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## Disrupting Design Education through Designing for One

### Eleven Variables That Can Extend the Education Experience beyond Practicing Practice

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# Disrupting Design Education through Designing for One: Eleven Variables That Can Extend the Education Experience beyond Practicing Practice

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*Abstract: This article shares the results of research into the designing for one approach, a term referring to a (student) designer designing for one individual in which the individual's specific interests, accessible tools, capabilities, etc. shape the designer's process and are reflected in the resulting bespoke design. This particular study looked at four individual case studies in which design students of diverse design disciplines and educational levels from universities in the US and in Belgium used this approach. The cases were analyzed by a panel of twenty-one design education experts looking specifically to identify factors that were different within this approach from that of the educator's own practice, factors that potentially had shifted the educational context and student experience from the known and routine into areas that were unfamiliar. Next to this, the analysis included over 200 pages of interview transcripts from students in the four cases, looking to identify how these identified factors impacted the student's experience. Using the participant's own voice to provide context to these points of difference, this article offers readers a list of eleven variables that were identified as factors which set the designing for one approach apart from standard, skills-based design education. A call to action for educators, the article proposes how these variables can facilitate a shift in learning to bring students experiences that challenge their discipline, medium, and processes.*

*Keywords: Design Education Approaches, Design Research Methodology, Research through Design, Designing for One, Participatory Design*

## Background

In 2012, the precursor to this research began as part of a project funded by the former Flemish Digital Research Institute (iMinds) that looked to identify how "smart" objects (the Internet of Things) could support a person with dementia, who was living at home. The research involved working with people with dementia in their homes, as well as carrying out observations and interventions in care facility dementia wards. These experiences led to the researchers' position that dementia was a lived experience (Lazar et al. 2017; Hendriks et al. 2018) and that, although one could draw similarities across the dementia population, individuals often needed personalization or specific support and tools that were particular to their own day-to-day experience (Gibson et al. 2019; Branco et al. 2017; López Gómez 2015; Langstrup 2013). Linking academic research to education, an applied research module was developed for Master's students (product design, interaction design, graphic design, animation, photography, etc.) in which this individualized research approach was used. Students began *designing for one*—working with one individual with dementia and identifying ways in which design might be able to ameliorate this person's life.

With continued iterations of the module, there developed an increased interest in this designing for one approach and how it was functioning within the design educational program and its impact on the student designers and their way of working. The engagement that the students were having with residents leaned on the tenets of human-centered design (Roth 1999) and the relationship between design and context of use (Sanders 2002). Next to this, the empathy that was generated from this engagement resulted in empathetic designers (Kouprie and Visser 2009) as well as student designers being engaged (even if briefly) in societal matters (Papanek

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quoted by Klein n.d.). This called for further investigation into the value of designing for one and how it was affecting the student's way of being within the action of designing. It called for analysis into why students were so engaged and motivated by these experiences in spite of their being "difficult" and even confrontational contexts. In terms of theoretical context, was it a model for education or a form of design participation? (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Andrea Wilkinson in an Early Designing for One Research Experience (Research through Design) in Which She and Her Colleague Observed, Tested Early Prototypes, and Co-designed Together with a Person with Dementia
*Source: Hendriks 2014*

## Positioning Designing for One within a Design Paradigm

With a primary focus on experience, a research study was organized that placed designing for one within the student-centered exploratory framework of Problem-based Learning (PBL). Unlike PBL's concept of triggers in which students begin with a set of predetermined information that is used to engage and motivate students toward a particular problem (Moallem et al. 2019), designing for one utilizes the relationship between student and participant as a context that offers motivation, engagement, problem definition, and learning. Like PBL's attempts to integrate "open-endedness" into a problem space (Moallem et al. 2019) designing for one also relies on working within the "unknown" (Boden 2007; Gero and Kumar 1993). This positions both PBL and designing for one as a counterweight against rigid design educational frameworks (Wilson and Zamberlan 2017) that have predetermined expectations attached primarily to learning outcomes and technical skill acquisition (Kelly 2019).

