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Empathy and creativity

Abstract

This paper will discuss the research project "Pictogram-me". The focus is on research-based teaching and student workshops, and how a large degree of empathy can reduce creativity. It will discuss this in relation to human centred and inclusive design, approaches were people are included in the design process in different degrees and sometimes also take part in designing the end product (Papanek 1971:188, Eikhaug 2010:6). In Pictogram-me we aim to highlight the experiences of those who have a difficult daily life, a challenging existence. By the help of pictograms we wish to contribute to increased reflection on life's complexity. By presenting pictograms in public spaces, and in an interactive website, the project wants to promote empathy for those of us who are "challenged". Together with students we are exploring how we can collect personal stories for and from various groups of 'challenged' people. The collection of material for the research project is heavily based upon the involvement of Visual Communication Bachelor 3rd year students at Bergen Academy of Art and Design, and inspired by the methods of human centred and participatory design, as well as co-design (Fuad-Luke 2009:143, 147). Our preliminary conclusion is that the research workshop's support for the student's learning process is excellent, on most points, but a surprising experience was that our insight into the situation of the challenged groups made it most difficult for the students to work on the visual material. This reaction was the complete opposite of what methodological theory states. Working closely with users should lead to better understanding, better processes and improved design results. The great degree of empathy encouraged in this project seems to discourage the student's creativity, and the designer's social consciousness becomes a burden instead of inspirational insight.

Keywords*: Empathy, creativity, learning, methodology, user-involvement, human-centered design, pictograms*

Introduction

We can all feel underprivileged or have a difficult day, but we use "challenged" as a generic term for individuals or groups of individuals who, for longer periods of time, face challenges in life and society. There can be many different types of challenges, related to being unemployed, in poverty, a victim of crime, a prostitute, an immigrant, a drug addict, elderly, a sexual deviant, or having lifestyle complaints, physical or sensory disabilities or mentally challenged and so on. The Project's focus is upon collecting stories from and for these groups of the "challenged", and their representatives and support organizations, if they have one.

Discussions

Surprisingly, we have used lots of discussion time on terminology. The names 'disadvantaged' and 'underprivileged' have received mixed response, and some negative comments. It was definitely not our intention to be derogatory. We have experienced positive response from the disadvantaged's cooperative organisations, with one exception, a mental health organization refused to work with us, because they experienced that our project description was stigmatizing. We are now more aware to avoid terminology that can be seen as allusive.

The intention of the project is threefold: Development of methods, pictograms and an interactive tool

Methodology is the challenge we have addressed most thoroughly in the first years, and the main subject for this paper. Our professional question is: What methods can be used or developed to get in contact with the "challenged" to collect their personal stories? We are exploring how visual language can play an important role in creating dialogue (figure 1).

Figure 1

The 'Pictogram-me' project is inspired by the Bergen Academy of Art and Design's interest in 'Social design', based upon social and participatory design thinking.[1] Victor Papanek already in the 1970s stated the social responsibility of designers, and wrote in the legendary book «Design for the real world» that designers should «design for people´s needs rather than their wants» (Papanek 1971:219). This field of design might have it´s roots in Action Research, which is a form for research involving the participants in defining and solving problems. One definition is a "systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (McCutheon and Jung 1990:148 in Masters 1995:2). Empowerment of participants is essential, and this is highly relevant in Pictogram-me. In the mid-1940s the American psychologist Kurt Lewin described action research as "proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action" (Lewin in Masters 1995:1). Lewin argued that to understand and change social conditions, you needed to include those who know and live with the conditions. The participants are often referred to as co-researchers (Bjørndal in Tiller 2004:129). Practitioners are also involved in the reflection on the work (Altricher 1999:3). This is related to how

Thomas Lockwood describes a shift towards a more creative and more collaborative way of thinking in design (Loockwood 2010:ix).

First - methods and teaching
Together with students we are experimenting with how can we collect the stories for and from 'challenged' people, people who would see it as a challenge in itself to meet us maybe because of anxiety, shame, or mental and physical challenges. In a pictogram course for the 3rd Year BA students in Visual communication in 2010, where drug users were our 'focus', we experienced the challenge of working with people with varying 'daily health', who were most difficult to make appointments with and to facilitate workshops for, we had to go out and meet some of them in their milieu. Inspired by Action research and Human centred design, and with respect for the participant's insight and knowledge, we have started to test a variety of methods for collecting life stories (Dowling in Tiller 2014:236-240) (figure 2).

