

## **Designing to Change the World**

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Creating technologies, tools or projects to promote social justice brings with it particular challenges for design. The very concept of social justice requires a consideration of the *process* of design itself, independent of the final product or project to emerge from that process.

Commercial design activities may take a very pragmatic approach, consulting representatives of the target user group to ensure maximum possible usability of the final product. In designing for social justice, however, success is not just measured by outputs, but by the process itself. For example, the most appropriate design process may be one in which the widest group of users is involved, or in which a significant number of people are enabled to feel a sense of ownership and a desire to use the end product or project. These goals of the design process can be best achieved by bringing people's opinions and ideas into the design process itself. This contrasts with processes that treat people as testers of the system, or as the subject of study.

Designing for social justice, then, requires that we take a close look at the process of design itself.

*Is there an ideal design process for projects and tools that support social justice?*

### ***Why now?***

Social justice can be understood as the balancing of maximum individual emancipation with the greatest possible fairness for all, after the work of the philosopher John Rawls (1999, 2001). Once confined to academic political philosophy, the term 'social justice' is now common parlance in policy circles and it is fashionable to talk about social inclusion and public consultation as important parts of policy. At the same time, we are seeing a growth in the technical means to support democratic processes, such as Downing Street's e-petitions and online citizen's juries.

On the morning of prime minister Gordon Brown's first citizen's jury, Ed Balls talked about a "citizens' summit, composed of a representative sample of the British people", in which "representatives assembled from every constituency" will help to shape policies on crime, immigration, education, health, transport and public services (BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Sept 6<sup>th</sup> 2007). Brown then assured the first jury, at Bristol's Brunel Academy, that "the old days of someone else making the policies and the people not being involved are over. We won't announce new policies in this area [education] until we have had this listening and learning and we won't do things in future unless we can involve and engage you in the right things to do."

*Can designing for social justice support democratic engagement?*

*When should the public be involved in the process of policy-making, and how do they know whether their voices have been acted upon?*

### ***What do we mean by design?***

Some products have very obviously been created through a process of applied

design: built architecture, computer games, chairs. But a design process is also involved in creating learning experiences, long-term participative projects and processes. Our understanding of design encompasses this broader definition, and emphasises the process of generating ideas and decision-making that leads to a final product, process, or project.

There is a considerable – and frequently iterative – process of choosing and deciding involved in design. And there are various ways of informing and making decisions that include members of the proposed constituency of users, assigning agency in more or less equitable ways between different stakeholders, including designers, end users and commissioning bodies. User-centred design (UCD) describes a broad spectrum of approaches, which involve users in the design decisions to varying degrees.

The following are a range of approaches, at different points on the spectrum of user agency:

- Designer muse (after IDEO, who coined the phrase) – this is the 'maestro' approach to design, where the strength of the idea carries it through consultation and appraisal into development.
- Participative design (PD) – processes that involve users in decision-making and devote some energy to engaging the non-specialists with the issues involved so that decisions can be made on an informed basis.
- Co-design – the equitable sharing of the design process with those who will benefit from the outcome.
- Design as appropriation – underdetermining the product so that users can configure and adjust aspects to meet their needs contingently after the event. All products go through this after-design process more or less actively, but some methods recognise this and plan accordingly.

Historically, in the design of generic products – where a very broad constituency of users is likely to exist – the methods used have tended to fall at the straightforward end of assessing needs and testing as part of the iteration of the design. If a particular group of people are the main or only users of the final outcome, especially in a specific context such as a single workplace, there are good reasons for using PD or co-design practices. More engaging methods such as these can win greater buy-in to use the product, as well as harnessing local knowledge more effectively.

If buy-in is particularly important to the success of the final outcome, then the focus of activities may well shift towards an emphasis on the process of design rather than the product itself and move from the pragmatic end of the UCD spectrum to the slower but more engaging participatory and co-design approaches.

### ***What should 'user-centred' mean in this context?***

Shared agency in design does not need to be restricted to the design of the product. It is possible to involve a representative constituency of users in designing the process of design as well. For example, there might be a collaborative definition of 'social justice' as part of getting started on a social justice design challenge and a collaborative definition of the problem space before any design decisions are anticipated.

A participative design process has the benefit of being a great motivator when it is conducted well. However, it is more difficult to handle than a more limited procedure and usually takes longer, as time must be made to discuss things fully, ensure

understanding and keep all participants engaged. When it is conducted poorly, it can disenchant rather than engage, and people's appetite for discussions around process can wane. There is also the danger that participants 'go native', absorbing the values of the design team to such an extent that they lose touch with the needs of the constituency of users not involved in the design process.

*Which approach(es) of user-centered design are most appropriate in designing products and projects to promote social justice?*

***What role is there for technology-enhanced learning in supporting social justice?***

Consideration of technology-enhanced learning is important to the debate about social justice, because learning is the process that can equip people with a voice in their future trajectory in the world, and technology has the potential to support learning and amplify that voice.

However, while information and communications technologies have undergone such significant developments in recent years, there has been less change to educational policy and to the prevalent pedagogies in use, in both formal and non-formal learning contexts.

An increasing number of techno-savvy people are using the tools provided by mobile technologies and social software to air their views about many issues: social, political and entertainment. This is an excellent step, but also a deceptive one with respect to increasing democracy. There is a danger that some may think that as we can look to the learners to express their own needs and the question of pedagogy no longer needs answering. It is tempting to look at the energy and the amount of material being generated and assume that there is no further need for design or for teachers and mentors. This is not the case. We need, instead, to work out the appropriate roles for the stakeholders in a learner's education.

*How can technology-enhanced learning environments promote social justice? How should policy, pedagogy and practice change to take advantage of the new opportunities available?*

***References***

Rawls, J. (1999) *A Theory of Justice* (rev.ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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