A new form of design participation (Lee 2006), designing for one can neither be fully placed within participatory design, in which a marginalized participant is accepted as a full design partner as a means to empower them (Bratteteig and Wagner 2016; Ehn 2008; Muller and Druin 2002) nor as co-design, in which a design is created through a collective process (Sanders and Stappers 2008; Sanders 2002). Instead, designing for one requires participatory interaction but does not define what this participation must look like or how it will impact the process, other than to say that participation based on a relationship between designer and participant by nature influences a designer's choices (Wilkinson and Hendriks 2022).

## *The Cases*

In order to explore designing for one further, over the course of two years, four individual student module case studies used the designing for one approach across four different design educational disciplines (interaction design, graphic design, advertising, and digital design), both locally in Belgium and abroad in the US.[2] The four cases ran across design coursework within bachelor-degree, discipline-specific programs and each explored a different topic: e-inclusion (marginalized communities and the increased shift of local government to communicate digitally), supporting neighborhood initiatives and engagement in a multicultural neighborhood, supporting people with dementia in a residential care facility, and city-center revitalization. Documented with photos, observations, and post-module interviews, these four cases were subsequently analyzed by twenty-one design education experts, looking specifically at elements within the designing for one approach that distinguished it from standard design education practice (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Lead Lecturer in One of the Student Module Cases Discussing with Students on Location within a Meeting Room at a Skilled Nursing Facility
*Source: Wilkinson 2018*

## *Materials and Methods*

To identify how these cases were operating differently compared to traditional design modules or what Schön referred to as courses in which students are practicing practice (2017), the designing for one module had to be analyzed against existing design curricula. A workshop entitled "Residue of Interaction" was held at Decipher, the AIGA Design Education Conference at the University of Michigan, Penny Stamps School of Design, USA, in which twenty-one international design educators worked together in five small groups to analyze initial research findings.[3] The workshop utilized a visualization process called mapping, in which participants collectively create a workshop artefact while they interact in small group participation. This artefact in turn becomes evidence of the discussions and findings of the participants and can be

[2] The cases are discussed in further detail in the doctoral dissertation: Designing for one: how designing for one enriches the student design process: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/28031/.
[3] View the film at: https://youtu.be/I6O1tuTZ3ws.

later analyzed as a data set. A tool widely used within participatory and co-creation research, the map is the result of collaboration between workshop participants and facilitates discussion as well as conflict (Schepers et al. 2013) and allows researchers to come "close to practice without being in practice" (Ørngreen and Levinsen 2017, 77).

This particular mapping focused specifically on the following areas: the "residue" of the workshop participant's own experience of how an individual has impacted their own design practice, unpacking the student experience, identifying what a student might potentially take away from the experience, identifying points of difference between the designing for one approach as applied to the Student Module Cases and their own modules at their own institution, identifying potential organizations and people-groups that might best utilize this individualized approach, and matching this approach to the skills and competences identified by the AIGA whitepaper Designer 2025.

The participants were specifically recruited for the workshop based on their backgrounds and included emeritus design professors at some of the USA's top design programs as well as design educators serving on the AIGA's Design Education Committee's Steering Board; the list ranged from heads of design departments (and thus curricula) to well-published international design education academics, each a critically engaged design educator. Participants were informed beforehand that the results of the workshop would contribute to ongoing research, and they willingly provided the necessary consent for the use of their photos, the collected workshop results, their image, and for those interviewed, their voice.

The findings were transcribed and collated together in a physical map of the participants' collective responses (see Figure 3). Two rounds of maximum variation sampling were used to find patterns that "cut across cases" (Palinkas et al. 2015).

Figure 3: Workshop Participants Discussing How Designing for One Could Be Applied in Different Contexts
*Source: Wilkinson 2018*

Next to the workshop participants, reflections from the Student Module Case lead lecturers were also integrated into this data set. Collated together, and analyzed according to theme (Braun and Clarke 2006), this data pointed to factors that were contributing to the differences being experienced by both students and lecturers, which included differences relating to the participation of the user, differences relating to the research methodology, differences relating to the context or environment, etc.

