

EMPLOYING PARTICIPATORY DESIGN TO INITIATE DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Design (PD) has brought focus to the importance of involving multiple stakeholders and incorporating play, performance, and cultural probes into design process. Sticks + Stones, a collaborative, iterative design education project, has implemented PD methods to assist students in the investigation of complicated content and to initiate difficult dialogue. Students who are diverse in ethnicity, religious practice, heritage, gender, sexual orientation, and geographical home are brought together to explore interpersonal and intercultural issues. By employing play and modes of performance, faculty and students erode barriers and create an open atmosphere to examine visual representation and its relation to typically tension-filled subjects including racism, profiling, religious disparities and migration. Sticks + Stones Project Investigators offer their applications of PD as a means of broadening the scenarios to which PD might be applied. This paper describes our experiences in organizing participation around complex, sensitive subject matter. We present conclusions on expanding the application of PD beyond its traditional uses towards the goal of initiating difficult dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Design (PD) incorporates atypical methodologies and results into the design process. Play

and performance, cultural probes and Courses As Seeds model inform the design process with unexpected, stimulating and often subjective input from end users and stakeholders. (Gaver 2004; dePaula 2001) Sticks + Stones, a collaborative design education project, employs the spirit of PD to initiate difficult dialogue between design students and within communities.

Over the course of three iterations spanning six years, the project has engaged students about intercultural relations, stereotyping and representation. The latest project iteration addressed these issues as they relate to migration. Since meaningful discussion of these topics is not easily broached, the project's faculty collaborators have used PD techniques to initiate student dialogue about personal views on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, heritage, and geographical locations. The goal is to expose existing preconceptions among student participants and broader communities, revealing some of the fallacies embedded in the common act of stereotyping.

Whereas PD has been successfully employed to inform the design of objects and interfaces, Sticks + Stones expands the scope of these methodologies to address complex and potentially controversial issues. The end goal, in this case, is to draw intangible perceptions into design discourse. In their article regarding research-based theatre, Tuija Oikarinen et al define PD: "The goal of participatory innovation is to discover new meanings. This process of making new meanings is understood to be a multi-voiced process of sensual dialogue, which emphasizes interaction and communication." (2011, p. 202) Sticks + Stones foregrounds active user participation combined with design making. These methodologies are applicable when conflict threatens to suppress deeper conversation.

CONFRONTATION AND COLLABORATION

Sticks + Stones is an iterative collaboration that gathers design students diverse in geographical location, religious practice, race, gender, sexual orientation, and heritage to learn first-hand from each other about issues of culture, stereotyping, and representation as they relate to visual communication. Sticks + Stones aims to reach broader audiences through playful and provocative exhibitions and actions that directly engage community members. The project's Primary

Investigators emphasize creating awareness of how personal biases can leach into visual communication messages, potentially influencing communities around the globe.

Iterations have tackled issues of stereotyping, racial discrimination, religious intolerance, human migration, and cultural profiling with the goal of educating future designers to be more aware of personal biases and false perceptions of the “other” and offer means to increased awareness and deeper conversations to and with broader audiences.

Three collaborations have taken place: in 2005 and in 2006 with students from across the United States, and in 2010 with students from China, Germany, Turkey, and the United States. Two more project editions, planned for 2012 and 2014, will include an international student makeup as well.

Project PIs find that standard classroom practices such as lectures, reading assignments, and normal course discussions are not sufficient to engage students in thorny, multifaceted and conflict-ridden issues. Rogerio dePaula et al found this to be the case as well when developing their Courses As Seeds model: “The traditional paradigm of education is not appropriate for understanding and learning to resolve the types of open-ended and multidisciplinary problems that are most pressing to our society.” (2001, p. 494)

Faculty have found effective ways to engage diverse groups of designers through participatory innovation, incorporating ideas from Courses As Seeds, play and performance. Further, faculty directed students to set aside political correctness and politeness and even “misbehave” in an effort to get to the heart of these complex issues.

