

A sparkle in people's eyes

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This paper describes a specific design teaching methodology based on user-centered design, pioneered in Brazil in the 1980's, called Social Design (SD). It contextualizes SD in the national and international field, pointing out a main characteristic which makes this teaching practice worth considering in the co-design context: the identification of intrinsic motivation in the user to serve as the main guideline for project development.

1. Introduction

This paper describes a specific Brazilian Design education methodology first established at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), in the early 1980's and introduced at the Federal University of Espírito Santo (Ufes), in 1998, called Social Design (SD). This methodology, pioneered in Brazil, was the subject of two Master Course dissertations —Rita Couto, 1992 and Heliana Pacheco, 1996—, both at PUC-Rio, and a few articles on Design Education, one of which was presented at the Design Research Society (DRS) 2010 Conference in Montreal, about the use of SD in the first year of the design course at Ufes: "Involvement in the design student approach".

The aim here is to present briefly how this methodology started, its goals and some of its theoretical background. This paper aims to contextualize Social Design in the national and international field, pointing out characteristics which make this teaching practice worth considering in the co-design context. It also aims at differentiating this particular methodology in its approach based on the identification of intrinsic motivation in the user as the main guideline for project development, referred to as "a sparkle in the eye".

2. World context

Elizabeth Saunders and Pieter Jan Stappers (2008) in their paper "Co-creation and the new landscapes of design" present a research about how the practice of co-design began in the 1970's which provide the historical background from which Social Design was to emerge.

According to Saunders and Stappers (2008), although the terms co-creation (or cocreation), co-design (or codesign) are becoming increasingly popular —sometimes used with different meanings—, the practice of collective creativity has been around since the early 1970's, under the name of Participatory Design, mostly in Europe.

At the Design Research Society Conference in Manchester, England, in 1971, the theme was already Design Participation. Nigel Cross (1972), warned that it was time designers rethought and reoriented their approaches, including users in the design project decisions. Also Robert Jungk, in the Closing Comments of the proceedings, predicted that radical changes would occur, but that they would not be taking place before the end of the century (Cross, 1972: 121). He also stated that this participatory involvement was linked not only to the final decision, but also to the process of ideas generation.

There is a difference between traditional user-centered design —mostly a US phenomenon— and the participatory approach, mainly developed in Northern Europe. In the first classical term, designers and researchers work separately observing the user, studying and planning. In co-design, designers and researchers work together, they can even be the same person. Here the user is not passive, but someone who knows about the subject and passes this to the others with authority and "plays a large role in knowledge development, idea generation and concept development." (Sanders & Stappers, 2008:7).

This issue was also discussed when the architect Christopher Alexander, in 1975, recommended that users and students should all be involved together for a successful experience, with the user as part of the creation process and contributor to the development of the project (Alexander, 1976).

Participatory design methodologies spread slowly in the last 30 years. One of the reasons nominated is that:

⌘ participatory design has been seen as academic endeavor with little or no relevance for the competitive marketplace. In many parts of industry, investment in research is looked upon as a non-obvious step, investment in user studies a big and expensive step, and user participation a radical step into the unknown. This is beginning to change now as product development becomes increasingly knowledge-intensive, and industries and universities look to each other for collaborative explorations in innovation. (Sanders and Stappers, 2008:2)

3. The beginning at PUC-Rio

Following these developments, the issue of the inadequacy of conventional design methodologies in the Brazilian context began to be discussed. In the early 1980's, José Luiz Ripper and Ana Maria Branco —Head of Department and Course Coordinator of the Design Department, at PUC-Rio— were the main developers of the practice and teaching of SD, with extensive discussions and analysis on Design Education. Several issues relevant to the relationship between the efficiency of traditional design

methodologies and their use in professional training through education were discussed by questioning the place occupied by the market in the teaching of design practice.

In this new form of exercise, students were encouraged to look for design contexts outside of the University, engaging in real-life situations with users referred to as project partners instead of staying in controlled laboratory situations (Pacheco, 1996).

