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Provoking Students to Re-Story Stakeholders in Their Design Process

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ABSTRACT

It's exceptionally challenging for novice designers to fully understand the stakeholders that are intrinsically part of their design process (and ultimately their target design). Research shows that student designers often think of the other people involved in their designs as 'users', and those users are generally mirrors of themselves. Expert designers, however, know that there are many relevant, interested and affected individuals, communities and groups involved in their design process, which naturally includes users but also includes other parties (e.g., funders, manufacturers, user/experts, target users, other designers). This paper highlights a project implemented in a design foundation studio course that provoked students to discover, define, acknowledge, and design with/for the breadth of stakeholders in their design process. The aim of the design project was to support the students to engage in human-centred designing); to build a more fulsome picture of a target design (in this case a board game for blind and sighted folks; to work with real stakeholders; to develop a detailed empathy and design research plan; and to story and re-story their design process through designing, making, deep reflection and meaningful conversations. The project involved a multi-staged process that began by facilitating students to make design inquiries with stakeholders from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), a blind user/expert, and a seasoned industrial designer. In the process of the project, the students developed skills that increased their ability to balance the needs of the various stakeholders involved in a project, to make meaningful decisions towards an interesting target design, and to engage in self-knowing and understanding their own role in the design process. This paper promises to illuminate interesting ways to provoke students to move beyond simply thinking of users, and instead to re-story stakeholders in their design process.

Keywords: Clients, Design education, Human-centred designing, Lived experience, Self-knowing, Users

INTRODUCTION

Designing for diverse stakeholders presents a unique challenge, particularly for students who may initially perceive stakeholders solely as 'users', often reflecting their own perspectives and experiences. While expert designers recognize the complex network of individuals, communities, and organizations involved in the design process, students often overlook this complexity. This paper explores a project conducted in a foundation design course aimed at broadening students' understanding of stakeholders in the

design process. The project was centered around creating a board game accessible to both blind and sighted individuals. Through engagement with real people, including a representative from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) (https://www.cnib.ca), a blind 'user/expert' (Ringaert, 2001), and an experienced industrial designer, students were guided to identify, analyze, and incorporate the needs of various stakeholders.

Our design project called Sense & Sensibility employed a multi-staged approach that emphasized human-centered design (Strickfaden & Thomas, 2022) principles, fostering empathy, and facilitating meaningful interactions. Teaching students about stakeholders is essential for cultivating their understanding of collaborative processes in various fields, including project management, education, and design. Stakeholders play a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of projects and designs, as they provide diverse perspectives, resources, and needs that influence decision-making. This paper explores two key aspects by: (1) unpacking various definitions of stakeholders within design practice and scholarship; and (2) teaching students about how to characterize and consider stakeholders more effectively.

STAKEHOLDER THEORY AND EARLY EMERGENCE IN DESIGN STUDIES

The concept of 'stakeholders' has played a significant role in shaping organizational and design discourse. Freeman (1984) traces the term back to 1963 when it first appeared in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute. Initially used to broaden the narrow focus on "stockholders," (p. 1) the term was expanded to include employees, customers, suppliers, and society at large. Rendtorff and Bonnafous-Boucher (2016) further argue that the original definition posited stakeholders as those without whose support an organization would cease to exist. Over time, stakeholder theory has evolved into a foundational framework for understanding relationships between organizations and the individuals or groups affected by their actions (Laplume et al., 2008).

At its core, stakeholder theory maps the complex network of connections that organizations must navigate. Freeman's (1984) widely accepted definition states that stakeholders are any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives. This broad characterization has been pivotal in adapting the theory across multiple disciplines and fields, including design. However, the definition remains contested, as different scholars propose alternative classifications. Some prefer narrow definitions that emphasize stakeholders with legitimate claims or direct influence (Clarkson, 1995; Ng, 2019; Kaler, 2002), while others support broader definitions that include all potentially affected individuals (Savage et al., 1991).

