

Kaleidoscope of roles: valuing the agencies of the audience, client and the designer

Abstract:

This paper broadens the discussion on the inclusiveness of design process. It discusses the inclusive approach to communication design projects that values the agencies of various stakeholders involved. In particular, this paper explores the importance of the designers' human agency to enable a human-centred approach in the practice of communication design. The paper draws on design-led investigations and interviews with practitioners undertaken in the author's practice-led doctorate research situated in communication design.

What roles do people play during the design process? How does that affect the design outcome? Prompted by such questionings, this paper illuminates the main roles people play within a design process; the audience, clients and designers. It explores how and why these roles are central to designing. The paper argues that the dialogic interaction that occurs between these various roles drives the design process in creating engaging and meaningful outcomes for all concerned. The paper concludes with a proposition for the discourse within communication design that embraces designing as an interpersonal, complex and layered relationship that includes the multiple roles that people have.

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Introduction

This paper broadens the discourse on the inclusiveness of design process. It discusses an inclusive approach to communication design projects that values the agencies of various people involved. In particular, this paper explores how the designers' agency, and the agency of other stakeholders are valued to enable a human-centred approach in the practice of communication design. This human-centred approach in the practice of communication design is explored through investigations and interviews with practitioners in the author's practice-led doctorate research.

Human-centred design is becoming widely discussed in various design disciplines. For example, in 'The Semantic Turn', Klaus Krippendorff (2006, p.48) challenges design discourse to address issues on human-centredness. In this book, he calls for a human-centred design approach to include the designer's agency;

Designers' extraordinary sensitivity to what artefacts mean to others, users, bystanders, critics, if not for whole cultures, has always been an important but rarely explicitly acknowledged competence.

Thus the design focus is not purely on the users' need, input and feedback, but also on what agency the designer-as-human can bring to the design project. I have observed that emphasis on 'users' in user-centred design has inadvertently excluded the designers' agency and the values they can bring to the design project. Within HCI and CSCW literatures, I have noticed that designers are often portrayed as 'producers' that create prototypes for user testing or implement feedback obtained from users. In contrast, Krippendorff's call for a 'semantic turn' in design addresses how designers manifest their 'humanness' in the design process with others who they work with, in creating artefacts.

Thus, what follows is a discussion that unpacks Krippendorff's notion by applying it to the practice of communication design. To clarify, the word 'design' or 'designer' is used in this discussion in a communication design context. The discussion in this paper is constructed from the explorations and illuminations from the practice-led doctorate research in communication design. Firstly, the discussion clarifies the terminologies used to distinguish between 'people' and 'roles' of the designer, client and audience. I argue that acknowledging the diversity of roles is central to the human-centred perspective. Secondly, I examine the contexts in which human-centred approaches are manifested within the practice. I give examples of how and why mutual relationship amongst the stakeholders is a key component to the human-centred design process. Then I discuss the significance of the dialogic process that allows stakeholders to negotiate, question, highlight issues and enhance a 'Social Creativity' (Fischer, 2003). Lastly, I discuss how the designer-as-human perspective has been significant in

bringing their agency of 'human-ness' to the design process within the practice. Thus, this paper illustrates that human-centred design in the practice of communication design, is an interpersonal, complex and layered relationship that include multiple roles of people; the audience, designers and clients. The paper concludes by putting forward a human-centred proposition for the discourse to embrace, discuss and to explore what it means.

Communication Design context

I have observed that current discourse surrounding communication design is saturated with graphical language. The abundance of visual examples within the discipline celebrates the crafting of the artefact. However, despite the body of work by Frascara (1995), Nini (2002) and Siu (2003), user-centred design has not been adopted within the wider discourse of communication design. What does it mean to design with people? What is the relationship between design, artefact and people? Prompted by such questionings, this paper explores how the designers' agency, and the agency of other stakeholders are valued to enable a human-centred approach in the practice of communication design.

As stated in the introduction, the discussion here draws on the investigation undertaken in the author's practice-led doctorate research in communication design. Various design projects were carried out with clients and other collaborating designers to explore a human-centred design approach. These explorations illuminated knowledge absent from the literature and make the tacit knowledge explicit within the author's own practice in communication design. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with a small sample of communication design practitioners in Australia. A diversity of practitioners from various backgrounds was selected to give a broader view of the practice of communication design. The perspectives shared within the interviews have informed the author's understanding of the interactions that occur between stakeholders when designing with people.

