

PUTTING SERVICE BACK IN SERVICE DESIGN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN INTEGRATED DESIGN PRACTICES FOR PUBLIC GOOD

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INTRODUCTION

Designers and researchers have been involved in designing services for public or commercial uses for decades. In this paper, we will argue that designers can gain important insights by becoming the “servers” to provide the services they are designing. It is a significant role reversal that should be advocated especially in design education. We also argue that integrating design practice is essential in designing services. To achieve maximum effectiveness, organizations must assemble a service design team that includes all creative professions.

To begin, we will discuss two concepts, service-learning and service design. We will then analyze a few cases that link these two concepts in current creative practice. We will discuss this practice’s potential in design education. Finally, we will then discuss a multi-year design projects that is currently being conducted in the Product Design and Graphic Design program of Columbia College Chicago. Through this project, we will explore the educational opportunities in integrated design practices to provide design services to our communities. The project also contains both the elements of service-learning and service design, therefore, provides the possibility of alternative paths of design education that could put “service” back in service design.

SERVICE DESIGN

Services are organized combinations of products and resources situated within the local and global economy that are intended to improve human relations. To improve users’ understanding of any service, services must be designed as a gestalt. In essence, service is an integrated experience, meaning the visual identity system (graphic communication), the human-machine interfaces, and the physical and virtual spaces and forms of the service have to collectively create an integrated system. Such an undertaking requires a shift in design education to think systematically about a service that exists over time and adapts through user input. This clearly presents a challenge to design educators, particularly at the undergraduate level, since learning outcomes of curriculum tend to focus on tangible skill sets. Systems thinking is difficult to cultivate alongside skill building and even more difficult to implement when building educational design projects. It requires both students and faculty to become comfortable with the fuzzy front end of design research and working across disciplines. It also requires rigorous research activities, which are not typically expected at the undergraduate level. Nevertheless, design educators should not shy away from this area because service design clearly presents tremendous opportunities for creative professions.

In addition, as new technological infrastructures develop, there emerge new ways of leveraging them to provide services in place of actual owned products. Such a model moves consumers towards greater social awareness and shared responsibility as we simultaneously work to minimize the physical footprints of our lives. Therefore,

service design has become an essential component of sustainable design as Ezio Manzini pointed out so eloquently in several of his articles regarding immateriality and social innovations towards sustainability.

Designing services inevitably involves large number of stakeholders, especially users. Typically, when designing services, designers and researchers conduct ethnographic research to develop empathy for the users and to improve understanding of user behaviors and the underlying mental models that determine those actions, all of which is essential to create a better understanding of the context of the design problem. Participatory research methods are also commonly used in this process, in which users are invited to participate in the design process. It is easy to see that services designed for social changes can only succeed when the community is engaged in the process. However, though designers usually make the effort to experience the services themselves, seldom do they actually become the “servers” who provide the services to the community (users). This has to do, in part, with liability concerns from the service providers’ point of view, but one could argue that through the act of serving, designers could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the services they intend to design. An analogy could be drawn with the techniques of “Method Acting”, by internalizing the thoughts and feelings of the ones they serve, designers could strategize more powerful experience for both the servers and the served.

Our research reveals that in recent years, design research is increasingly being done by designers who are also participants. In Eric Ries’ book, *Lean Startup* (Ries, 2011), he describes a design method called: “the concierge MVP”, where the designer/researcher acts as the back-end infrastructure of the service to test the experience of the service before actually figuring out the back-end (be it technological or labor). In that sense, they are ACTUALLY serving the user while designing. Designers and researcher gain accurate data about customer demands because they are observing real customer behaviors, instead of asking hypothetical questions; they put themselves in a position to interact with real customers and learn about their needs; they are often surprised by unexpected ways of how people use their designs and services. Clearly, it is beneficial for our students to learn this research method as well.

One example is that as one of the authors was volunteering for a local food pantry, a homeless man came in and asked for cans that could be opened without a can opener because he had no tool for it. He also had nowhere to heat up or store his food so the food had to be ready for eat once it was open. This extreme experience could be common to other groups of people as well, such as backcountry campers and truckers, even soldiers. This is the kind of insights that designers could find in serving others. Another example relating to food is that for people in urban food dessert, one of the difficulties to get healthy food is the distance between their locations and the places that serve healthy choices is too large and they cannot afford to go. So the strategy is NOT to make people go the distance, but to bring the choices to them. Local NGOs such as Capital District Community Gardens in New York have started various programs such as “the Veggie Mobile” to serve the elderly and disabled with affordable fresh produces that come from the community gardens. Several large corporations such as Procter & Gamble (Campaign “Load of Hope” for Tide) also stepped up to provide disaster relief for communities in need.

SERVICE-LEARNING

Coincidentally but not surprisingly, the above discussed research method often requires students to be engaged in the communities, gaining valuable learning experience while serving the communities. This requirement suggests

that there might be linkage between service design with the much practiced “service-learning” strategy in academia.