In addition to definitional disputes, stakeholder theory grapples with ethical and strategic concerns. Some scholars argue for a standardized approach that recognizes stakeholders' intrinsic value and ethical considerations (Gooyert et al., 2017; Schuler et al., 2017). Others advocate

for an instrumental view, seeing stakeholder engagement as a strategic means to achieve organizational goals such as profitability or corporate social responsibility (Jones, 1995; Justus et al., 2009). Deplazes-Zemp & Chapman (2021) propose a relational perspective that balances ethical responsibility with strategic objectives, highlighting the importance of relationships in decision-making.

Stakeholders in Design Studies and Beyond

In design studies, stakeholder theory has been adapted to emphasize collaboration, inclusivity, and user-centered approaches. Youn and Baek (2024) argue that stakeholder considerations in design align closely with Freeman's broad definition, as designers often work with diverse groups, including direct users, marginalized communities, and even future generations. The participatory ethos of design demands a nuanced understanding of stakeholders' roles, yet challenges persist. These include determining stakeholder inclusion criteria, addressing ethical concerns about representation, and navigating power dynamics throughout the design process.

The lack of consensus on stakeholder definitions mirrors the disciplinary diversity within which the concept is applied. For instance, management studies prioritize economic stakeholders such as shareholders and employees, while environmental science considers non-human entities and future generations (Colvin et al., 2020). Power asymmetries further complicate stakeholder engagement, as different groups hold varying levels of influence over design processes (Goddard & Nexon, 2016; ElWakeel & Andersen, 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Sova et al., 2015). Despite these complexities, Freeman's inclusive definition remains influential due to its adaptability across fields, including design.

Critique of the Term 'Stakeholder' in Design Studies and Education

While 'stakeholder' is widely used in human-centred design, it has been critiqued for its colonial roots and systemic inequities, particularly in Indigenous contexts. Banerjee (2003) argues that the term reflects Western economic rationality, often legitimizing extractive policies by corporations and governments on Indigenous lands. Such framing marginalizes Indigenous communities, positioning their claims as "illegitimate" compared to national interests (p. 271). Similarly, Whyte (2024) challenges that the term operates within Western epistemologies that conflict with Indigenous and decolonized design practices, reinforcing imbalanced power dynamics.

Sharfstein (2016) further critiques the term, arguing that it has mercenary origins rooted in transactional rather than ethical concerns. In design studies, this raises questions about whether stakeholder engagement genuinely aligns with principles of equity and inclusivity. Stakeholder involvement is sometimes performative, used to satisfy institutional mandates or secure funding rather than to prioritize marginalized voices. This critique calls for a deeper interrogation of motivations behind stakeholder engagement in design education.

Additionally, Sharfstein (ibid) highlights the inefficiency of the term when applied to projects with numerous competing interests. When too many stakeholders are involved, decision-making processes can become unwieldy and counterproductive. Design projects attempting to accommodate diverse perspectives risk decision-making paralysis or diluted outcomes. For example, a community-centered initiative may struggle to balance the priorities of residents, municipal authorities, and private developers, ultimately compromising the design's effectiveness. This tension emphasizes the challenge of balancing inclusivity with practical execution in design processes.

Towards a More Critical and Reflective Approach

Addressing these critiques requires moving beyond surface-level stakeholder inclusion to a more critical and reflective engagement process. Designers must interrogate who is included, who is excluded, and why. Human-centered design methods should incorporate tools for redistributing power, ensuring that marginalized stakeholders have meaningful influence over outcomes. Scholars such as Banerjee (2003) and Whyte (2024) advocate for decolonized frameworks that challenge dominant Western stakeholder models and prioritize equity.

Likewise, designers must critically assess the motivations behind stakeholder engagement, shifting from transactional goals to ethical commitments. By adopting an approach centered on self-knowing (Strickfaden et al., 2023) and accountability, design education can cultivate a generation of practitioners who navigate stakeholder complexities with intentionality and integrity. To illustrate these theoretical insights, the following design foundation studio project examines how stakeholder engagement was introduced, taught, and navigated. This project highlights strategic examples for addressing power dynamics, fostering meaningful participation, and refining stakeholder engagement within design education.