A characteristic that defines the practice of communication design (and perhaps may apply to other design disciplines as well) is that designers very rarely work alone, unless they are undertaking a personal project that is driven by and is intended only for themselves. However, the personal projects designers undertake, or indeed their own personal creative activities that are undertaken are not in discussion here. Rather, this paper intends to discuss the significance of interaction with other people during the design process.

Design projects in communication design usually involve a number of people from specialised areas where they contribute to create and realise the design outcome, yet they vary considerably within the practice. For example, a designer working in Publishing has different roles and people they work with, compared to a designer in an Advertising agency. However, across the practice, the designers usually work with a client who commissions the work or project. The relationship that the designer has with the client is vitally important to the work being undertaken. Similarly, the relationship that designers have with others working on the project determines how the work is carried out. Thus this paper explores the complex interpersonal relationships that occur within design projects and to draw out the human-centred approaches within the practice.

Multiplicity of roles and perspectives

In our every day life, we play numerous roles depending on the context we are placed in. For example, one can be a daughter, a mother, a friend and a wife with different people and different contexts. This multiplicity of roles we play in our daily lives can be mirrored in design. I believe that acknowledging the diversity of roles we adopt is central to a human-centred perspective. Our diverse roles leads to diverse perspectives, that in turn enables us to understand the multi-dimensionality of people's lives. I believe this understanding is significant to designing.

However, in examining what roles people undertake in design, I have struggled with which terminologies to use that best avoid any embedded political or reductive descriptors of people. 'People' are given various terms depending on context and discipline. The same person may be called a 'user' in the HCI context, and yet be a 'consumer' and a 'reader' in other contexts. The perspective adopted in describing a 'person' can therefore be limiting. Liz Sanders and Robert Suarez (2001) criticises that such perspectives can become a label that '...relegates them to minor roles.' They argue, '...people are only 'consumers' for small, often insignificant and not so positive portions of their lives... If we start calling them people, maybe we will begin to think of them as people.'

Sanders and Suarez argues for a more human approach of engaging with people that begins by questioning how 'labels' are given to them. The 'labels' used to describe people within different contexts and disciplines strips the human dimension of people, forcing them to become 'categories', rather than living, dreaming human beings.

As this paper explores the human-centred perspective of a communication designers' practice, it investigates the interaction that takes place between people in design. However, continually using the term, 'people' was often too broad. Whilst acknowledging that 'labels' are limiting, I believe that there is rhetorical value to foster discourse. Therefore, for the purposes of discussion in this paper, I have mainly focused on three different kinds of 'roles' in design; designers, clients and audiences. The three different roles represent different identities, interests, values and agendas.

I intentionally use the word 'role' and not 'people'. This is because I believe and have observed that various people take on the 'roles' of the 'designer', a 'client' and the 'audience' at various times and in different contexts during the design project. These roles are often interchangeable and may not be as clear-cut as one hopes. To give a simple example, a designer designing a corporate identity can be working with the client, but the 'audience' can be the staff of the client's organisation. In this context, the client also represents the 'audience'. Thus, I have used commonly applied 'labels' to examine the complex, inter-changeable roles that people play within the design process. In this way, I am exploring the multiplicity of roles within design that people play, and how and why they are central to designing.

Relationship amongst people in projects

There is a genuine desire for designers to be in a mutually respectful relationship with their clients and other team members who they work with, rather than being delegated the task of a 'stylist' or 'window-dresser' at the tail end of the design process. This desire for designers to elevate their position as mutual partners or collaborators is the

central appeal for 'designer as author' discourse (Rock, 2002) within communication design. Through flexible definition of the word 'author', designers had attempted to 'exercise some kind of agency where there has traditionally been none' (Rock, 2002, p.243). Thus, authorship in communication design remains a highly problematic concept, as it can be confused as yet another way for designers to play centre stage. Yet, the discourse continues to interest designers resulting from the genuine desire to assert their professional presence and significance in the contemporary visual culture.

Poynor explains, '...designers have always insisted that, to function effectively, they need to question and perhaps 'rewrite' the client's brief. They have argued that the client's understanding of the communication problem may be imperfect and that this is why the client needs their help in the first place' (Poynor, 2003, p.120). Poynor reveals how the designer is keen to be involved at the very early stage of the project to 're-write the client's brief'. During the discussion, the 'communication problem' that the client had perceived may be illuminated differently, resulting in a re-evaluation of the problem. Thus, clarification of the brief stems from discussions with the client to ensure that the overall outcome is effective for all concerned. I will explore more about the importance of such discussions and negotiations later in the paper.