## Results: Embedding Participants in the Designing for One Space

Participants in the Residue of Interaction workshop began by sharing personal stories about the impact of individuals on their own design practice. One participant, for instance, shared that her brother with learning difficulties had been the reason for her to actively problem-solve and design forms of communication from an early age, whilst another suggested that working with a local blind person within a class project had radically changed her perception of empathy and prejudice.

When participants moved from their own personal experiences to reading the experiences of students who had already designed for one, they suggested that the students were taking away more than skills; they were taking away experiences and real insights into designing for people. One suggested that students appeared to develop a relationship with the users and that this relationship allowed for the students to work with real design constraints. Another suggested that it seemed to reveal the power of storytelling to students. One participant indicated that it showed the importance of primary research and another expressed that it perhaps revealed to students the value of showing a deep interest in another person. Finally, one participant suggested that in some cases the computer became less of "the answer" to students and became simply "just a tool."

The design of the mapping included time for groups to discuss the designing for one approach and welcomed reflections on the riskiness of it. In some cases, participants suggested that their own school curriculum wasn't open enough for projects to fail, and that in projects such as some of the examples within the workshop, the possibility for failure was real. Another group discussed student maturity and how working individually with people outside of the student's own life-context could be challenging. One group exchanged views about working within a user's own private home and how this held all sorts of risks but also offered high rewards and richness of experience.

Initial analysis of the workshop results suggested that one of the primary discussion points was context—how contextual understanding can add value to a design proposition and how this grounds a student designer's confidence to make decisions. While discussing riskiness, participants also related the students' experience to that of their own students. Were their students having the same sort of experiences? Were they encountering similar contexts? Were these insights being generated by other means? Other conversations began to discuss if this approach was somehow preparing students for the future. One group suggested it helped prepare students to work with complexity and populations with shifting needs. Another group suggested it prepared students to look at ways to bridge the physical and digital by teaching them to analyze people's needs, wants, values, and patterns. And yet another group thought it broached the subject of a designer's core values by working authentically and by connecting these values to services.

Although participants were enthusiastic, they suggested that planning for such a student experience within rigid curricula structures would be difficult, and that the effort involved in prepping for this level of interaction, (i.e., the logistics of moving students from one place to the next, as well as the ethical concerns of working with marginalized groups) was challenging in itself. The key takeaway—from the workshop results as part of the conference proceedings as well as from the interviews post-workshop—was the relevancy of bringing students in contact with diversity, challenges, and the needs of real people, and how these confines allow design to be an action instead of an outcome.

### *Identifying Difference as a Means to Identify Potential Change Agents or Variables*

Looking at the collated points of difference as one data set, it was not that the modules in the Student Module Cases were fundamentally different to other modules the workshop participants

and the lead lecturers taught, but there were elements that felt radically disparate; aspects of what were seemingly familiar course modules had been altered or changed and this had impacted not only the student, but the lecturer as well.

For the module lecturers, these questions and reflections were equally mirrored. For one lecturer, it filled a gap that her students had surrounding their own discipline and yet at the same time, another lecturer called on designing for one's ability to equalize the power balance between student and lecturer, placing them both on the same page in terms of problem definition and thinking through the project together.

> I got to a point of crisis. My student was in crisis about how to solve a problem that we couldn't find a solution to. And I got to a point of crisis as a teacher, where I didn't know how to solve the problem either. And we were right there together trying to solve the problem. And as an academic to get back to that point where you're learning new material, how to create a better interaction, how to watch more closely, what are we missing, how else can we frame the problem. That's academic gold. That is…that fills your soul. That is food for an academic who has been teaching for 15 years, a real learning experience, brand new information.

The analysis of the participants' contribution led to the following clusters of points of difference.