There have been many definitions of “service-learning” over the past three decades. As the *servicelearning.org* website defines it, “Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” This strategy could be characterized as a wide array of experiential education endeavors, from volunteer and community service projects to field studies and internship programs (Compact, 2003). Regardless of how it is implemented, the goal of service-learning is clear. “In a service-learning experience, students learn not only about social issues, but also how to apply the new knowledge to action that addresses real problems in their own communities.” (Torres & Sinton, 2000)

Though service-learning is not a new strategy, we have not seen many applications of such strategy in design as in other humanity fields such as sociology. It is a struggle in design education because normally there are defined skillsets that are expected to be taught in design courses. Inserting a community service component into already packed studio courses faces many obstacles. Time limitation, budget constraints, the large scope of a community engagement project, etc., all make a successful integration difficult. We recognize these obstacles but argue that through careful coordination across several design disciplines, we can make service-learning a meaningful and rewarding experience for all students and faculty involved. A service-learning project can have much greater potential to allow students to conduct in-depth research than commercial projects, while still providing our students opportunities to create great portfolio projects that have the potential to be mass-produced.

CURRENT PRACTICES

There have been a few high profile designer-initiated community projects and organizations over the last few years. One of the most respected is Project H, an NGO founded by designer Emily Pilloton. By “Teaching youth to design and build their future with heart, hands, and hammers” (Project H, 2014), Project H is both a design studio that serves the community and an educational agency. It is currently operating mainly in Winsor, North Carolina, collaborating closely with the local schools.

Another artist who uses his creative skills to serve the community as “the server”, is Mero Cocinero Karimi and his touring group, “People’s Cook” (People’s Cook, n.d.). Through engaging communities by creating cooking events that are interdisciplinary and participatory, Mr. Karimi blends performance art and civil engagement into a unique act. His group’s purpose is not to design new services, but to inspire and bring the community closer together. In addition, Mr. Karimi’s group also inspires designers and community leaders to explore the possibilities of creating change through common creative experience. The questions designers should ask are, what are designers’ roles in these service design projects? Shouldn’t we be designers and citizens simultaneously? Can we design experience that encourages active community engagement? Can the designers themselves become the leaders of these services?

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

To engage the community effectively, students must learn the appropriate and effective way to conduct research. Service-learning experience is important for our students in the design disciplines and much needed in our curriculum. The service-learning component will allow students to focus on understanding the motives of users in the community and how to engage them to ensure the success of their designs. Moreover, students would become advocates in the community through this design process.

Currently we are running a multi-year service-learning project in the Art + Design department of Columbia College Chicago: the redesigning of the school lunch experience for children and youth. We are collaborating with several local organizations, including Chicago public high schools, local NGOs Mikva Challenge and Healthy School, with a further plan to involve more local and regional organizations such as universities and NGOs. We need their help in recruiting participants for this project. The department has long tradition of running projects that deal with public good. In the past, we also conducted projects on the topics of disaster relief, sustainable design, and adolescence health, etc., all of which had taught the students the necessity of civic responsibility and community engagement. It is our intention to establish the service-learning component in the department through this project and to use our experience to create an educational model.

This project asks this tough question: How do you create design that will transform the experience of having lunch at school for Chicago Public School students to help increase the participation of lunch program, help students make healthy food choices, and help them connect with their peers in a deeply meaningful way? To answer this multi-faceted question, a research and design team of multiple creative disciplines must be assembled. We insisted that this experience be designed for (K-12 students) and by the students (university students). As an educational experience, our design team at Columbia College Chicago will consist of multidisciplinary teams of students studying graphic design, product design, interior architecture, and advertising/art direction. The teams will be mentored by educators and researchers in these disciplines.

Our designers see the opportunity to redesign the experience of having lunch at the public schools of Chicago to address issues of concerns beyond merely provision of healthy food. We must deal with many challenges that the Chicago youth is facing at many levels: malnutrition and under-nutrition due to poverty, childhood obesity, adolescence health, and food desert. These issues are interrelated and need a holistic design approach to tackle them. The dining experience needs to be engaging, educational and inspiring, beyond providing nutritious meals. The design team wants to design the lunch experience to replenish students' bodies as well as their minds to help them achieve more academically and socially. Furthermore, students will in turn become the catalyst in their own communities to help educate people to make healthier food choices. Our design team has begun to conduct ethnographic and participatory research to understand the actual needs of the communities, conceptualize and prototype creative solutions, and formulate concrete and realistic design suggestions to the Chicago schools. The students' community work will have a direct impact on the high schools that will be participating in the project and have the potential to recreate the school experience as a whole. We hope to even expand some of the creative ideas to the global scale.

The first phase of the project is being implemented in our sophomore studio course, Integrated Design Studio. Students have created a research report, branding, packaging, and environmental design, etc., all of which indicates exciting directions for an entirely new experience. To share the project across disciplines and studios,

we established an online database to serve as a resource that can be referenced and built upon with future community service projects.

It is our intention to have our students serve lunches in some capacity in the future phase of this project. Though facing political issues such as union, contract negotiations in Chicago Public Schools, we could arrange small demonstration groups of students through local NGOs to simulate the entire process, with the design students serving as the cooks, servers, faculty, and staff. We are excited to see how our students, who have fresh memories from their own high school cafeterias and who are currently experiencing the cafeterias at the college, will have a different perspective of how the service is created and why. In this way, they will potentially generate more insights that lead to designs for a new experience.

CONCLUSIONS

By changing the roles we play in the design process, we change people's perception of us as designers and thus change their behaviors around us. Through this immersive process, designers could find new ways to make positive changes to our society. By utilizing our skills in design thinking and visual communications, we are capable to build greater and stronger communities in many levels. In our seeking of better service design, let us not forget that we can serve the community directly, not only through professional engagement, but also through community engagement. We believe it is important for design educators to encourage civil engagement in their classrooms. We can lead the next generation of students to become citizen designers by creating educational opportunities to learn through services.

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