The relationship a designer has with their client can span many years. Indeed, some clients will keep returning to the same designer again. This is not only due to the talent and professionalism of the designer, but clients also value the knowledge that designers' accumulate of the client, the clients' audience and nature of work. These experiences form the foundation of 'trust' between the two stakeholders.

Many designers who I interviewed commented on the importance of 'trust' between project team members and especially with their client. Having the trust of a client allowed the team to put forward ideas or propose future directions with confidence. This view is echoed by a designer who works in an ad agency, 'I don't think we've ever lost a client since it opened for 5 or 6 years. Definitely, clients stay with us. ...Our clients genuinely like us and who we are, and listen to us and respect our opinions, which is fantastic' (Interviewee A). Furthermore, other designers spoke in depth on the value of collaboration. One designer comments:

The [website I worked on] is all about people with different ideas coming together. It's all about sharing your perspective and sharing your knowledge and that's really rewarding. Majority of all broadcast design work have lots of level of collaboration. All projects are collaborative anyway, even with your client. You're both collaborating to get to the end, regardless of the amount of work you're both putting into the project, or who's hand is sculpting, or who's actually applying the brushstrokes. It is collaborative. (Interviewee B)

In this way, clients can also become a 'collaborative partner' in the process. In this context, rather than the client physically collaborating in the crafting of the design artefact, their input is through active discussions, conversations and critique which are a vital part of the overall design process.

Mutual respect and trust allow the diversity of people working on a project to bring together their individual skill sets. The knowledge from individual stakeholders, including the client, is equally important as each other. Allowing mutual input by team members opens the possibility of unexpected interactions to emerge. Fischer (2003) discusses such a framework of design as 'Social Creativity'. He explains, 'bringing together different points of view and trying to create a shared understanding among all stakeholders can lead to new insights, new ideas, and new artifacts.'

Similarly, Spinuzzi discusses how knowledge-making occurs through interaction among people, practices and artefacts:

Knowledge is situated in a complex of artifacts, practices, and interactions; it is essentially interpretive, and therefore it cannot be decontextualised and broken into discrete tasks, nor totally described and optimised. In the constructivist view, participants' knowledge is valorised rather than depreciated, and their perspectives therefore become invaluable when researching their activity and designing new ways to enact that activity (Spinuzzi, 2005, p.165)

Thus, various people including the client and designer, bring their knowledge to the design project, and it is through the interaction between people that knowledge is shared and discussed.

Dialogic process in communication design

Discussions, conversations and critique are common activities within a design process that actively involve other stakeholders. As explained earlier in the paper, the discussion and negotiations begin as early as the briefing stage. During these dialogues, a common vocabulary and language is established to facilitate communication between all stakeholders involved. This dialogic process is crucial in establishing and strengthening the working relationship between people. In my practice of working with others, and interviewing other designers in practice had revealed that the discussions revolve around any number of things. For example, any assumptions that people have are questioned; expectations and values are illuminated; ideas are shared and critiqued; issues are resolved and objectives are clarified and negotiated.

In communication design where the physical participation of the audience during the design process remains a theoretical model, I have observed that the client, designer and other team members often take on roles to advocate for the audience. I believe this to be a critical and significant part of the design process to ensure that the design outcome engages the audience in the way it was intended. This means, at times, discussions amongst the team will arise that addresses the concerns of the audience.

For example, in one design project conducted in my doctorate research, personas (Cooper, 2004, Grudin and Pruitt, 2003) were used as a tool to collectively discuss the audiences early on in the design process. Each collaborating designer was asked to describe a persona that characterised the audience. Lengthy discussions revolved around each persona that illuminated the values of the audience we wanted to engage with. The use of this method revealed that personas were an effective communication and collaborative tool that facilitated our understanding. Through this process, the team shared their knowledge of the audience and were able to discuss any concerns, assumptions or questions. It enabled the team in being conscious of the variety of audiences' values, and in critiquing our assumptions and approaches to the project. Thus personas became a catalyst in accelerating and facilitating a rigorous discussion that, on reflection, became a crucial stage in shaping the overall outcome for the project.