## 1. Participation of Real Users

Not surprisingly, participants noted that the hyper-focused working with one user/participant was different to many of their course modules that focused on designing for user groups or demographics. For one participant, the participation of an individual meant that "it's a very individualized solution for one person—and not for a group/community like our courses are generally focused on." Another participant noted that direct participation with an individual user led to "more interpersonal impact than my typical classes" whilst another participant added that this interpersonal impact would aid a student's motivation through their own "self-experience." One of the workshop participants described this further, describing the proximity as being a form of attentiveness: "I think it's really important to offer students this ability to design in a way they are attending to other's experiences." For one of the lecturers of the Student Module Cases, the participation of a user meant that student reflections were "more considered" and the students had "a different sort of awareness" for their project and its design. Another proposed that designing for one required students to be present, a chance "to have students realize that they are taking the pulse of an interaction in time." Other educators discussed it in terms of authenticity: "this is all real person to real person" one participant noted. Participants offered up examples from their own classes in order to show the difference. Whereas in designing for one the students met with individual users, in many of their classes students were limited to going to "other students for their participants/feedback." Finally, one workshop participant reflected on the potential of participation, suggesting that, even if it was small, the interaction between designer and participant possessed a lot of possibility:

> I still feel at the same time a huge accountability in a way…I think breaking things down into small pieces. Just a small exchange with somebody can change things, being impactful in ways that are overlooked.

## 2. Dissemination

Specifically for the lecturers participating in the Student Module Cases, the module's dissemination was voiced as being different to other modules. When compared to other modules, the documentation of a student's project often stops at a progress journal, final power point pitch presentation, and the mockup handed in. In three of the Student Module Cases, case movies were made that summarized the student's experience and the other case included a twenty-minute radio interview on a local radio station.[4]

Because the cases were part of the research, these extra elements of dissemination brought with them an additional layer of reflection. "Documenting the student project in this way allowed for others to understand what we do and what we value in our discipline" one lecturer suggested. Another added, "the student and their process is on display instead of only focusing on the end result." One of these longer films, Digital Designers as Democratic Innovators,[5] was submitted and presented at REDO as part of the Cumulus Design Education Conference in Kolding, Denmark. The longest of the films, Designing the Personal,[6] also served as the conclusion to the project. It was screened in a local café that was owned by one of the participants, consequently partially sponsored by the City of Genk's Department of Culture. The screening formally ended the students' participation in a way that was a form of what the lecturer considered "giving back to the participants" as a means of thanking them for their contribution to the project. This idea of giving back was also mirrored in the other cases. In Student Module Case 2, Advertising Ghent,[7] the students organized, cooked, and served a meal to the local neighborhood, taking over one of the monthly neighborhood meals as their final moment of participation with the neighborhood. This "students putting in extra effort" provided time for them to engage with the neighborhood and share the visions of their projects.

## 3. Students' Proximity to Theme/Topic/Users

For workshop participants who said their students did have contact with clients or participants, in comparison to designing for one, the educators said that the contact their students had was minimal; there was "much more interaction with users than my students" in designing for one and another suggested that there was "more interpersonal impact than my typical classes." For one of the lead lecturers, she saw this proximity as a means for her students to critically reflect on their understanding of the participant group:

> And there's this lovely marriage of the graphic design students in their 20s—that what for the graphic design students was effortless was very hard for the senior citizens and what was easy for the senior citizens was really hard for the graphic design students. And there was this lovely give and take of skills that none of them expected. And I didn't expect. I didn't know it was happening.

This particular point of difference by one of the Student Module Case lecturers was in stark contrast to one of the points of difference outlined by one of the workshop participants who suggested that at their school "the users are all the same type in nearly every class." This suggested that there was often little or no diversity in terms of demographics. One of the workshop participants suggested that their students needed to be confronted with uncertainty like this because uncertainty requires engagement, "when you're a designer, it's already about

[4] Listen to the radio interview: http://www.designingforone.com/?section=case-dementia.
[5] View the case study film Digital Designers as Democratic Innovators at: https://youtu.be/I6O1tuTZ3ws.
[6] View the case study film Designing the Personal at: https://youtu.be/Jbi2YxRd8ZM.
[7] View the case study film Project Muide Meulestede at: https://youtu.be/URfjbJcLYS8.

not knowing…designing for one puts them in even more of a position of not knowing until they engage deeply." Two participants voiced similar distinctions regarding frequency of participation, suggesting that their students typically only met participants or clients two or three times across a whole semester: "This has much more onsite interaction, not just one/two meetings/visits" and "there is much more interaction—from class to class—not just two or three times per semester."