DESIGN FOUNDATION STUDIO PROJECT: SENSE & SENSIBILITY

The design foundation studio course is a dynamic and immersive exploration of design principles, processes, and practices, aimed at equipping students with the foundational skills necessary for creative problem-solving and innovation. Rooted in the philosophy of human-centered design, the course provides a more holistic approach to understanding and applying design thinking (Thomas et al., 2021) across various contexts, from designing to material culture to artifact creation. The primary objective of the course is to deepen students' understanding of the complexities of design thinking by integrating theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice by encouraging students to critically analyze and reflect on designed artifacts within social, cultural, temporal, and personal contexts, fostering a more comprehensive appreciation of the interconnectedness of design and human experience. Through lectures, studio activities, and collaborative projects, students are introduced to the intricacies of design processes, visualization,

communication, representation, two-dimensional and three-dimensional design; all framed by self-knowing.

The Sense & Sensibility Design Project is a multi-staged, collaborative endeavor that challenges students to apply human-centered design principles to create a meaningful, inclusive solution. Their task is to design a multi-sensory board game that can be equally engaging and accessible to both blind and sighted players. Throughout the project students work in teams progressing through design process stages that include problem definition, ideation, prototyping, and evaluation. Guided by input from a group of 5 stakeholders including a blind DJ, a seasoned product designer, a representative from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), and two instructors with vastly different perspectives (i.e., an African immigrant to North America and a European migrant), students are tasked with creating a game that fosters inclusivity and sensory engagement.

Key requirements include ensuring the game is playable without relying solely on sight, providing tactile, auditory, and other sensory feedback, and avoiding appropriation of existing games. The project culminates in the development of a two-dimensional and three-dimensional board game prototype, accompanied by clear rules and objectives. This hands-on, iterative process allows students to explore the complexities of designing for diverse user needs while honing their creative and technical skills.

Interactive Stakeholder Engagement is a cornerstone of the design process in this course, providing students with opportunities to work directly with diverse stakeholders. The process begins with interviews of the 5 stakeholders, where students actively listen to understand their experiences, expectations, and insights. These interactions lay the groundwork for identifying design priorities and uncovering opportunities for innovation.

As the project progresses, students identify stakeholders who are absent (e.g. players, buyers, manufacturers) and further engage in interactive check-ins with the 5 project stakeholders who ae present (in the room and sometimes via Zoom) presenting early concepts, sketches, and prototypes for review. These sessions are opportunities for stakeholders to provide constructive feedback, ensuring the design aligns with their needs and expectations. Students learn to refine their ideas based on this input, adjusting overlooked details or unintended barriers. This iterative engagement fosters a co-creative environment where stakeholders are not just informants but active collaborators in the design process. By incorporating stakeholders' voices at every stage, students develop solutions that are not only functional and inclusive but also deeply resonant with the lived experiences of those they aim to serve. Ultimately, this approach reinforces the value of stakeholder participation as a dynamic and ongoing partnership in achieving meaningful design outcomes.

Empathy Building Activities employ a variety of methodologies to deepen students' understanding and enhance their ability to design inclusively and empathically. These methodologies focus on fostering self-knowing (Strickfaden et al., 2023), and empathy building processes (Thomas & Strickfaden, 2023) such as empathic modeling, collaboration, and practical engagement with stakeholders throughout the design process.

Self-knowing practices play a pivotal role in helping students identify and categorize stakeholders by encouraging them to critically examine their own perspectives and how these influence their design process. Activities such as journaling (Kleinsasser, 2010) and creating 'embodied maps' (Strickfaden et al., 2023) allow students to explore their assumptions, biases, and preconceptions about the people and groups involved in a design context.

The reflective process of journaling (documenting thoughts, feelings, and evolving understanding of the design problem) helps students become aware of potential blind spots or preconceived notions that might limit their ability to identify key stakeholders. For example, a student might realize they initially overlooked the importance of secondary stakeholders, such as caregivers or support networks, in a project designed for visually impaired individuals.