At PUC-Rio, Design Project disciplines began to invite the user and their demands to be considered in the development of the design solution. Inspired by Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian educator, it was believed that the capacity of the design students could be enhanced when they become aware of "how an individual's personal experience is connected to larger societal circumstances." (Pacheco, 2010).

According to the mentors of this methodology at PUC-Rio, the tension between the current design practice at the time —reproducing accepted imported ideas which did not take Brazilian reality into account— and the newly-found needs of design teaching, initiated a practice where students could truly interact with society. They believed that in small communities it would be possible to develop, in the students, the competencies of a designer. In this scenario, the designer is not seen as someone concerned only with Industrial matters, but as a creator of possibilities and potential worlds, someone who understands the reality of communities, their motivations and interests, which would in turn be used to strengthen the development of the project. The design would arise from the relationship of the people with the environment around them, turning passive users into co-creators of their own world and practice (Pacheco, 1996).

It became of extreme importance to find places where this form of Design could be taught and a preference for certain groups becomes more evident. The elderly, children and the handicapped are good examples of alternatives where the Design exercise of the project proved to be more beneficial to the students, causing them to engage in real situations which were open to their participation, instead of abstract questions without feedback from real users. By working with disadvantaged groups, students could circumvent the limits sometimes imposed by traditional industry in the design process and were also presented with a completely new reality, different from their own. Because of this evident difference, answers could not be presumed as easily as with other users and experimentation became clearly necessary.

This choice of groups caused Social Design to be frequently confused with Social Assistance and this seems to be one of the reasons the term "Social Design" was modified by the mentors. The methodology was referred to as "Collective Design" for a while because of its co-creative nature, and later "Living Design", in reference to the fact that the design solution continues to be modified and improved by the user, as well as the methodology, which continued to be developed and improved not only at PUC-Rio but also at Ufes. At the same time, the appeal of the term

Social Design was so strong, that it began to be used with different meanings by other scholars. It also seems, that the term "co-design" defended by Sanders and Stappers is very closely connected to the original conception of SD.

By co-design we indicate collective creativity as it is applied across the whole span of a design process [...] Thus, co-design is a specific instance of co-creation. Co-design refers, for some people, to the collective creativity of collaborating designers. We use co-design in a broader sense to refer to the creativity of designers and people not trained in design, working together in the design development process (Sanders and Stappers, 2008:2).

4. The methodology

Social Design methodology is characterized by asking the students to identify a group of people outside the University, that welcomes them, and with whom they will become involved in the development of a 'real-life' design project. This group can be part of an organisation, i.e. a firm or a school, as people share and integrate knowledge best in social environments (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is necessary that students identify a potential user within the organisation with whom they will interact primarily and directly in the development of the design project, a person who will be referred to as their 'interlocutor' for the project.

The design process will be centred on them, as it happens in traditional user-centred design approaches, and the interlocutor takes on the role of 'specialist' in their own activities, guiding the design choices. Students are encouraged to consider intangible aspects in the field —such as culture and values— as well as tangible aspects such as easily available resources and sustainable considerations. It is important that the project is completely integrated in the user's reality and all issues which arise in the development of the project —economic, physical, social, environmental, psychological, or any other consideration— are also analysed from the perspective of the interlocutor.

The interlocutor

The interlocutor represents a different point of view from that of the students, and it's from this newfound exchange that creation can happen, as problems encountered in the real environment are faced from multiple perspectives, and tackled with different skills and abilities. In the experience of project development with the interlocutor, there will be instances where the pace and effectiveness of the solution seem to be in a direct relation to the sense of partnership created, and their level of engagement.

There are a few aspects of Social Design which differentiate it from other user-centred or participatory methodologies which emerged in the last 30 years. In SD, it's not enough to find a social group where an average user could be identified, but students are trained to find an interlocutor with an intrinsic motivation and an action already in place.