## 4. Limitations

Perhaps different to some of the other points of difference, both workshop participants as well as Student Module Case lecturers identified designing for one as requiring the ability to work within limitations or restrictions. One lecturer suggested that designing for one asked a lot from students: "class organization, relies on flexibility of student" whilst another suggested that "having something off campus complicates things." Many of the workshop participants identified things that couldn't be changed in their own institutions: locations of coursework, scheduling, module descriptions, learning outcomes defined in ECTS documents, etc. In teams, the workshop participants discussed these limitations. While one lecturer suggested getting her peers on board would be difficult to manage, another suggested that her department head "could be convinced."

## 5. Module Expectations and Student Responsibility

For the workshop participants, several identified responsibility as being one of the key points of difference—the responsibility placed on students. From students in designing for one not having a predetermined participant to their having in some cases to cold call their participants, the educators found this a lot to place on the shoulders of the students. Some suggested that they specifically "would not require our students to do cold calling," where others praised a student's needing to "find their 'one'." One workshop participant suggested that "creative problem solving" might be "too hard" for undergraduate students, yet one case lecturer suggested that placing more responsibility on the student to find their own design problem caused students to have "vested interest in results." One of the lead lecturers suggested that the module filled in a gap in their expectations surrounding their own discipline.

> Design students struggle with being overwhelmed and wondering what they're doing it for or who they're doing it for. So, this project, what was fascinating, is when my students could see whose life they were impacting and watch their experiments positively impacting the life of an individual, it was heart-breaking for them. They were so moved by the fact that they were truly helping them with very small things.

Next to this, participants suggested that students had expectations about their own modules and designing for one might not fit into their expectations about what a design module should be or what would be required of them for a module. In the cases presented the students seemed "free in their use of their discipline," which at least one participant felt was risky if it were applied to a module in which there were specific skills students were supposed to be learning. Lead lecturers too suggested that working in this way asked a lot from students, suggesting in some cases that "students were not prepared for" this format or approach, that in fact the challenge was perhaps in some instances "too complex for them, too multidimensional." Yet, this same lead lecturer suggested that this is the direction that design education should go: "The designers of the future must dare and be able to tackle wicked problems. Design education should be a bit more ambitious in that regard."

## 6. The Module Setup

Many of the participants, both workshop educators as well as the lead lecturers of the case studies, found difference within the module itself in its setup and its execution. Some remarked on the intensity of two of the cases: "very intensive for a shorter time vs our 'intensive' modules which is 8 hours/week for 5 weeks" and others called out the location as being a point of difference—"the amount of time offsite." One of the participants suggested that the module's format, in which students were given time to create relationships with participants during class time, was distinct: "the longevity of the one-to-one relationship is not something that would come up in our courses." One workshop participant called the designing for one approach "very daring" simply because of the "things that could go wrong," what another participant called the "unexpected issues." These complexities were mirrored by lead lecturers in the cases. One distinguished his case module from other modules he taught in terms of the types of projects the two locations offered. Off-campus projects could deal with "wicked problems and complex social challenges" and projects on campus were more controlled; "simpler, so that you can zoom in more specifically on certain skills." The lecturers who had taught the case modules too identified differences within the setup. One found the work that it required in terms of set-up and management "a lot more intensive" than a standard discipline module, yet he also suggested that because it was different "you learn a lot from it" as an educator:

> What I didn't expect was how much I got to grow personally as a person and as an academic. Because what I didn't expect is, I went in there with this assumption that I knew how to handle this situation. And I got it all wrong over and over again. I approached the residents at Brooking Park and I did it all wrong. I talked too fast. I didn't lean down. I didn't—I got everything wrong. And I watched my stu—first of all, I watched my students say, after watching the residents, they told me what I was doing wrong, number one, which remember who you're supposed to be learning from, you know.

