

# Design Drama: A Person-Oriented Method to Foster Creativity and Holistic Human Development

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## Abstract

*Design Drama* is an applied theatre method to foster creativity and holistic human development in educational and professional contexts. It incorporates theatre games, creative improvisation exercises, storytelling techniques and other resources from different artistic, educational, and therapeutic fields into the design process. This method combines divergent thinking with embodied creativity to support idea generation and concept definition. Also, it helps to research in-depth the users of products or services by considering them as if they were characters performing in a story (project dramatization). Just as an actor does when studying a role in a play, *Design Drama* encourages designers to do work on themselves to identify with their project recipients rationally, emotionally, and physically and deeply understand their actual needs. Finally, such a person-oriented approach fosters designers' soft skills and team building in group work, encouraging personal growth and increased empathy.

## Keywords

Design method

Creativity

Applied theatre

Person-oriented design

Holistic approach

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Open Debate

## Putting the Individual At Centre Stage: From *User-Centred* to *Person-Oriented* Design

In-depth research into user needs is the basis for several approaches in the design field. The relevance of human factors in product and service development is at the core of *user-centred design* (Norman & Draper, 1986; Norman, 1988), *human-centred design* (Kurosu, 2009; Goodwin & Cooper, 2009), or *people-centred design* (Giacomin, 2014). Accessibility and inclusion are at the centre of *universal design* (The Center for Universal Design, 2008), *design for all* (Accolla, 2009; Steffan, 2015), or *inclusive design* (Keates & Clarkson, 2004; Eikhaug & Gheerawo, 2010).

Recognising *user-centricity* as a key issue for the project has contributed to shifting the focus from the purchase phase of the goods to their use and consumption, and the *overall experience* that a person can have (Newbery & Farnham, 2013). However, such experience is determined not only by biological or psychological factors (internal factors) but also by social and environmental ones (external factors), according to an integral biopsychosocial approach (Frankel et al., 2003). Moreover, in addition to rationality and corporeality, interiority plays a decisive role in experiencing everyday life, both in an emotional (Crossley, 2003) and spiritual sense (Steiner, 1939; Frankl, 1990), in line with a holistic view of the human being (Haynes, 2009).

Therefore, a holistic understanding of the project's recipients is crucial to fully comprehend and meet their needs, which also arise from inner motivations and *pains* (Llorens, 2015; Halvorsrud et al., 2016).

### The Contribution of Theatre to a Person-Oriented Design Approach

Ethnoanthropology and other social sciences have certainly provided design with useful tools to research people in-depth and understand the needs of project's recipients (Martín Juez, 2002; Gunn et al., 2013), but besides these most well-known disciplines, theatre is also being giving significant support in strengthening a *person-oriented* approach, integrating the methods and techniques commonly applied in user analysis (Klement, 2014).

Among the resources of dramaturgy and narratology already used in the field of design, *storytelling* (Salmon, 2007; Batini & Fontana, 2010) is employed, for example, to explore alternative scenarios for a service or product *put in action*, by the production of scripts and storyboards of possible user experiences (Moggridge, 2008; Brooks & Quesenbery, 2010; Zamarato, 2008; Salevati, 2008); also, the *personas* technique (Cooper, 1999; Pruitt & Grudin, 2003; Long, 2009) helps to define the profiles of potential project users, by developing fictional characters that embody the characteristics of specific social groups. Moreover, based on the improvisation techniques, *bodystorming* (Oulasvirta et al., 2003; Schleicher et al., 2010) allows imagining alternative ways of interacting with products and services, through the so-called *embodied creativity* (Burgoyne, 2018).

However, the use of theatre and drama techniques in the design process can potentially go further and deepen people's understanding even more.

When actors prepare for a performance, they first carry out a desk study of the psychological, emotional, and physical traits of the characters they are to play, to comprehend their personalities and distinctive features. Then, thanks to performing techniques, actors do work on themselves, especially at a body level, to identify completely with their characters and make them believably live on stage (Stanislavski, 1999; 2000; Moore, 1960; Gordon, 2004). Similarly, we may assume that designers, employing the same acting techniques, could study the potential recipients of their projects, characterise their profile and, through identification and interpretation, better understand their needs, motivations, and pains, by literally "putting themselves into their shoes".

Academic and professional examples explicitly oriented to apply theatre in design processes are not numerous. Among them, we may mention the activities of the *Theatre Lab* at the University of Southern Denmark (Friis & Ryöppy, 2018) and the work of Peter Sloth Madsen (2015a, 2015b), whose *Embodied Design Thinking* method is the combination of theatrical techniques with design thinking.

Due to the lack of other significant experiences, an opportunity has been detected to further investigate this disciplinary crossing and propose a theatre-based design method to support a person-oriented approach in projects' development.