Creating 'embodied maps' further aid in identifying stakeholders by encouraging students to visualize their connections to various people, groups, and systems within the design problem. By mapping these relationships, students can see how stakeholders interact, where overlaps or gaps exist, and which individuals or groups hold influence or are affected by the design outcomes. It helps categorize stakeholders into primary (directly involved), secondary (indirectly affected), and tertiary (supporting or enabling) groups (see Table 1).

Table 1: Stakeholder categories and roles.

Category	Stakeholders	Role/Description
Primary Stakeholders	End-Users	Individuals who directly use the board game.
	Visually impaired & blind individuals	Require sensory accessibility features such as tactile and auditory elements.
	Sighted individuals	Engage with the game using visual cues, alongside other sensory experiences.
Secondary Stakeholders	Advocacy Representatives	Provide expertise through organizations like Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB).
	Facilitators & Caregivers	May assist visually impaired players during gameplay, ensure inclusivity and ease of use.
Tertiary Stakeholders	Product Designers & Industry Experts	Offer insights, critique prototypes, and ensure feasibility and quality.
	Community Representatives	Advocate for inclusive design practices, emphasizing social and cultural implications.
Environmental & Contextual Stakeholders	Manufacturers & Suppliers	Influence materials, cost, and scalability for production of the game.

Continued

Table 1: Continued

Category	Stakeholders	Role/Description
	Policy Makers & Regulators	Set accessibility guidelines and ensure compliance with legal standards.
Design Team (Internal Stakeholders)	Student Designers	Engage in designing the board game by contributing ideas, skills, and reflexive insights.
	Instructors & Facilitators	Guide the design process, provide feedback, and supporting stakeholder engagement.

Empathic Modeling was used to help students simulate and understand the lived experiences of their stakeholders, particularly individuals with specific sensory needs, such as the blind or visually impaired. Students engage in activities designed to approximate the sensory challenges and interactions that stakeholders might face. For example, students participated in exercises that limit their vision and simulate tactile and auditory-only environments through the *Jelly Bean Empathic Modeling* activity (Thomas & Strickfaden, 2023), allowing them to gain a first-hand appreciation of how their stakeholders might navigate the world. These experiences challenge students to rethink conventional design assumptions and consider alternative sensory pathways for engagement.

The insights gained from this process help students not only understand the functional needs of stakeholders but also appreciate the emotional and experiential dimensions of their interactions. For instance, they discovered the importance of further exploring tactile cues that could support independence and to better understand the role of auditory feedback in fostering inclusion and participation. By extending their 'empathic horizons' (ibid), students provide more effective design solutions that align with the diverse perspectives and needs of their stakeholders. This process fosters a deeper desire to understand the people they are designing for, ensuring that their designs are not only functional but also meaningful and respectful of the stakeholders' lived realities.

CATEGORIZATION OF STAKEHOLDERS

Through the empathy building and structured feedback sessions, students moved beyond traditional, linear views of stakeholders to recognize a broader network of individuals and entities that influence and are influenced by the design outcome. By re-storying stakeholders (reshaping their narratives based on evolving insights) students developed a more inclusive and holistic approach to designing.

In Sense & Sensibility, students identified and categorized stakeholders into key groups, reflecting the diverse roles and perspectives involved in the design process.

During the discussions and brainstorming of the stakeholder concepts, several additional stakeholders were discussed in the project but were not engaged with during designing. These stakeholders could potentially

provide valuable insights, resources, or perspectives to enhance the design's inclusivity, practicality, and societal impact, but were absent from the Sense & Sensibility project (see Table 2).

Table 2: Potential stakeholders, contributions and why they matter.