Designers who I interviewed also emphasised the importance of the multiplicity of perspectives. This means that the stakeholders involved in the design project take on different roles in contributing to the discussion from different perspectives, and not just from their personal point of view. For example, in the absence of the client, other members on the design team may take on the role as the 'client'. The work is then critiqued from the client's perspective to ensure that the client's values and concerns are addressed.

Such discussions and negotiations can potentially be a highly emotive experience, especially if there is discord amongst the team. Paul Carter (2004, p.9) explains that,

'collaboration is always, first of all, an act of dis-memberment... the stories, ideas, locations and materials thus dismembered are put back together, but re-membered, in a way that is new.' This suggests that at the beginning of any collaborative activity there is a need to break down the whole to examine each piece. Carter's use of the word 'dis-memberment' has a violent connotation, suggesting that a collaborative activity can be a discord resulting from a clash of ideas or opinions. It can be confrontational; challenging; a dispute. Through this rigorous process, assumptions are questioned and discussed. Again, these dynamics were observed whilst working on a design project amongst collaborating designers.

Collaboration is a complex social relationship amongst participants, and so the process and outcome is complex. Collaboration as a practice enhances the self-reflective practitioner because through such process, participants provide spontaneous feedback and critique to each other. In such processes one cannot avoid being self-reflective and open to feedback – in turn this speeds up the cycle with fresh perspectives offered by those within the collaborative group. Furthermore, in a collaborative process, it can also spur and facilitate a generative activity that can spontaneously inspire creativity and new direction, as mentioned by Fischer early on in the paper.

It is interesting how Carter explains the notion of 're-membered' as a way to retain the original memory of the individual of a group. This suggests that by collaborating, participants are not blending or homogenising into an indistinguishable blob, but the whole is a sum of the parts where each part participates as an individual. In this way, the interaction that occurs between individuals retain each of their own identity and values, yet, share, be inspired by, self-reflect and be confronted by eachothers' values and opinions. Through such rigorous and complex dialogic process, the design process is driven to create engaging and meaningful outcomes for all concerned.

Designers' agency and the human perspective

The audience of the intended design outcome will change depending on context and client. Through multiple iterations and receiving feedback, the designer accumulates knowledge of the clients' audience by experiencing how their designs have engaged the audience. This is evidenced in the interviews where many designers explained that they generally receive feedback from their client of the design jobs undertaken. One designer comments, 'the only level of feedback you get is from the client, and they let you know whether it's been successful or not for these reasons' (Interviewee C). If the designer has been working with the client for a longer period of time, the designer will become increasingly aware and knowledgeable about the client and their audience.

Through many years of designing experience, the designer accumulates knowledge and understanding of specific audiences. Continued experience of designing for and with other people provides a way of knowing. Thus, a designer's skill and knowledge centres around people through designing. As Downton (2003, p.92) explains,

Designers know about designing and this knowing is enriched and positioned by their knowledge of prior design works, the past and present discourse of design, and also through a knowledge of related ideas that can be made to pertain to their designing.

Designers from the interviews also revealed that they observe and experience how

design engages people by reading, talking, listening to other people and it is an accumulated knowledge from past designing experiences.

For a lot of what we do, it's about seeing ourselves as part of the audience. (Some designers) see duality between clients, designers and audiences where there is a divide. I don't think it's that simple. We're part of that same community that we're talking to, we don't go out into the community with lab coats and microscopes and taking notes like science. We're part of it everyday. We live it. Of course there are specific audiences who are outside of our experiences, but it helps to just understand that we're part of what our visual messages adds up to. In terms of researching specific audience needs, it's about reading, talking to people. (Interviewee C)

Similarly, as explained earlier in the paper, other members on the team may bring their knowledge and experiences through a dialogic process. Fulton-Suri (2005, p.175) echoes how people harness tacit knowledge through observation of others.

Each of us possesses unique knowledge that we use in creative ways to achieve our personal and social goals. This intuitive expertise is a very important resource for design because it represents know-how that has been built and honed often through years of experience ...we can work together to uncover the opportunities for improvement.

Thus these accounts suggests that designing is a manifestation of the world, according to how designers understand the world from within, as people. I argue that the characteristic knowledge that designer have as people-as-designer is significant and essential.