## 7. Design Participation Research Methodology

The educators within these collated data sets also identified research methodology as a key point of difference. Although many educators suggested that they were also teaching various research methods within their own modules, some saw the student experiences within these cases as actually allowing the student to really carry out and adapt research methodology: "This seems appropriate and controlled in terms of what we would do at our design school but this allows students to have an opportunity for primary research." Another participant also voiced a distinction by contrasting it against the methods they rely on: "Our students interview users and then compile personas." For the lead teachers from the case studies, they identified designing for one as an approach which required students to "use new methods or put methods into practice." In some cases, what students were calling activities became their primary methods: "students just respond to the needs of the moment."

## 8. Difference: Module Situation

Many of the participants identified the environment as being one of the most distinctive differences between their own modules and those defined in the Student Module Cases. Some specifically pointed to the difference in the idea of classroom: "At our school, classes are within a 'clinical' setting" whereas others pitched the designing for one module as being "real world non-studio based" module. Some participants found these real-world contexts lacking the formality of design research, as they taught in their own schools suggesting that "informal

meeting in someone's home" was different. They compared their course modules to the designing for one module in terms of its experience: "my courses are concrete design versus this multi-packed object learning experience" of which the context played an important part. One described the designing for one module as "actual immersion in context and learning from it about the nature of the problem itself." Likewise, the case lead lecturers agreed. In their experience, in the designing for one approach "learning happens in the world, rather than within the school walls."

## 9. Open Outcomes

Outcome was also a topic many responded to, with most suggesting that providing open-ended outcomes, particularly for bachelor students, was unusual. Some even suggested that the themes being discussed (such as healthcare or digital literacy) were perhaps too difficult for undergraduate students to deal with. This individualized approach meant that the lecturers too had to be flexible, requiring them to be flexible enough to allow for "non-traditional outcomes," and less rigid in their expectations and "use of their discipline" for the students. One of the workshop participants contrasted the designing for one approach with the "old school way of thinking" in which students would fashion portfolios based on which employers evaluated their worth. She saw the designing for one approach in terms of "the process that you take that makes you get there. I think that it's about highlighting—allowing students to kind of pay attention to that as much as they pay attention to that end piece."

One participant suggested that a safer option would be to have student designers "arrive at functional tools." Whereas most participant educators made a direct comparison to their own modules, others saw this as a reflection on their own practice. If designing for one bachelor students needed to define their own problems and find their own participants, then one participant reflected that her "students are facilitated perhaps too much!" Related to student responsibility, one workshop participant suggested that the students themselves had to be open to possibility, to "see what they can do for the context that they are working within."

## 10. Risk

When reflecting on their own classes and how much they allowed for unpredictability, one participant said: "my classes have a very low element of risk" and another said the designing for one module appeared to have a "high level of risk beyond my typical course module." Focusing mostly on the ethical matters relating to their institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB), one participant linked this riskiness to the ability of the lecturer, requiring lecturers that could steer and guide the project well. For other workshop participants, risk was embedded in the project's wanting to help people, in the sense that designers would need to be held accountable but also supported in their intent. Another participant suggested that there was a risk embedded in working with vulnerable or marginalized groups with another suggesting that the process itself was risky, not in execution, but because the "processes that happen in between are not very visible. They are intangible."

## 11. External Interest and Participation

The final point of difference identified in relation to their own modules was the inclusion of organizations and guest speakers. Participants found that the inclusion of experts added value by "contributing external feedback," which supplemented the expertise of the lecturers. The lead lecturers in the module also identified guest speakers and organizational contacts as adding value for the students: "A good guest speaker can help substantiate the relevance of a research challenge…guest speakers know their subject through and through." One lead lecturer suggested

that compared to his other course modules, working with off-campus organizations often means that students have to face "time and project management challenges" which they wouldn't otherwise have to deal with (Figure 4). Some of the workshop participants pitched the point of difference in terms of what function these external parties had: "our external partners are nearly always seen as 'clients'" with another participant adding "clients are not always users."