Stakeholders	Role/Contribution	Why They Matter
Technology Specialists	Experts in assistive technologies (e.g., haptics, sound design).	Could advise on incorporating advanced features like vibration feedback or audio narration.
Psychologists or Therapists	Specialists in sensory integration or accessibility.	Could offer insights into how games can promote cognitive and emotional well-being for diverse users.
Families & Friends of Users	Individuals who frequently interact with the target users, especially visually impaired players.	Can provide practical feedback on how the game fits into everyday life and group dynamics.
Teachers & Educators	Professionals working in inclusive education settings.	Could explore the game's potential as an educational tool or resource for teaching inclusivity.
Cultural Advisors	Representatives from diverse cultural backgrounds.	Could ensure that the game design is culturally sensitive and appealing to broad audiences.
Accessibility Advocates	Experts or activists specializing in broader accessibility beyond visual impairments.	Could highlight additional considerations for other disabilities.
Social Media/ Marketing Specialists	Professionals in branding and outreach.	Could advise on effective marketing to reach the intended audiences and raise awareness.
Economic & Business Analysts	Advisors on cost, scalability, and marketability.	Could help optimize the design for affordability and widespread adoption.
Future Users	Children or younger generations who might use the game in the future.	Could offer a long-term perspective on the game's usability and relevance.

DISCUSSION

The insights gained from our Sense & Sensibility student project reveals a great deal about the significance of stakeholder and human-centered design in contemporary design education. Interestingly, students explicitly noted that one of the most profound aspects of this project was its ability to highlight

the complexities of stakeholder relationships and their ongoing relevance in shaping inclusive design. They expressed that engaging in self-knowing and having direct contact with real stakeholders allowed them to see how the design process extends beyond aesthetics and function to encompass ethical considerations, accessibility, and social responsibility. Students also indicated that this process supported them to think about stakeholders who weren't present and consider how to bring their voices into the design process. The challenges and opportunities presented through stakeholder engagement became central to their understanding of human-centered design and the broader implications of their work in design practice.

When considering the specific dimensions of stakeholder engagement explored by students, it is interesting to note, for example, the importance of direct collaboration with end-users. Students learned that engaging with visually impaired user/experts, an advocacy group, and expert designer provided invaluable insights that might have otherwise been overlooked. The theme of self-knowing demonstrated that students began to recognize their biases and assumptions, prompting them to rethink traditional design processes and prioritize inclusivity. Similarly, empathy-building and designing for the sensorium highlighted students' deepened awareness of how sensory engagement influences usability, reinforcing the need for multi-sensory design approaches that cater to diverse user needs.

When considering the various stakeholder categories recognized by the students, it becomes evident that they viewed design as a complex and multilayered profession. The themes highlighted here are not exhaustive, as students provided deeper reflections than can be fully captured in this discussion. However, these themes illustrate how the project encouraged students to integrate multiple facets of stakeholder theory, including ethical engagement, power dynamics, and human-centered design. By critically analyzing and re-storying stakeholders, students were able to articulate their design approaches with greater precision, demonstrating an evolving understanding of how stakeholder engagement influences problem-solving, innovation, and responsibility within design practice.

Through this lens, students developed a more nuanced appreciation of design, learning that stakeholder engagement is not just a procedural step but a fundamental aspect of meaningful and impactful design. This deeper engagement with stakeholders fostered a more critical and reflective approach, ultimately shaping students into more conscientious and socially responsible designers.

CONCLUSION

Superficially, the themes explored in Sense & Sensibility may appear as straightforward applications of stakeholder theory and human-centered design. However, it is essential to recognize that they represent deeper interpretations and reflections that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical experience. This project allowed students to critically engage with

stakeholder dynamics, moving beyond conventional definitions to actively re-story and expand their understanding of inclusivity in design.

By engaging with diverse stakeholders, ranging from end-users to industry experts, students navigated the complexities of human-centered design and ethical decision-making. Through unpacking stakeholder theory with the students, they also learned to consider and seek out stakeholders who were not present during the project. These experiences emphasized the evolving nature of stakeholder engagement, reinforcing that design is not merely about creating products but about fostering meaningful relationships and addressing societal needs. The project serves as a testament to the ways that design education can cultivate socially responsible and empathic designers.

In the end, this study illustrates how contemporary design students, much like previous generations of designers, grapple with fundamental questions of inclusion, accessibility, and responsibility. As we look to the future, the continued exploration of stakeholder engagement in design education will remain crucial. It is our hope that this research inspires educators and practitioners to further integrate self-knowing, critical stakeholder engagement, and human-centered methodologies into their teaching and practice, shaping a new generation of designers equipped to address the complex challenges of an interconnected world.

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