Chapter 4

Empathic Design
Research Strategies:
Designing for, with and by People with Disabilities

Deana McDonagh
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Joyce Thomas
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Lydia Khuri
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Susann Heft Sears
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Feniosky Peña-Mora
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

Demographics are shifting. People are living longer and are expecting a higher quality of life than previous generations. Over a typical lifespan we will develop a range of disabilities, which are no longer perceived as a barrier to having a good quality of life. User expectation of products is growing which suggests a balanced approach to functionality is more important than ever. Rather than designing for the users, we need to be designing intimately with them to ensure that more intuitive design outcomes are generated. Ideally we hope to see people with disabilities designing for the wider population, which will push this model more towards design by. Empathic design research is a strategy that relies on the end user being an active partner in the designing process, a co-creator of knowledge. The concepts of empathy, empathic horizon, and the material landscape are illustrated through the discussion of a pilot design course within a university context. Using this approach, students with physical (visible) disabilities and product design students worked together designing everyday products. This empathic approach highlights research strategies that can support more effective design outcomes.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-617-9.ch004
INTRODUCTION

Creativity is an instinctive urge... that gives creators an unusual euphoria and generates an unmatched sense of satisfaction. Creativity is the core of new ideas. It’s the source for new products, new designs, and vision to see the world in a renewed way (Canaan, 2003, p. 236).

Designers are traditionally and ostensibly able-bodied men and women. Design, of course, depends on the designers’ creativity, which in turn is shaped by the material and historical dimensions of their lives. These conditions are often taken for granted and tend to be left unexamined. Along with individual differences in creativity, they provide the platform for designers to imagine what has not been imagined before. Able-bodied designers bring into prominence novel ways of thinking that nonetheless emerge against a backdrop of interacting with the material landscape which presupposes certain bodily qualities, a privilege not possible for individuals with disabilities or impairments. Although these delimiting conditions shape it, the very definitions of creativity denote pushing knowledge beyond things as they are accepted, defined, or known to exist – designers push beyond the boundaries of their empathic horizons.

The material and historical dimensions of their lives also shape the creativity of people with disabilities. Most often they are not in a position to take for granted what others accept without question – e.g., able-bodied people have an expectation that they will be able to reach door handles and elevator buttons, where a person in a wheelchair may not have the same assumption. A person’s level of impairment can become magnified by the physical environment. How those who are able-bodied view the level of impairment of their peers with disabilities versus how people with disabilities view themselves can be entirely different, thus generating two realities. The conditions that provide the starting point for people with disabilities re-imagining the material landscape may or may not be radically different from their able-bodied counterparts. However, what they must contend with are the limiting factors of the environment, the nature of their disability and interpretation of it by others, and the seemingly universal phenomenon of devaluation (Vash & Crewe, 2004). In particular, people with disabilities face barriers in accessing the materials, skills, and facilities where product designers are educated and work.

Design is less about generating products and more about creating positive experiences for the user (Formosa 2006). This places design as a critical agent between the material world and the user. The material landscape impacts all people’s daily experiences and affects personal perception of their independence in such basic areas as food packaging, mobility, personal hygiene, and communications. Effective product designers recognize they cannot rely solely on their own experiences to inform their designing process. More often than not they will be designing for people with experiences different than their own. Product design practitioners must be innovative problem solvers, studying and simulating life-expert-users in their environments to gain understanding of ways to create better user experiences with products.

Empathy “…is simply about achieving greater awareness, an extended imagination, and sensitivity to another person’s world in a powerfully memorable way” (Fulton-Suri, 2003). It is the critical component that deepens the designer’s understanding of users who may be very different from the designer. It allows the designer insight into intangibles such as feelings, emotions, dreams, aspirations, and fears that can provide the designer with critical cues, triggers, and inspiration that provide the foundation for more balanced functional and supra-functional products. Employing an empathic design research strategy enables the designer to expand his/her empathic horizon (McDonagh, 2008; Denton & McDonagh, 2003;
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