This approach of people-as-designer has significance on two levels. Firstly, it differs significantly to an approach where the designers views and manifests the world as it revolves around themselves. The interviews illuminated significant discoveries of a practice that contradicts a common perception of designers who, 'are often seen to construct solutions and thereby design for people essentially like themselves' (Crabtree et al., 2003, p.1). Designers have often suffered such egocentric stereotype, and some may say this is a well-earned reputation. Poynor (2001, p.66) critiques a designer's obsession with self by stating, '...the old fashioned egotism required to believe you have something to say than an audience might want to hear is superseded by the narcissism of thinking you deserve an audience simply because you are you.'

I believe that Poynor's criticism may rightfully apply to some designers whose work has been influenced by celebrity designers. I do not wish to condone their work and nor do I believe that the designer's personal, creative expression produces 'bad', meaningless, disengaging design outcomes. However, I believe the egocentric stereotype had given a negative perception to all designers where it can lead to undermining the value and knowledge of what designers bring of their own understanding of the world from within, as people.

Secondly, knowledge that designers have is built on the notion that individuals have identities, histories and emotions. Such a notion challenges the baggage still carried from Modernism's worst moments when it embraced formal, objective and scientific approaches. This approach has been problematic for design as it resulted in a disconnection between design and people. Dilnot (1993, p.62) critiques this formal practice where it has 'disembodied and disembedded' the subject and was too easily rationalised and reduced to an ergonomic criteria. "... the model of the subject developed here is far more congruent with a designer's instinctive understanding of

the actualities of the subjects he or she designs for than the older model of the 'abstract generalised other.'”

In the same article, Dilnot further equates the concept of 'gift giving' in relation to how designers make/design for users. '...the giver – in this case the designer-maker – knows, and has understood, recognised, affirmed, and sought to concretely meet our most intimate and human needs and desires.' In other words, in the 'gift giving' paradigm, there is a deeper level of consideration, care and attention given to designing as well as the anticipated joy that will be experienced when it is received and appreciated. Designing could thus be argued as a personal human-to-human relationship, residing in empathy. The designers' empathetic practice is echoed in a statement by Tonkinwise and Lorber-Kasunic (2006), 'It is an embodied practice precisely in an interpersonal sense... an interpersonal embodiment, grounded in a shared body experience.'

In this way, the designer manifests their experience as people to create artefacts for other people. The knowledge designers have of people is 'situated in action' (Suchman, 1987) rather than a static, detached, objective understanding. It is not framed by a "passive, 'fly on the wall' spectators of a scene" (Heritage, 1984, p.104). The designer's world-view, their interactions and exchanges with other people reflexively inform and contribute to their understanding of design.

Proposition for the practice of communication design

This paper explored how human-centred approaches are manifested within the practice of communication design. It broadened the discourse on the inclusiveness of design process by illuminating how the designers' agency, and the agency of other stakeholders are valued in the practice. It has highlighted that designing is a dialogic process, based on interactions between people in creating engaging and meaningful outcomes for all concerned. Multiplicity of perspectives was enabled through stakeholders taking on 'roles' to be inclusive to other people's viewpoints. Furthermore, the paper has argued that the designer's skill and knowledge centres around people through designing, based on personal human-to-human relationship. The paper has argued how designers manifest their 'humanness' in the design process with others who they work with, in creating design artefacts.

Yet, the 'semantic turn' addressed by Krippendorff has not begun within the discourse of communication design. I believe that acknowledging and embracing the human-centred approach would lead to significant shifts within the discourse. Firstly, the human focus would enable others to see a designer, not as a 'label', but foremost as a human with designing skills. I believe this acknowledgement will lead to equal respect of their values as a person and those they work with, as well as the values of those the design outcomes are intended to engage. Secondly, the current emphasis and limited understanding of designers as 'producers of artefact' would begin to shift. It would broaden the designers' role as those who co-create human-to-human relationships. I believe this broadening role will place emphasis on furthering the designer's skill in facilitating interaction and communication between people. New discourse will emerge from actively exploring tools, methods and concepts within the discipline, and embracing knowledge and learning from other disciplines.

Clearly, there is more to be discussed and explored if the human-centred approach became the core paradigm for communication design. Liz Sanders (2002) presents discussions around an emerging model of a 'New Design Space'. She speculates of a design space where, 'Collectively, they will generate many new ways of expression,

experiencing and meaning-making.' Thus, the proposition of a human-centred framework in communication design raises many questions for us to explore. What would communication designers design; how and with who in this new paradigm? What new discourses will emerge from these explorations?

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