### ***Applied Theatre in Design:* Dramatizing the Project to Focus On the Person**

*Applied Theatre in Design* (or, shortened, *Design Theatre*) is the research project that has been developed at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile to explore the integration, within the design processes, of drama games, creative improvisation exercises, storytelling techniques, and resources from other artistic, educational, or therapeutic domains (Ciravegna, 2015; 2019)<sup>1</sup>. Through theoretical study and practical experimentation, this work aims to define techniques and tools<sup>2</sup> to support people and organisations, in educational and professional contexts, in the (re)design of products and services that meet the real needs of their recipients.

Furthermore, in addition to complementing current methods of user analysis, the integration of theatre practices into design processes also aims to facilitate *teamwork*, as it can strengthen designers' *soft skills* (Fry & Whitmore, 1972), increase their *empathy* (Leonard & Rayport, 1997) and *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 1995).

The *person* is assumed to be the main driver of the project, both as the recipient and the author of the project, according to a biopsychosocial and holistic vision of the individual. The dimensions of the human being are thus reconnected and integrated into the design process: *rationality* (reason and logical thinking), *interiority* (emotions and inner dynamics), and *corporeity* (bodily sensations). These three components can be also visually represented as a *Head*, a *Heart*, and a *Hand* (Barnard, 1859; Kehr, 2004) Fig. 1.

1

This research project has been formalised and developed since 2015 in Chile, but it is based on various experiences previously made in Italy by the author from 2005 to 2014, in the academic, professional and artistic fields.

2

These techniques and tools have been experimented in the context of high school courses, university courses (at bachelor and master levels), vocational training courses, professional development activities for teachers, and consultancy projects.

3

The name *Design Drama* is an abbreviation of *Design Dramatization*, in its meaning of dramatizing the project, that is, the application of the dramatic structure to a design process and the staging of its elements. It should not be confused with *Drama Design*, also called *Theatre Design*, which refers to the project and construction of theatrical space and its components (sets, costumes, etc.) for the performance of a show.



### **Design Drama: A Person-Oriented Design Method**

Among the most relevant results achieved by the *Applied Theatre in Design* research project, it has been developed a person-oriented method called *Design Drama*<sup>3</sup> (Ciravegna, 2020), which, in its current version, consists of five stages, each one made up of a specific set of activities.

Fig. 1  
The *Design Drama*  
Method: Person-Oriented  
Approach Model. © Erik  
Ciravegna.

### Warming Up

The first stage consists of a series of exercises aimed at physical (body and voice) Fig. 2 and imaginative Fig. 3 warming up. On the one hand, it helps to create an atmosphere of openness, trust, and cooperation among the participants; on the other hand, it favours the achievement of a suitable *creative state of mind* (Stanislavski, 2000), thus encouraging the free production of ideas and the spontaneous expression of thoughts and emotions.

These exercises have been compiled from a wide variety of sources, ranging from artistic to therapeutic areas, all of which are concerned with improving people's well-being and emotional connection with others, as well as enhancing their creativity: stretching (Anderson, 1980), bioenergetics (Lowen, 1978), singing (Setrakian, 2018), theatre (Barba & Savarese, 1996), theatre pedagogy and applied theatre (García-Huidobro, 1996; Ackroyd, 2000; Taylor, 2003; Pitruzzella, 2014; Burgoyne, 2018), playful didactics (Vygotsky, 1981), art therapy (Pitruzzella & Bonanomi, 2009), psychodrama (Moreno, 1985).



**Fig. 2**  
Physical warming up exercise: moving in space collaboratively and acting as a single entity. Photo taken at Liceo Artistico Preziosissimo Sangue, Monza (Italy), 2014.



**Fig. 3**  
Imaginative warming up exercise: inventing a story around a pen. Photo taken at the School of Design of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2016.

## Storytelling

The second stage is based on storytelling techniques and grounded on the research of Propp (1966), on the characters of folktales; Rodari (1976), on fantasy and the construction of fairy tales; Campbell (1958), on the *hero's journey*; Jung (1977), on the *collective unconscious* and psychological archetypes (Nichols, 1980).

To trigger the creative process, a deck of illustrated playing cards (Pallottini & De Luca, 2013) has been used so far, but any kind of game, book or other narrative resources that can be used to make up stories (like tarot cards for example), is an effective means to this end.

Each participant is invited to envision a fictional reality (without restrictions, in terms of space, time, and rules of the imaginary world), invent the story of a character (human or other anthropomorphic living beings) and build his/her detailed profile, based on a specific archetype and the coordinates given by the triggering narrative tool Fig. 4.



Fig. 4  
Storytelling exercise:  
building the character's  
profile and story based  
on a fairy tale archetype.  
Photo taken at the School  
of Design of Pontificia  
Universidad Católica de  
Chile, 2017.

## Staging

The third phase consists of improvisation exercises for the staging of fictional stories. Besides stimulating creativity and improving expressiveness, this phase allows participants to identify with their characters, and experience what they might perceive and feel in certain situations and contexts (Batson, 2007) Fig. 5. Also, through *bodystorming* (Oulasvirta et al., 2003; Schleicher et al., 2010), it is possible to experiment with alternative dynamics of interaction with objects and other elements of the story and explore, at the same time, other symbolic and narrative values.



