
The Central Role of Empathy in Service Design

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is commonly defined as “the ability to put yourself in another person’s shoes i.e., to truly see the world through others eyes in a given context or situation. This is particularly important in Service Design since the goal is designing meaningful and sustainable relationships. To do so we need to engage in a process of deep understanding and connection with different persons having a multitude of visions of the world, ways of behaving and acting. Having this central relevance, Empathy is a mandatory condition to any Service Design project, being the engine both of the design thinking process and the design action process. In methodological terms this paper addresses this central role of Empathy and discloses it through the concatenation of literature review and the presentation of Design student’s service projects (developed in the Service Design Course from the Design graduation program at FA_ULisboa), done with a social design focus and developed in a specific conjuncture: the Covid pandemics. This peculiar context challenged the way the activities of observing and engaging with people occurred, making it hard to set aside assumptions, thus suspending each student own view of the world around her/him. The critical assessment and discussion of the results of these group service design projects allowed us to develop some tactics in order to overcome the constraints imposed by the pandemics. Hopefully this reflection will somehow contribute to the design area of Education and it is in itself an empathic gesture towards the Design education agents.

Keywords: Service design, Empathy, Design process, Design education

INTRODUCTION

Empathy integrates as a key issue the defense argumentation of several design approaches and practices such as empathic design, participatory design, human-centered design, inclusive design, social innovation design, among others. In synthesis, empathy is seen as a crucial element of the design thinking process of each of these design fields/modus operandi since it provides a perspective-taking behavior crucial to the creative process, but most of all for the correctness and sustainability of the proposed solutions emerging from the design processes. As identified by Zaki (2014), Empathy in its emotional intensity is unique in humans and it can be understood and observed at two levels: affective and cognitive. The first one has to do with the ability to experience and share the emotions of others and the second one (related with what usually is mentioned as perspective-taking) is the capability to

understand the emotions of others (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972; Hogan, 1979). It is not known whether and how they are dependent or not, but it is well documented that it involves affective arousal, emotion understanding, and emotion regulation (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, and Perry, 2009; Decety, 2010). Relevant for the purpose of this paper is the fact that as Siegel and Dray (2019, p.85) mentioned “True empathy cannot be achieved by abstracting general user characteristics from the context of specific user experiences (...) that can only produce stereotyping, the opposite of the deep understanding (...).” Being so, the main challenge is to understand a person’s experiences, which are specific and dynamic thus requiring a narrative, not a static description. Furthermore, it is important to assess empathy in terms of class dynamics, the one generated among students and among students and teacher.

SERVICE DESIGN TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS - EXAMPLE OF FA COURSE DURING THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Service Design Course in FA_ULisboa integrates the 3rd year of the Design graduation program. The teaching-learning project is strongly supported by project-based work mostly developed by groups of students. In this specific curricular unit (CU) the focus of all the briefings since the beginning of the course was to create meaningful services in terms of social and cultural dimensions, thus benefiting the wellbeing of humans in an inclusive and sustainable way. The challenge of the past two years for this type of courses, highly dependent on field work, participatory and collaborative experiences, was to overcome the “distance” Covid 19 impose to all of us. Being so, for the illustration of the teaching-learning process in this specific context we chose to use as an example the Service Design course taught during the first lockdown - that started the 12th march 2020, with classes finishing the last day of May 2020. As Almendra (2021) acknowledged, under these unusual conditions classes required on the part of teachers and students to find ways of collaborating and achieving results without jeopardizing the quality of the processes and results.

The Service Design briefing of this course was set in a Covid free moment and prompted students to develop services, being their choice of project based on a table that allowed them to select distinct areas of intervention, target groups, and possible stakeholders (with a minimum of 3 partners). The alternatives to be made should have a clear impact in terms of social empowerment and sustainability commitment. In Table 1 we present the names of the projects, as well as the areas of intervention and the target groups.

A quick analysis of Table 1 makes clear that the vast majority of the services proposed by the groups of students focused on the improvement of the life of most unprotected and vulnerable population groups, as well as the ones affected by the pandemics (including students). In what concerns the areas of intervention, they are related with sustainability, demographic phenomena and wellbeing (with a specific focus on mental wellbeing). These specific contexts of intervention clearly call for empathic processes since, as Mattson and Wood (2014) state, those are situations requiring group abilities

Table 1. Groups and its services thematics/target groups (Almendra, 2021).

No	Title service	Area of intervention	Target population
1	Security at night – old town neighborhoods	Security	Night users
2	Giving the hand – living the city	Wellbeing	Informal caregivers
3	Ajuda's Hand	Food waste	Vulnerable people
4	Your Wave	School Dropout	Teenagers
5	New Living	Elderly's Isolation	Elderly
6	ReAjuda	Recycling	Poor neighborhoods
7	Sol a Lés – Solidary Transportation	Mobility	Elderly
8	Happy Place	Temporary lodging	Students lodging
9	Javô	Elderly's isolation	Elderly
10	PorLisboa	Inclusive tourism	Disabled people
11	Rehabita	Rehabilitation	urban citizens
12	Overcoming Covid	Wellbeing	urban citizens
13	Between Us	Education	University students

to promote peer learning, while pulling students to “experience” cultural and social contexts rather different from their ones. These particular contexts of intervention are aligned with the perspective we defend for Service Design teaching-learning process that must focus in the human being and its their interactions with other persons and the nature, in order to solve relevant problems in ethical, inclusive, and sustainable ways. This entails that the main focus is the process itself, the one that offer us a result in the end, but also the process that allow us, while pursuing solutions, to engage in teaching-learning moments that make us become more competent as human beings as well as designers.