Figure 4: Designing for One Change Variables for Use within Design Education to Extend the Design Space beyond Routine Design (Download link: Google Drive)
*Source: Wilkinson 2020*

## *From Point of Difference to Variable Change-Agent: Using Difference as a Tool*

Educators who are motivated and engaged actively look for ways to improve and change their course modules from semester to semester. As individual reference points then, the above one-off quotes and reflections offer little more than points of comparison—how it is done at one school versus how it is done in another. However, when grouped together, a different picture emerges, one in which these differences become calls to action, potential change agents.

Individual variables listed above can be utilized as a means to encourage design programs and educators to take risks, to shift the experience of students into unknown territory causing them to respond in ways they wouldn't or couldn't otherwise.

In this way these variables are a collective call to action: guidelines for disrupting standard design educational practice through designing for one but also individual tools for developing engaging student experiences. A point of difference regarding the participation of a user becomes the impetus to include real participation of users. A point of difference regarding research methodology becomes the inclusion of real, applied research methodology. A point of difference regarding limitations calls for work that challenges disciplines in ways that students must blaze their own trail.

## Discussion: How Variables Can Facilitate a Shift in Learning

One of the case module lecturers summed up designing for one's potential. He had found his students were perhaps "not prepared for" this way of working and perhaps in some instances it was "too complex for them, too multidimensional" for them. However, he firmly believed this is the direction that design education should go. What makes these variables (the collective approach itself) valuable is that when designing for one is used in the classroom, it results in orchestrated, design participation experiences that align to the skills that are what the above module lecturer suggested: skills *required* for future designers.

Literature agrees. The designing for one approach places humans at the center of the design process, which Slavin suggests should be *mandatory* not only for future designers, but for designers creating now (2016). The experiences students have designing for one move them beyond simply reacting to the world, toward being "actively engaged in shaping the world around them" (Mendoza and Matyók 2013, 215). It allows students to develop an understanding of communication, of their craft, not in terms of just organizing information or logo creation, but rather as a powerful mechanism of social communication that goes beyond the aesthetic expectations of the medium (Resnick 2016).

Likewise, designing for one moves students away from message and product-centered design toward what the AIGA suggests are skills required for future-forward designers: toward research-based inquiry and decision making. This increases the importance of research that is "not just information retrieval at the beginning of the design process but ongoing feedback and evaluation of the consequences of design action" (Design Educators Community 2025 2017). Designing for one can be seen to be dynamic, an approach that engages students in a way that they can develop their own "appetite for enquiry" (Macdonald and MacLeod 2018, 215). With its focus on interaction, engagement, and participation, and supported by purposeful, guided reflections, these experiences can move from being tacit happenings to explicit learning that call on a "student's ability to adapt, innovate, empathize, persevere, and succeed through possible failures, solving problems through design thinking and critical analysis" (Kelly 2019, 44).

## Conclusion: Designing for One as a Starting Point

Examined through the lens of design educators, these designing for one change variables facilitate not only empathetic relationships but rich design experiences as well. As variables, it is not suggested that they are finite, nor do they offer a direct suggestion for implementation or call to action. Instead, they are starting points for designers and educators to reflect on how their own modules can be adapted, how they are relating theory to practice in their own departments, what sort of experiences they are offering their students, and the closed-loop nature of design education.

Looking at contrasting versions of these variables can also highlight the potential issues that can arise with maintaining routine design educational practice. Within a student's university career, there may be little variation of the module setup or timeframe, participatory methodology

may be taught but not necessarily practiced with authentic users, outcomes for briefs are predefined and leave little room for exploration. What has been suggested through these findings, then, is that embedded within the designing for one approach are variables that are not only relevant within the context of designing for one as a means to diversify educational practice, but that this is equally a diversification for both student designers as well as their lecturers.

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