In Western cultures there is a common refrain that discussions of politics or religion should be avoided at the dinner table, that mealtime decorum should not be disturbed by potentially volatile subject matter. This safety-by-avoidance practice also plays out in the workplace and other public spaces. And while it might keep conversations light and ensures that everyone stays to finish the meal, it also suppresses exploration and exchange of the critical issues facing today’s world.

The Sticks + Stones “audacity factor” flies in the face of the dinner table practice. It invites open, honest discussion and brings discordant views to the surface. It empowers us to inspire others to be similarly provocative. If committed stakeholders are given permission to misbehave, challenge, and propose polarizing viewpoints, a richer exchange of ideas and opinions can be exposed. This model can stand as an example to business or other forums seeking open, honest dialogues.

Since our natural tendency is to resist oppositional conversation, particularly with group discussions where participants do not know each other or are influenced by conceivable perceptions of impending conflict, our own

stereotypes and those we expect others to hold can create anxiety.

Project PIs realize that a plurality of perspectives and diversity of geographical locations is not only preferred, but is essential in addressing wicked problems. The Social Creativity model put forth by Gerhard Fischer (2003) poses that “Complex design problems require more knowledge than any single person can possess.” Involving participants with varying backgrounds expands the conversation and knowledge base to achieve a more holistic view of the problem. The common interest in and commitment to design unifies the participants and keeps differences from splintering the group. Similarly a common focus of community interest or physical location could be the shared ground in other groups.

ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGIES

PD includes a variety of disparately structured yet similarly minded activities that have the goal of producing new knowledge and new perspectives for the design process. It seeks to find innovative ways to rethink the research and feedback process. Stakeholders join designers in considering the design project at hand; they are given creative and authoring voice throughout the project rather than simply offering feedback at various stages. “Participatory design (PD) aims to involve practitioners in expanding the space for design ideas, trusting that this will allow the design project to arrive not only at a functionally better but also a more ‘creative’ solution. As methods and techniques of PD are moving out from work organizations to other contexts of use, such as the home or public spaces, new challenges have to be addressed.” (Brattetig 2010, p. 51)

PERFORMANCE

Performance has the potential to be transformative. It allows participants to role-play and to find comfort in a sense of anonymity. Performance also encourages individual creativity in behaving as directed or as “another”. Sticks + Stones is not unique in its investigation into the improvisation theatre’s transformative potential. Brecht’s ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ as well as the use of jesters, fools, and other comedic roles have been studied for their potential to reveal new way of “organizational reflexivity.” (Schreyögg, p. 692).

Organizational theatre has been employed to gain new insights into ways to improve a corporation’s efficiency, effectiveness and employee morale. To behave in a manner either as instructed by another or as directed the constructs of a project can be liberating. (Nissley, p. 831)

In a 2006 symposium event, students performed the Privilege Walk, an often-used exercise aimed at creating awareness about the different socioeconomic advantages or disadvantages each student had growing up. In this exercise, students form a straight line,

standing side-by-side and holding hands, and then take steps forward as directed when they have experienced privilege (such as having more than 50 books in your childhood home) and take steps backward if they have been disadvantaged (such as being raised by a single mother or being called names due to race, class, gender, or sexual orientation).

The once-conjoined student line eventually broke as the advantaged and disadvantaged took multiple steps in opposing directions. The result was a physical dispersion that reflected the often-invisible or muddled consequences of prejudice and privilege.

“Organizational theatre means to expose the audience to a strange experience. They observe well-known problems of their working life on stage, acted by unknown people in an unusual setting. This unfamiliar experience is assumed to set things in motion.” (Schreyögg, p. 697) The performative aspect of the Privilege Walk brought focus and significance to the ensuing conversation about how perceptions and stereotypes play out in society.

