

EXPLORING CONTEXT AND BUILDING EMPATHY WITH THE YOUTH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of a collective imagery framework, as part of a participatory design workshop, facilitated by the My Dream World project in Namibia. The workshop focused on issues relating to youth unemployment in Southern Africa. The collective imagery framework, discussed in this paper, was the first phase of the participatory workshop. The framework aimed to externalise individual creative imagery, in order to create a safe, creative space for participants to explore their own perceptions regarding youth context and unemployment, as well as those of others. This paper documents the context, process, and participant experience, and aims to identify outcomes as well as factors that contribute to, or challenges empathetic interactions and storytelling within participatory design practices.

1. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

South Africa and Namibia with their long history of inequality, poverty, and injustice has risen to the level of middle income countries, but still rank as some of the most unequal societies in the world, in terms of income inequality (Frye & Kirsten 2012). In South Africa the policies of the pre-1994 government excluded millions

of people from the political, social and economic base of society and denied them long term accumulation of land, assets and sustainable livelihoods. From the 1970's, population demographics in Europe and America began to shift towards an aging population, due to a slowing of population growth. In Africa the opposite has happened, resulting in an overwhelmingly youthful age structure (Population Reference Bureau 2014). South Africa has more than 3 million unemployed youths, and in Namibia youth unemployment is over 40%. Employment and educational opportunities are two factors which impact the future success of young individuals in Southern Africa. Most of them do not have the necessary formal skills to access employment or to be involved in sustainable development. The exclusion of this large number of young people does not only perpetuate inequalities in Southern Africa, but it also denies the affected young people an opportunity to elevate themselves beyond poverty (Magongo et.al. 2011:63).

The challenges faced by the marginalised youth in developing countries, such as unemployment, are not simply or easily solved, and investigating these requires deep contextual understanding and empathetic practice. Cognitive and emotional empathy allows the researcher and designer to identify and understand emotions and emotional reactions of others in context, in order to acknowledge those in the process of developing solutions together with users. Kouprie and Visser (2009:442) noted: "For designers, awareness of both components is essential. One of the two components will not suffice for understanding the user's world. Having an emotional response (affective) to another's emotional state and being able to reflect on that by perspective taking (cognitive) seems to be the core mechanism of empathy".

2. ENVISIONING DREAMS WITH THE YOUTH COMMUNITY

The importance of immersed community involvement in design has been realised in collaborative approaches such as participatory design, co-design and service design, to name a few. Participatory design aims to involve all stakeholders in the process to ensure the design solution is context specific and meets their needs. In co-design the line between designer and user (or community member) begins to blur and the creation process becomes a shared activity. Service design uses generative, formative and predictive methods with the goal to innovate (Fulton Suri 2008).

The important factors considered when selecting the design processes and methods can be identified as follows: understanding the design challenge - the users, business environment, and applicable technologies; observing, profiling, and creating empathy for and cooperating with the users; including the clients, other stakeholders and the users in the process; creating ideas; prototyping, evaluating, improving, and visualizing during the whole process; implementation; and also maintenance and further development after implementation (Miettinen et al 2014b). Several methods were used within the same development process with methods being selected or applied according to need.

In the first phase of the participatory design workshop, we explored processes to create empathy among participants (students and community members), and to engage youth in the project. We adopted the *collective imagery framework* of co-design, on the basis of collective creativity (Chueng-Nainby 2014, Chueng-Nainby and Gong 2013)¹. The collective imagery framework works on the externalisation of individual creative imagery in sharing with others (Chueng-Nainby and Gong 2013). The shared collective imagery is a creative concept structure that represents communities' shared design space in which connections of ideas are made possible through spatial activities of deconstruction, construction and reconstruction.

The structural connectedness of ideas and data give rise to creative emergence of design concepts. It is a theoretical framework informed by practice based research and extends Finkes' (1995) work on pre-inventive structure of creative imagery as divergent insights that drive creativity. It works to overcome individuality in creative processes. The designers generate design elements in keywords or drawings, such as ideas in visuals or words, into narratives and stories, using threads/strings, or sticks. The stories are then structured into a physical installation which forms a common ground for creative space for conceptual understanding.

3. CASE STUDY: MY DREAM WORLD WORKSHOP AT PDC14

This paper reports on activities and findings from a My Dream World² workshop, and joint exhibition during the Participatory Design Conference 2014 (PDC14) in Windhoek, Namibia. The workshop was held as part of the UFISA³ intensive course with students from participating universities and Namibian youth collaborating around developmental issues in Namibia. During the first phase of the UFISA intensive course the My Dream World project hosted a two-day, focused collective imagery weave session to introduce participants and to facilitate the initial exploration of Namibian youth context⁴. This was followed by the development of an installation to house the constructions, as part of the PDC2014.

As the largest demographic group in Southern Africa, the youth face a number of challenges; notably unemployment and barriers to social cohesion. During the first day of the collective imagery weave session key concepts related to service design, design thinking and creative problem analysis were explored and students began a free discussion around the context of everyday life, and challenges faced by Namibian youth, and youth in general. Key themes related to unemployment, feeling oppressed due to national bureaucratic systems relating to employment, and access to education were identified. Social challenges, including alcohol abuse, drugs and teenage pregnancy, were also explored. Participants began with informal small group discussions, allowing them to draw on personal experience without committing to a public narrative of their life and experiences.

