of an age group or a certain experience by stating *"I am going from memory here ..."*. Even when the students have presumably completed research about a user group quite different than themselves they seem to defer to talking about themselves. This raises questions such as, did the students do their research, have enough time researching, or is research an adequate method for students to use towards designing for to the other? These actions in the reality of the students' design environment remind us that trying to understand, let alone empathise with 'the other' is not as natural a process as imagined.

In addition, the students do not stop to consider that they may be mirroring their own assumptions and generalisations about people. One UK student says, *"when I looked at what people wanted then it seemed that people really liked to eat off of white"*. This illustrates how a student is translating something stated by a potential user into information that can be tangibly embedded into a design. Furthermore, there is a lack of depth in what students believe their audiences think and feel. They often refer to people wanting something "fun", "functional" or "surprising", without investigating what these mean to others. Even when the students undertake primary research, they tend to generalise what their interviewees said. One UK student says, *"we got feedback that meals were un-experienced"* and a Canadian student contends, *"a gimmick—something to do—it shows in the research that people would like that"*; yet neither explore what it means to be "un-experienced" or how a "gimmick" may be user-defined.

Our study, then begs the question: who is 'the other' for these students? It is speculated that the students do not engage with finding out about the user as 'other' because they are driven by different forces. A major force, our study suggests, may be leadership (teachers): when considering 'the other', students seem to implicitly think of themselves first and of their teacher(s) second. There seems to be a natural desire to please their teacher and to focus on his or her needs or desires. This is exemplified within each group through patterns in conversation where the students are clearly responding to their teacher above any consideration of user. Moreover, ultimately students are assessed by their teacher, not by the user. Other forces may be a strong group member (colleague), group composition (students' interaction with one another and the teacher) or the focus of the task at hand. It is clear from our study that group make-up affects the way 'the other' is perceived and discussed. This is evidenced through the all-male group predominantly referring to male users while the mixed group provides a more balanced representation of gender.

6 Conclusions

In drawing conclusions, it is important to bear in mind that, from the students' perspectives, they are juggling many things at once: processing the project parameters, developing concepts, interacting with classmates and teacher(s), completing the task at hand, responding to the teacher. Students seem to be torn by the need to perform for their teachers while continuing to consider people who are neither present nor stakeholders in their project. They focus their work on the artefact's functional qualities and, as a result, struggle to consider and maintain the audience at the forefront. This is a

reminder that designing for an absent audience holds some major flaws. It is virtually impossible to develop empathy when no level of intimacy is present *i.e.*, 'the other' remains positioned as distant, untouchable—simply "someone" or "anyone" else. This perspective pushes other stakeholders (teachers, colleagues) to the forefront where they take the position of user-audience.

Our study explores the reality of two groups designing and how they perceive 'the other'. It paints a bleak picture of how design students are characterising the people they are designing for, while revealing that as a community of educators we need to establish more concrete ways of bridging the gap between self and other.

Acknowledgments

This research is funded by the European Research Council under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 201673. The authors would like to thank the participants for their honest and open participation in this project.

References

1. **Toft, AE** (2003) Interview with Prof. Whitney P. In Toft, AE (ed) *Design in a Global World*. EAAE News Sheet 66: 23
2. **Kirah, A** (2008) *Meaning Mining Rebels. Mindset and Methodologies: Creating Value Through People Centered Design and Concept Making*. Brussels: Presented at U²: Understanding Users.
3. **Wilson, MA** (1996) The Socialization of Architectural Preference. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 16(1):33-4
4. **Bowen, SJ** and **Chamberlain, PM** (2008) Engaging the Ageing: Designing Artefacts to Provoke Dialogue. In Langdon, P, Clarkson, J and Robinson, P (eds) *Designing Inclusive Futures*. London: Springer-Verlag. 35-44
5. **Heynen, H** and **Baydar, G** (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity*. London: Routledge.
6. **Dischinger, M** (2000) *Designing for All Senses*. PhD dissertation. Göteborg: Chalmers University.
7. **Devlieger, P, Renders, F, Froyer, H** and **Wildiers, K** (2006) *Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City*. Antwerp: Garant.
8. **Pedersen, A** and **Crouch, C** (2002) Introducing Universal Design to a Colonial Context. In Christophersen, J (ed) *Universal Design*. Norwegian State Housing Bank. 289-314
9. **Schön, D** (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
10. **Tremlett, P** (2003) *The Self and the Other in Disciplinary Anthropology*. *Anthropology Matters Journal*. 2003-2
11. **Wolcott, HF** (1999) *Ethnography a Way of Seeing*. USA: Altamira Press
12. **Morrow, R** (2000) Architectural Assumptions and Environmental Discrimination: The Case for More Inclusive Design in Schools of Architecture. In Nicol, P and Pilling, S (eds) *Changing Architectural Education: Towards a New Professionalism*. London & New York: Taylor and Francis group. 43-48
13. **Till, J** (2005) Lost Judgment. *EAAE Transactions on Architectural Education* 26:164-183