Fig. 5  
Improvisation exercise:  
interpreting a character  
and staging a fictional  
story. Photo taken at  
Liceo Artistico Prezios-  
simo Sanguè, Monza  
(Italy), 2014.

### Mapping

The fourth stage is made up of a group of activities aimed at mapping the feelings and emotions experienced by the participants. The sensory mapping, originated by the *bodystorming*, and the emotional mapping, generated by what has been defined as *heartstorming*, are then integrated with more rational reflections, determined by the usual *brainstorming* techniques (Osborn, 1963).

These mappings can be carried out alone, in pairs or small groups. They can be performed by distancing oneself and observing “from the outside” and/or by staying in character and observing “from the inside”. Using playful dynamics, it is possible, for example, to imagine a sort of therapeutic session between two fictional characters (e.g., a witch and an ogre), where one is the psychologist and the other the patient.

### Translating

The last stage consists of *translating* (Baule & Caratti, 2016) fictional stories and characters into scenarios and profiles of potential recipients of a project. Such a transposition leads to a divergent exploration of solutions deriving from analogies and metaphors associated with the elements of dramatization: a magical tool or an object of power can represent, for instance, a product with tangible or intangible qualities that can meet the needs of a person, acting in a certain context and in a certain time, during his/her own *hero's journey*.

Considering the users of the project as *characters* (Klement, 2014), and placing them in a *staging* process, is a way to investigate not only the rational and explicit needs but also the likely deep and implicit motivations, starting from the presumable *pains* that push people to action.

All the insights generated can be integrated into the design briefing which results in the production of ideas, the generation of proposals and finally the development of possible design solutions.

## Applied Case: Designing an Emergency Kit for Emotional Well-Being

To exemplify the process as described above, a project<sup>4</sup> is presented as an applied case: a marzipan box configured as a kit to “feed” adults’ imagination and awaken their inner children Fig. 6. This project was developed during a two-month packaging design course<sup>5</sup> that was dedicated to the creation of *emergency kits* with a focus on people’s *emotional well-being*.



4  
Project *MZPN kid A*, developed by Cristián León and Juan Restrepo.

5  
Elective course *Métodos para el Diseño de Packaging (Methods for Packaging Design)*, in charge of Erik Ciravegna (professor) and Zinnia Silva (teaching assistant). MADA UC - Master’s in Advanced Design, School of Design, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2017.

Fig. 6  
Example of applied case: project *MZPN kid A*, developed by Cristián León and Juan Restrepo at the School of Design of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2017.



The *Design Drama* method was applied to support the creative process, the deepening of the project recipients' inner motivations and pains, and the enhancement of the narrative and metaphorical dimensions of the design solution. The method was implemented along the course with these constraints: after the initial collective warming-up phase, the students had to develop individually the storytelling and staging phases of the creative process; then they had to work in pairs during the mapping and translating phases, and then propose a single design solution from two different narrative threads.

The design process of the applied case started from the creation of fictional characters based on the fairy tale archetypes of the *frog prince* and the *lost child*, whose stories were developed separately as the tales of, respectively, a "lonely writer losing inspiration" and a "sick child seeking care". After the staging and mapping exercises, these two characters were combined and translated into a unique profile: an adult who needs to rekindle his imagination and awaken his/her inner child. Their personal "magical" objects — a notebook (writer) and a construction game (child) — were also combined and transformed into a box that externally is disguised as a professional diary and internally contains a colourful set of marzipan shapes.

To reinforce the concept of the project, when opening the "diary", sentences from Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* invites the adult to recover his/her inner child through play: *All grown-ups were once children / but only a few of them remember it.*

## Conclusions

The version of the *Design Drama* method presented in this paper corresponds to an ideal configuration formulated according to what has been tested so far, but it is constantly evolving, and refining based on the results of each experiment, as a *trial-and-error* process.

On the one hand, the linear sequence of phases, as presented, is being revised to develop a modular structure, in which sets of exercises can be applied flexibly and separately, depending on the context of their application, the available time, the specific needs of the participants and the expected results relating to the stated problems.

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On the other hand, the process of design dramatization is also under revision, to confirm the possibility of originating a project starting from a real-life situation (e.g., a company with specific needs), and not only from the random assignment of a fairy-tale character archetype, as a creative exercise that might be somehow disconnected from the current market reality. Although more experimentation shall be needed, some simulations of the “inverse translation” of existing products and services into fictional stories (based on fairy tales, myths, legends, but also movies and tv series), have proven the method could effectively be used to investigate alternative scenarios and dynamics of interactions, as well as different symbolic and narrative values for the project (Zamarato, 2008; Homberg-Schramm et al., 2016).

Finally, considering the current Covid-19 pandemic, the *Design Drama* method incorporates *creative well-being* as a relevant factor for the growth of the individual and harmony in groups, communities, and organizations. According to multiple studies (e.g., Cropley, 1990; Maslow, 1954; Richards, 2010; Rogers, 1961), psychological well-being is, in fact, one of the basic aspects for the development of creativity and, vice versa, creativity is recognised as an important driver for people’s mental health.

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