Figure 2

Secondly - pictograms
Pictograms are by definition simple characters that are designed to convey information effortlessly. We are surrounded by thousands of them each day - as the friendly couple on the doors of public toilets, on your smart phones and computers, weather maps and road signs, they are there to inform or warn, or sometimes just to adorn.[2] The 'Pictogram-me' project aims to experiment and investigate whether pictograms, which are, normally, accepted as simple and not very flexible visual messages, if then they can express more complex social messages. In pictogram development our professional questions are: How can pictograms be used to express abstractions, differences in degree, nuances in definition and philosophical concepts (figure 3). The project is inspired by Isotype, a symbol system developed by Otto Neurath to explain and illustrate social and economic issues to the general public in the 1920's and of which is said to be the origin of modern pictograms. His vision was: "Words divide, pictures unite".[3] Other reference projects are Jonathan Barnbrook and Marcus McCallion "Olympukes", 52 satirical pictograms, developed as a comment to commercialization of the Summer

Olympics 2004.[4] And the Pussy Galore font, created in 1995 by the Women's Design and Research Unit; Teal Triggs, Liz McQuiston and Sian Cook.[5] Designed to help explore the roots of misconceptions about women propagated through contemporary vocabularies of Western culture. These examples suggest that pictograms will be able to express abstractions, nuances and philosophical concepts.
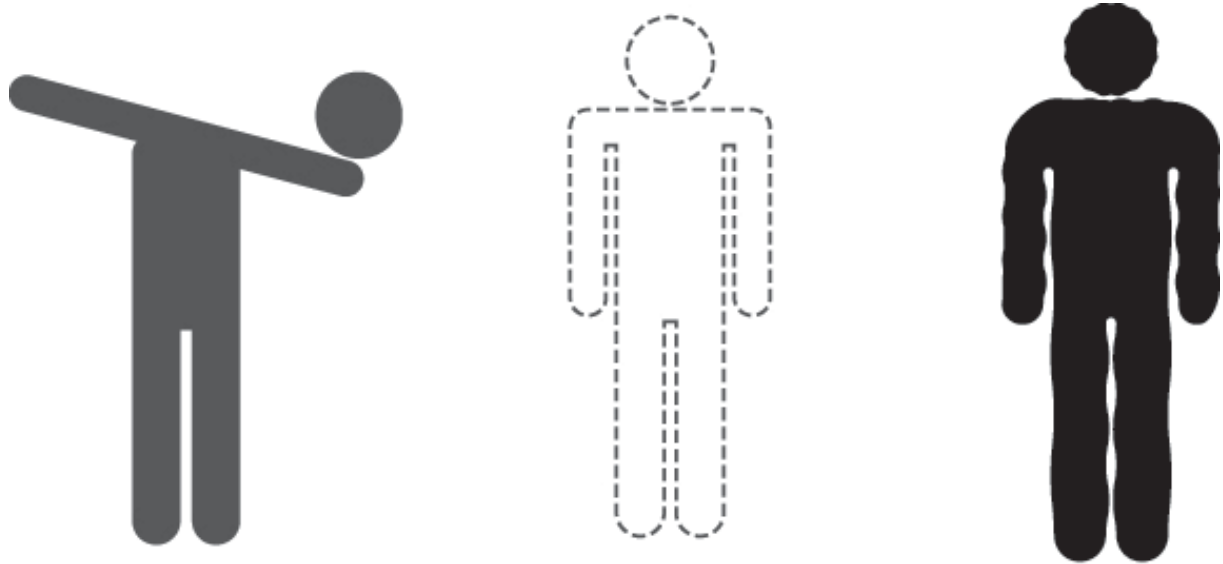

Figure 3

Thirdly – interaction and dissemination
The third intention is to develop an interactive communication, a web site, to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Can interaction help create new associations or enable the user to assemble their own visual language within the site and/or uncover hidden messages?

Preconceptions
In the further develop we will test methods to create real dialogue and participation between designers and the 'challenged'. In an article published in the 1960s´Sherry Arnstein (1969:2) describes how citizens can be involved or excluded from development processes. In his ladder of citizen participation, Arnstein points at eight different degrees of involving, and relate this to power. The top level, citizen control, has much in common with co-design. Language is a powerful tool that might not be equally shared by the participants, thus by using visual communication, the aim is to give the challenged an alternative tool and more power to express themselves.