As the course went to online mode thru the “zoom platform” at its beginning, teachers had to adjust didactics so the extremely important moments of discussion of ideas and collaborative work could be developed properly. The interactions were guaranteed in the virtual classroom by the creation of breakout rooms and students made use of the “miro” platform – a collaboration online tool – to analyze, synthesize and expose critically and in real-time their ideas and the co-created diagrams, maps and plans. In fact, early in this contingent moment it became clear that collaboration was at the neuralgic center of “distant” designing and that Empathy was more than ever central to the success of those collaborative engagement activities (Cipolla and Manzini, 2009). Again, as proposed by Almendra (2021) it is indispensable to recognize different but complementary types of Collaboration: 1) the one between teacher and students – that requests in this specific situation special care with the recognition of student’ needs and concerns as well as a keen comprehension of student’s environment (home) and responsibilities (e.g. caring), the access he/she has to communication resources and his/her level of proficiency using digital tools; 2) the dimension of collaboration among students that is twofold: a) as a class group; b) as a team – in which it is fundamental to

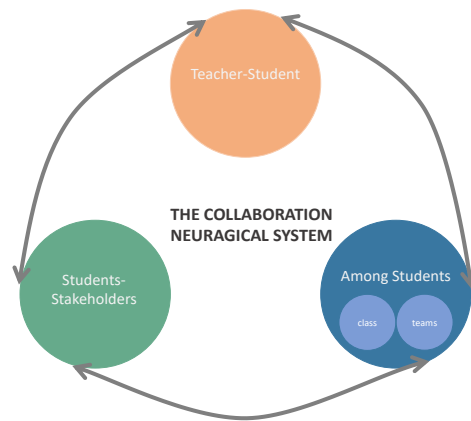


Figure 1: Collaboration as a neuralgic system of designing services (Almendra, 2021, p. 5).

incentivize the creation of robust connection not only among team members but expressly among all the teams, supporting the use of a shared platform of information, as well as the usage of a class “WhatsApp” group to streamline the involvement in the designing process and to increase the joint comprehension and enthusiasm to develop the tasks; 3) the collaboration among students and stakeholders that requires collaborative density that is hard to be conquered. All these three dimensions are translated in Figure 1 that establishes the relationship amongst them that engage in a dynamic interaction translated into continuous fluxes among all of them and in both directions.

It is also important to acknowledge that the openness to collaboration was reinforced during pandemics. That might be due to the fact (verbalized by several students) that all experienced the same constraint, being linked by that adversity.

Empathy as a Core Competence - Lessons Learned

Empathy has a core role in collaborative processes namely the ones of team work as much as it has in student’s design performance (Alzayed, 2019). Moreover, as Mattson and Wood, (2014) acknowledged “While understanding the factors that support the building of empathy is important, underscoring its role in the early stages of the design process is essential, since being empathic in those stages can be the gateway to creative solutions to the design problem”. As Almendra (2021) mentioned there are relevant issues to retain while experiencing a teaching-learning moment in a distant mode. Besides the assumption of collaboration as a neuralgic system that structures the process, it is fundamental that teachers create enabler-moments at the beginning and end of the classes (10 minutes) dedicated to promote empathy so the existing and desired collaboration dynamics can flourish, the class acts in an energized way, and the creation of a “collect smiles” moment can occur, exploring the positive aspects of each other’s constraints. Another pertinent condition favoring empathy development is the creation of

asynchronous moments with students allowing them to proceed their work outside classes. On the side of the students, empathy establishment was supported by the collective feeling that “all are in the same boat”. This “forced” union glued by the adversity all were experiencing was assumed as a driver of the collaborative mode, boosting solidarity and meaningful interactions among students and amid teams; Finally, in terms of the engagement with stakeholders, the empathic processes to occur during collaborative moments were backed by a sentiment of “belonging to this community linked thru adversity” (that was the case of all stakeholders involved in the 13 projects). Being so, students soon become aware both of their openness to empathize as well as they recognized and valued the stakeholders’ willingness to share and collaborate. Another driver of these empathic processes arises from the fact that most of the target groups are segments of the population with less ability to react and develop resilience in a pandemic context (elderly; disabled people; vulnerable people; caregivers). That reality created in students a strong commitment towards meaningful engagements and full comprehension of “the other”. The tactic adopted by the teacher of following the motto “Making normal the unusual” for interactions to be developed within the class participants as well as between those and all the stakeholders, contributed as a facilitator of communication, a booster of positive behavior, a trigger for empathic attitudes and experiences along the entire process of developing service design solutions.

CONCLUSION

Empathy is hard to develop and to be used by students in general, but the context of lockdown due to the COVID 19 pandemic allowed students, teachers and stakeholders to better understand the need and the value of collaboration based on empathic experiences. The shared feeling of “being in the same boat” gave rise to a chain reaction of willingness to be open and available to others not only on the part of all the persons involved in the different projects, but strongly among the students in class. Both affective and cognitive Empathy took place in an intense manner and as acknowledged by all the people involved in the course of Design Services (as a result of a short questionnaire posed at the end of the semester) the unusual restrained circumstances they were experiencing made them more aware of themselves and more open to others, their thoughts, feelings, desires and wishes, fears and hopes. This awareness and use of empathy as a mean and not as an end in itself is a rather important acknowledgement on the part of everyone involved since in the end the goal is to guarantee that one are aware and respect interpersonal differences among people as well as of the limitations of that process of knowing others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge CIAUD, our Research Centre as well as the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) for funding this paper. Furthermore, recognition must be made to REDEs – the research group that

enabled us to support this type of research and reflections. Last but not least a special thanks to all the students and stakeholders involved in the work developed during the Services Design Course.

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