Unheard Voices of the Wider Community:  
A Community-Based Learning Course Experience

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Introduction

“Empathy is our intuitive ability to identify with other people’s thoughts and feelings—their motivations, emotions, mental models, values, priorities, preferences, and inner conflicts.” (Fulton Suri, 2003)

While only a relatively small part of knowledge originates from personal experience (Schutz, 1970), it is still important to understand how experience affects learning. Designers need to be sensitive to the fact that there are boundaries to their understanding, awareness, and empathy. This has been referred to as the empathic horizon (McDonagh-Philp and Denton, 1999) and can be perceived as a measure of the individual’s ability to empathize with those beyond their immediate socio/economic group. The empathic horizon can be expanded by reflection, experience, and research, enabling the designer to be more sensitive to the issues of particular groups. Sensitivity to our own limitations encourages a participatory role for the user as the designer explores everyday experiences. It must not be overlooked that undertaking the process of expanding one’s knowledge and understanding can involve a degree of discomfort. Taking designers outside their comfort zone is a fundamental part of gaining shared understanding and real insight. Even if designers are exploring everyday activities, these experiences are useful.

There has been a significant shift in thinking with regard to the wider community as ‘active citizens’. This resonates with designers due to the fact that their collaboration with potential users of products can offer valuable insight and feedback. Gone are the days when designers would profess product outcomes with little consultation with the intended user. Consumers now have a voice, and it is a valuable one at that.

Community-Based Learning Course

This paper describes a course that was supported by the Steve Schomberg, the vice chancellor for public engagement and institutional relations at the University of Illinois (Urbana–Champaign) between spring 2005–2006. The aim of the initiative was to extend the student experience and engage the wider community.

“Community-based learning is an important aspect of undergraduate education to give students experiences outside the classroom and for them to bring those experiences back into the classroom. Students can get experience interacting with the community through volunteering, but I believe a better way is through a structured learning opportunity.” (Schomberg, 2004)

The authors developed an elective course that aimed specifically at transforming the students rather than attempting to simply transfer knowledge from the instructors to the students. The 15-week course was run consecutively for two academic years. From the outset, this course was distinct in that the students were made aware that the aim was not problem solving, which tends to be a more typical teaching model in design curricula. The focus was the expansion of their understanding and development of authentic empathy. Formal instruction on research approaches was provided, with particular emphasis on sensitivity, compassion, shared...
understanding, data capture, and transforming the data into relevant information. Working in small teams of two, three, and four, they chose to research people from various areas of society who they felt were underrepresented within the wider community.

There were a total of 28 students that took the course over the two years. The socio-economic profile of the students was predominantly white, middle-class and from the Chicago suburbs. However, there were Hispanic \( (n = 1) \) and African American \( (n = 3) \) students, though they were in the minority. What surprised the authors was that, without exception, all the students had had prior experience in performing volunteer work. One result of this course seemed to be furthering their interest in community service. Another unanticipated element of the student profile was that only two students were from the School of Art + Design, with the rest coming from disciplines such as journalism, English, economics, and dance.

Focusing on dialogue with community members rather than engaging in another design project with a product outcome activity also made this course unique. Creative venues were identified and prepared and public exhibitions were held. The benefits of such exhibitions were evident in touching testimonials from community partners that were on display at the exhibit. An example of such a testimonial was one written by Ray-Louise, who made a significant contribution to the exhibition by sharing his experience as a cross-dressing male:

"Why do I cross dress? The answer is as easy as why do I breath? Or why do I eat? I do these things because I need to. For me, the outward expression as Rae Louise is not an option in my life, but rather it is a need that I simply can't ignore, it is like breathing or eating. To me, not being able to cross dress can be compared with being trapped in a cold dark prison without walls. When I can't cross dress, I am in that prison and it is almost unbearable. When I leave my prison, I am free, if only for a short time. I cross dress because I need to! For to me, not cross-dressing would cause that vibrant, enthusiastic, lover of life in me to die a slow painful death that I cannot bear to think of. That is why I cross dress."

His contribution was compelling, powerful, and emotional. He was able to address a large audience attending the exhibition opening with dignity, sharing his experiences, fears, and aspirations.

Another component of this course was to provide an opportunity for nondesign students to design a poster/invitation for the event (refer to the following Figure 1 below). Faculty assisted in the usage of software, but the concept and graphic layout was the students' collective effort. Providing the opportunity for students to create their poster proved to be a unique process for this group, and they felt they had learned something valuable about communication.
Student Case Studies

There were no boundaries regarding the nature of the community members that the students could choose. However, the students were guided away from potentially hazardous and/or dangerous situations (e.g., anything that involved violence or illegal drugs).

A sample of the range of community partners presented within this paper is as follows:

1. Elderly people in assisted living,
2. Male cross dressers,
3. Young African American males
4. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals in the Greek system,
5. Addiction,
6. Rape survivors.