COURSES AS SEEDS

Rogério dePaula, Gerhard Fischer, and Jonathan Ostwald apply Meta Design to the education arena. In their Courses-as-Seeds model, students act as initiators as well as receivers of knowledge. Rather than following a closed and finite curriculum, faculty using this model plant “seeds” of information and then empower students to propagate knowledge. The model aptly applies to evolving, blurred, complex, and multi-faceted topics that do not have clear-cut “solutions.” (2001, p. 495)

For Sticks + Stones 2010, students from six universities — three U.S, one Chinese, one German, and one Turkish — worked on preliminary projects from their home campuses and then travelled to Berlin for a two-week symposium. Faculty collaborators framed the project with a conceptual and issue-related foundation of culture, human migration, and representation. They entrusted the participants (students) to become active creators, researchers, and executives of the ensuing exhibit.

Faculty seeded tracks of inquiry from the project themes of culture, migration and representation. These tracks proposed methodologies ranging from participatory design solutions to more traditional visual representation and information design opportunities. Student then selected tracks for their investigative actions and the ensuing exhibition design. Students worked within and outside of the pre-established curriculum context to create peer-driven responses to the project themes. The results evolved from bottom-up, issue-focused collaboration. Faculty challenged students to draw multiple voices into the project. They responded by building upon participatory conventions of a prescribed exhibit space and by exploiting the

unpredictability of public spaces, where diverse groups intersect.

PLAY AND GAME DESIGN

PD methodologies interrupt the predictable, business-like design process with infusions of subjection, playfulness, and emotional versus intellectual responses. Play’s requirement of social interaction and cooperation make it apt for use with difficult dialogues. Further, games and play offer suspension of everyday behaviours and the opportunity to behave according to given set of rules. These rules can allow actions beyond what is condoned or allowed in a individual’s current time, position or age. This freedom of expression can allow participants to relax their guard and engage in more honest dialogue. (Oikarinen 2011) Huizinga defines play as: a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. (1955, p. 13).

In 2005 and in 2006 project iterations, design students studying in different areas of the United States were asked to create self-portraits that communicated aspects of their lives including lived locations, religious practices, race, heritage, social networks, and pastimes. The finished portraits were exchanged between universities. Students were instructed to disobey the norms of politeness that would normally be afforded someone they didn’t know, and provide uncensored terms in response to other’s images.

Resulting labels included the terms “suicidal” “slut,” “hippie,” “junkie,” “prostitute,” “victim,” “addicted,” “smart-ass,” “push-over,” “insane,” “geek,” “addict,” “towel head,” and “liberal bastard.” Each portrait was assigned 15-30 stereotypes, and more than once, a single list included contradicting terms such as “intellectual” and “stupid.” The designed portraits and their accompanying stereotyping terms and labels were revealed and addressed.

This approach was instructive for everyone on how stereotypes are quickly and carelessly formed. By applying and receiving stereotypical labels, each student “owned” the experience in a personal way. Discussion of the labels centered on how such terms could have come to mind based on the imagery in the self-portraits.

The 2010 iteration also elicited participation within a defined set of rules, this time in a student-designed t-shirt project and in a map exchange. Earlier in the symposium, students were made aware of previous project exchanges as well as related participatory design methodologies. Faculty challenged students to work beyond exchanges with fellow classmates and engage audiences in a prescribed exhibit setting and in the broader urban setting of Berlin. Self-selected student groups chose to engage the participation of audiences in provoking playful dialogue in both settings.

The group that proposed the t-shirt project chose to continue the project exploration of the human tendency

to categorize and label those around us. They developed strategies and “rules” for how the t-shirt could become the interface through which participatory requests would be made. The t-shirts were imprinted with the question: “What would people call me behind my back?” Through several iterations, it was determined that the question should be deliberately written to be nonspecific, thus allowing the Berlin respondents the option of offering a personal comment or conjecture. This created a sense of anonymity, allowing the author to feel safe in writing an honest (and potentially impolite) response. The request for comments was initiated in a series of different public spaces: subway stations, sidewalks, and plazas. A potentially mundane subway ride was interrupted by an out-of-the-ordinary, playful request: to write a comment on a t-shirt. Each respondent was then offered an information card that included a statement about Sticks + Stones and visiting information for the ensuing exhibit. This initiative was meant to give physicality to the way we label each other. It changed the game of social convention by provoking the public to engage the “unmentionable.” The t-shirt wearers felt these labels and assumptions being impressed upon their backs. It changed the game of social convention by provoking the public to engage in typically off limits behaviour.