Social Design encourages students not to focus on the lack of resources or existing problems, but instead, to identify strengths

in the group and positive points of leverage as a starting point. They are also instructed to base their observations on the reality of what can be perceived in the workspace and to look for feedback from the interlocutor and the other people, as they identify the motivations in place. This identification of positive instead of negative aspects in the field creates the possibility of a design project not based on the overcoming of detected “problems”, but, instead can lay its foundation on the recognition of ‘joyful action’, with engagement resulting from the interlocutor’s intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures or reward. [Ryan and Deci, 2000:56]

The students rely not only on the discourse of the user to identify his/her intrinsic motivation, but more importantly, on their actions. What the interlocutor says is used as a guideline for investigation and it’s only accepted as true when verified by their actions, incorporating some techniques from classic ethnographic research.

The dialogue that takes place in this initial stage is not only verbal, but continues in the experiments the students bring, in order to identify directions and design possibilities to be further investigated. Students are told to look not for people who are waiting for something to happen, or have pending issues but aren’t acting upon them; they must find people who are engaged in their issues and show a particular indicator of intrinsic motivation when they are describing their actions and goals: a metaphorical ‘sparkle in the eyes’.

“When people are intrinsically motivated, they experience interest and enjoyment, they feel competent and self-determining, they perceive the locus of causality for their behavior to be internal, and in some instances they experience flow. The antithesis of interest and flow is pressure and tension. Insofar as people are pressuring themselves, feeling anxious, and working with great urgency, we can be sure that there is at least some extrinsic motivation involved. Their self-esteem may be on the line, they may have deadlines, or some material reward may be involved.” [Deci and Ryan, 1985:34-35]

The proponents of SD believe that when someone has a purpose derived from intrinsic motivation, that will translate into action and the metaphorical “sparkle in their eyes” is a confirmation of that. So, engagement with an action, a force that produces a movement is the basic requirement for the profile of the interlocutor (Pacheco, 2010). Action is the main word here: the design project will not be based on distant dreams or needs but on the direction indicated by their actions. The designer’s first question is not “what do you want/need?”, but “what are you doing?”. Now students learn how to identify an already-existing flow of actions which indicate an objective to guide the development of the solution, as the behaviour is the indicator of the existence of intrinsic motivation, as Deci and Ryan put it:

...behavior is influenced by internal structures that are being continually elaborated and refined to reflect ongoing experiences. The life force or energy for the activity and for the development of

the internal structure is what we refer to as intrinsic motivation. [Deci and Ryan, 1985:6]

The correct identification of an intrinsic motive is of great importance in Social Design, as it will shape the objective of the project, with a direct involvement of the interlocutor. SD proponents believe that the user’s pre-existing action—intrinsically motivated—coupled with a meaningful connection to the objective is what will stimulate the user to adopt the solution when it’s fully developed. Once the objective is defined, the development process is similar to what takes place in conventional user-centred design methodologies, with experimentation and prototyping leading to the refinement of the solution.

Another noteworthy aspect of Social Design is that the designers of the solution take into account all the resources and tools easily available to the users, in order to create an open-source solution which can be altered and improved from what is learned from future experience, by a user/co-creator who is actively engaged in its use.

5. Conclusion

In the increasingly more complex society we live in today, the issues which affect people in this positive way are the issues which will be embraced by users and co-creators of a solution, and will be leveraged by already existing actions in the direction of the same objective, creating a powerful and transformative impact in all co-creators involved, and consequently on society.

Even though developments in the methodology can be envisioned from its current state—e.g. the possibility of including more participation from the interlocutor in the ideation stage—, its main characteristic of identifying intrinsic motivation in the user to serve as the main guideline for project development makes this teaching practice worth considering in the co-design context.

While conventional problem-oriented design approaches—participatory or otherwise—can be extremely useful to bring solutions to many important issues, an intrinsic motivation-based approach such as Social Design can create new possibilities for design solutions and meaningful innovation, with the emergence of new relations between users and the solutions which are an integral part of their everyday lives.

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