All of these groups of people within the community offered significant challenges to the student teams. It was made explicit to the students that the aim of this course was to develop empathy and shared understanding for these community partners and not to attempt social engineering by solving or fixing social problems. It was acknowledged that the students did initially feel the urge to problem solve and “fix the world’s problems.” The authors however guided the students away from problem solving and encouraged them to focus on increasing their awareness and developing empathy. This approach was considered to be a more effective way to promote student transformation and may hopefully encourage them to engage in social engineering in the future once they the develop necessary skills to attain positions designed to facilitate social change.

This approach was validated by a comment left in the visitor’s book for the “Elderly in Care Homes” display. Upon viewing this particular exhibit, a visitor who happened to be a member of the local city council felt moved enough to start an initiative to investigate local senior housing with the hope of improving and enhancing living conditions for senior citizens.

(1) Elderly in assisted living
This piece focused on the food the elderly are served. Food is such a significant part of daily life, almost acting as a prism through which life is perceived. With little, if any, social interaction, food possibly comes to represent the only active element in the day of an elderly resident. If the quality of food declines, so does the residents’ perceived quality of their daily experience. Food offers us nutrition and sensory stimuli, and can be a social facilitator. The students displayed samples of low-quality food for visitors to the exhibition to sample. Substandard food, such as that offered as samples, helped to demonstrate how the elderly can have their dignity eroded in a subtle manner.

(2) **Male cross-dressers**

This exhibition piece concentrated on typical male attire (shirt and tie), which has been torn to reveal more feminine clothing that is worn underneath. For many cross dressers, wearing feminine clothes underneath their “everyday” clothes provides a way to satisfy their own needs. Though not perfect, this attracts less attention to them in the community.

(3) **Young African American males**

The definition of “black” provides the backdrop for a photograph of a response to that definition by a participant who is a graffiti artist. This exhibition involved suspended images of individuals with particular close-ups of their eyes. A near life-size photograph of a “black” youth dressed in casual clothing was displayed. In addition, rap music was played to provide another significant cultural backdrop to the exhibition experience.

**Table 1.** Case studies 1–3.

(4) **Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in the Greek System**
This display highlighted findings from a poll that stated homosexuals are equally at risk in dark parking lots as they are within their college fraternities. Photographs of parking lots and fraternity houses were presented on a black-and-white background. An assortment of bandanas that can offer symbolic meaning to one’s sexuality was mounted on an adjacent wall display. To complement their display, students collected reprinted quotations and comments from the community partners.

(5) Addiction

The focal point of this study was a piece of dark fabric draped over a group of chairs that were arranged in a circle. The chairs were tied together with rope and each was furnished with a nametag. This arrangement was quite striking in its ability to evoke the bond felt amongst members of Alcoholic Anonymous support groups. On the wall behind the chairs was a series of three liquor bottles containing various messages, images, and other memorabilia of an addict, in this particular case, “Rosebud.”

(6) Rape survivors

T-shirts that expressed the feelings of the individual survivors were displayed. The student team created an enclosure that viewers entered. Inside this construction, T-shirts were displayed at various heights. In between the T-shirts, there were mirrors located on that wall so not only could the viewers catch their own facial expressions while reading survivors' thoughts, but they could also envision themselves wearing the T-shirts.

Table 2. Case studies 4–6.
Student Feedback

This course concentrated on the students’ personal growth and did not cater to students who may chase grades rather than seek new experiences. Each student took responsibility for accessing, nurturing, and securing community participation within their team projects. Only two of the students had had any previous experience with exhibition design and display. All of the students enjoyed the exhibition experience and appreciated an alternative method of disseminating their work. Visitors to the gallery spaces responded well to the exhibits. Some even responded emotionally to particular displays (e.g., rape survivors and young African American males).

Conclusion

The authors feel that this type of course benefits students who commit to such activities as volunteers. For this degree of engagement, students chasing grades rather than valuing the experience may not benefit from this type of course. In addition, dealing with social issues requires some soul searching. This course relied upon the students’ capacity for self-reflection and their ability to engage with and reach out to the wider-community. What was so surprising about this course is that it took the students outside their comfort zones, requiring them to develop skills not normally associated with degree programs (e.g., attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, exhibition design) and yet they all thrived.

While it was clear to the authors that despite our honest belief that none of us are bias-free, an unanticipated dimension to exhibiting the student work proved the point. In the two-year duration of the course, two venues were used to display student work. One was a university sponsored community space off campus (Civitas) and the other was an exhibition space for students between the School of Art & Design and Krannert Art Museum. In both cases, the students generated work, curated, and executed the exhibitions. The nature of the spontaneous feedback fell generally across two lines. They included the general public and members of the art and design community. While the first were extremely supportive and enthusiastic, the latter proved judgmental, bored, or dismissive. This highlights another form of exclusion the authors attribute to the art and design community’s sense of entitlement to creative artwork production and an automatic association of the space used to be the sole property of art and design members. Again, the intention was to display the outcome of students’ learning regardless of the perceived artistic merit. It reminded the authors of the constant need for more openness as well as the need to refrain from passing quick judgments. Perhaps the learning experience could be expanded in the future to include professional artists and designers by providing more a concrete explanation of the course, the exhibits, and the students involved.

References