Student teams had to design the rules of exchanges and communicate these frameworks to their intended audiences. The location and manner of the request, the offering of a project information card, the physical appearance of the t-shirt wearer as well as previous responses collected on each shirt were all variables that were discussed, weighed and revised with the following day’s iteration.

Another 2010 project asked exhibit visitors to reveal preferences and prejudices of global geographical locations through a participatory mapping exercise. Students created a mural-size world map drawn on paper and then established the rules of engagement: press your fingers into each of the three differently colored inkpads and then leave fingerprints on the map as instructed. Visitors placed purple fingerprints to represent where they currently live, green to signify where they want to live, and red to mark where they would never live. Comments were invited to deepen the meaning and significance of each print. Mexico City yielded both red and green thumbprints. China received only green and purple thumbprints with affectionate comments for the country, declaring “I love it!,” “It’s a beautiful place!,” and “I will live here forever.” Japan’s eight red thumbprints easily outnumbered its three green ones. The Middle East received only red thumbprints along with negative comments about its propensity for conflict. The Southeastern United States also received a red thumbprint for being “Too humid. Too scary. Too slow.” What began as a blank world map with only outlines of landmasses evolved into a colourful mural with fingerprints and comments revealed a select audience’s global geo-cultural stereotypes.

ACTIVE REFLECTION

The execution of these three projects—labeling the self-portraits, writing on t-shirts, and leaving fingerprints and comments on a map—required an active response to engagement. While some responses were more playful, others might have been influenced by the more strident tone of comments that preceded them. The rules of engagement necessitated that these projects suspend normally polite and correct behaviour in favour of more authentic responses. The results were frank, surprising and illuminating.

Similarly, the dramaturgy of the t-shirt project unfolded via unconventional actions on the part of both performer and audience as performer — as stereotypes, beliefs and counter-views were juxtaposed on the shirts.

The gallery setting of the world map and the inclusion of a dozen comment-filled t-shirts and a video of the project offered a safe space of reflection about patterns that emerged and an ongoing mechanism for feedback.

CONCLUSION

Jacob Buur and Ben Matthews posed: “The opportunity to reframe innovation projects in terms of societal issues rather than business goals is a worthy expansion of the original workplace democracy mission of participatory design.” (2008, p. 189) Participatory Design’s unconventional nature can engage participants in ways traditional inquiry and research-orientated methods cannot. The playful and performative nature of these methods can be successfully applied beyond their original scope of research for design objects or digital interfaces, even though the PD implementation might require letting go of control, welcoming chance, and embracing process imperfections.

PD innovations have been successful at initiating dialogue about complex, sensitive and potentially polarizing topics. Sticks + Stones employs PD not for the purpose of informing the design of artifacts but to raise awareness of critical issues and initiate meaningful dialogue. PD has consistently enabled us to engage students and community members about culture, migration and representation.

Conflict in some form is almost always present in the design process: clients, stakeholders, designers, time and money are a few of the potentially competing constraints. All must be addressed for a project to be successful. For Sticks + Stones the conflict lies in differences of opinions. Project PIs have deliberately orchestrated more and more diverse groups of students together to allow these more egregious differences to inform the process. Incorporation of community voices—both from home and from symposium locations—means even more conflict is potentially embedded in the process.

The audacious nature of the Sticks + Stones’ projects and assignments allows tension to ease and more authentic conversations to arise. In short, they allow

participants to get to the heart of the matter. We foresee the easy application of this methodology to community and corporate-based projects as well. Where the perception of little common ground might be present, the potential for misbehaving could be customized to evoke productive responses and build a conversation.

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