"There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process". (Arnstein 1969:2)

As we wish to focus the research value and the output quality of the project we should concentrate on fewer groups in the future.

Conclusion
First: Research ethics
The project has met ethical challenges, although our focus group are informed about the use of their information - their stories that they share with us. But, an example is a homeless drug-user who lived

temporarily at a hospice in Bergen and gave us consent to take his picture (figure 4). Just to present the photo publicly is difficult; it was no problem to obtain permission to document the meetings, but this is permission given by drugged, often ashamed people, who don't want their family to see them like this, and do not want their family to know where they are.

Figure 4

Pictograms content can be provocative or disturbing. One pictogram had to be refused from an exhibition, because drug users reported that this pictogram made them want drugs. We also learned from another exhibition in Bergen that it feels much more balanced to ask people to contribute in the project, when we are able to give something back, in this case invite them to feel welcome in our exhibition space. By the help of post cards, poetry, dance and clay modelling we invited people to share personal challenges and stories. We presented a "Pictobooth" based on Kinect technology, encouraging people to make their own pictograms (figure 5). Participants were invited to an event where a professional dancer translated the descriptions of their experiences into body language (figure 6). We understood that transformation by a third part gave us a much richer material to work on. It made a huge difference to use visuals and performance as an icebreaker to engage people. We were surprised how easy people shared their stories. In some cases it was difficult to end the conversation, which is a risk as we are not professional therapists.

Secondly: Methods for visual dialogue
There exists a lot of literature about how to collect various data focusing upon individual stories, and for example sociologists have developed methods of how to direct "life story interviews" (Dowling in Tiller 2004:237-240, Wideberg in Album, Hansen and Widerberg 2010:220-225). The global design agency IDEO has developed a Human-Centred Design Toolkit and an online resource that addresses how to involve people from the initiation of a design project to its implementation.[6] Different public organizations and universities share their methods. [7] We can see that the students are so far limited in their explorations; they base their collection of data mostly on observation and interviews (figure 7).

But there are many possibilities to test and experiment with new methods based upon visualization. We believe that a use of the visual language will open up for better insight and conversations.[8] And it may not necessarily be small-scale tools, what would for example happen if we transform the surroundings, create shifts of scenery in rooms, or by the use of multimedia to stimulate senses?

Figure 5

Figure 6

Thirdly: Designing empathy – discouraging creativity?

Our preliminary conclusion from our courses is that they greatly support the student's learning process. But, a surprising experience was that our insight into the situation of the challenged groups, and the empathy created with and for them, made it most difficult for the students to work on the visual material.

Figure 7

Our experience with the students was the complete opposite of what methodological theory states. For example, the Norwegian Design Council points out how an inclusive design approach is a source of inspiration and an opportunity for innovation (Eikhaug 2010:8).

"Inclusive design is set to become an important design movement in the 21st century, building on the increasing interest in it and social advancements of the last century. Involving end users within the design and development process is becoming a more successful and proven way of engaging consumers and is also driven by legislation". (Eikhaug 2010:6).

Inclusive design and people-centred design processes are said to be effective as development processes, because users can play a leading role in defining issues and helping to focus direction, therefor there has been a shift from designing for users, to designing with users, where the user also becomes co-creator (Fuad-Luke 2009:143). As Alastair Fuad-Luke writes in Design Activism this shift has been paralleled with recent debate about the social dimensions of design. Participatory design has become mainstream and politically correct, and it appears that there is agreement on the ethical and practical advantages of participatory design approachs. But the great degree of empathy encouraged in the Pictogram-me project, instead, seemed to have a negative impact on the student's creativity and ability to find flow. Professor in psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has studied flow, and describes flow as a sense of effortless action (Csikszentmihalyi 1971:29). Such processes might

lead to unexpected and high quality results. To be in flow means to loose the focus on «the others» and other peoples expectations. Where as a too greater degree of empathy and good intentions may lead the students to be too self-critical, and too judgemental towards the expected result during the process. The designer's social consciousness becomes a burden of social responsibility rather than inspirational insight. We have received feedback from designers that they recognise this conflict between involving users and finding flow, and this is an area that we find most interesting for further investigation.

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