Then, through probing questions, the group noted down as many keywords on paper tags as they could. Once the pool of words and phrases was produced tables were swopped, thus a new group was tasked to interpret the words of the previous. As the session progressed, the discussions became more focused through the construction of narratives. Participants used any of the keyword tags and tied them together with raffia to form *story strings*. These story strings were shared in the groups, transforming individual words and phrases into actionable problem statements and advice from the youth, for the youth. The collaborative nature of identifying key words and storytelling drove a more creative exploration, based in collective experience and learning, instead of isolated individuality.

The second day focused on designing an appropriate construction to hold the story strings. The construction had to respond to the stories and combine them in a larger conceptual whole. The collaborative nature of the sharing process placed the power into the hands of the participants:

Collaborative storytelling is a research approach, which facilitates communicating, interpreting and giving



Figure 1: Participants (students and community members) on the first day of the workshop, building narratives using identified terms and phrases.



Figure 2: Students creating three-dimensional structures for the story strings during the second day of the workshop, which related to the meaning and contexts of stories.



Figure 3: Students creating three-dimensional structures for the story strings during the second day of the workshop, which related to the meaning and contexts of stories. The structures were united in an installation and were exhibited as part of PDC14 in Namibia, Windhoek (Participatory Design Conference 2014).

meaning to people's lived experiences. Collaborative stories allow research participants to select, recollect and reflect on stories within their own cultural context and language, rather than those chosen by the researcher (Bishop 1999:2).

The second day closed with a presentation of the structures to the larger group. The presentations allowed participants who generated the keywords to experience the stories developed by fellow participants.

The next part of the workshop took place over three days on site at the PDC2014. On the first and second day the installation was curated, followed by a final cycle of storytelling and the physical linking of the individual structures through new story strings.

At the start of this session the groups were dissolved and participants were tasked with joining the individual structures into a single conceptual whole. Participants proceeded by formally exploring the structures in relationship to each other, whilst also considering the narrative links between. The choice was made to ground the installation with a single structure whilst the others were suspended from above. This allowed participants and observers to literally step into, and experience their narratives spatially.

The embodied experience supported the participants in realising that a shift in thinking had occurred. The combined structures told a story not only of the challenges faced by the youth of Namibia, but emphasised an exploration and acknowledgement of opportunities existing within their own context as well.

This shift in thinking was illustrated by physically linking the structures with new story strings using the paper keyword tags generated during the first session. These story strings firstly linked the structures by visualising identified challenges, and secondly through conceptualizing scenarios that might utilize existing resources, skills and abilities within youth communities. Thus the story strings shifted from narrating challenges faced, to creating envisioned spaces for empowerment and a sense of ownership.

Students had the opportunity to present the installation to PDC2014 delegates. The format of the presentation was left open to the students. They decided to present as a collective, each summarising and responding to a phase of the workshop. The collective transformation of shared ideas into a physical and spatial structure allowed the students to concretise and share the complexities of their experience with the conference participants.



Figure 4: Final Installation at the PDC2014.

Figure 5, 6, 7: (Overleaf) Participants linking the structures with new story strings.



Following this presentation, students moved into the next phases of the participatory UFISA intensive course. The activities and experiences during the My Dream World collective imagery weave session helped students gain an understanding of youth unemployment in Namibia, whilst empowering community participants to share and reflect on their own context.

4. FINDINGS

The Collective Imagery Framework has been experimented in practice-based workshops ‘Mind Weave Theatre’ and ‘Collective Imagery Weave’, and successfully engaged communities to co-design for social innovation on often complex cross-disciplinary design problem (Chueng-Nainby & Gong 2013, Chueng-Nainby 2014, Chueng-Nainby et. al 2014, Mulder-Nijkamp & Chueng-Nainby 2015). This workshop is a practical example of the collective imagery weave workshop which is adopted into an educational setting as part of a participatory design process. In general, it was observed that the Collective Imagery Weave method; (1) facilitates empathy among users and contributed towards participants intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Its physical installation ; (2) allows a space for mutual learning as well as facilitated participatory sense-making; as well as (3) created a space for dynamic participation and allowed co-design processes to flourish throughout the course. Additionally two unexpected outcomes were noted; (4) The successful blurring of the boundaries between designer and community member and the formation of a community of practice 5) and a shift from problem based to opportunity based inquiry with a focus on utilizing existing resources, skills and abilities within youth communities. Phenomena observed during this workshop, in the context of community empowerment for youth unemployment, echoed phenomena previously observed within other contexts during Chueng-Nainby’s engagement (Chueng-Nainby 2015).

5.1 A SPACE FOR EMPATHETIC INTERACTION

The collective weave workshop offered students a single platform for personal and contextual reflection. This was of particular importance as participants represented an array of nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, languages and cultures. The diversity in the group was considered a strength, however individual assumptions and contexts needed to be explored to facilitate a joint understanding of the project goals, and enable an empathetic interaction space.

The format of the collective image weave activity allowed the participants to walk the tightrope between sharing individual reflections and context whilst still aligning their frames of reference regarding the user’s life:

Being aware that the process involves a combination of affective resonance and cognitive reasoning regarding the user's life can enhance empathy. Experiencing and reflecting can alternate the designer stepping into and stepping out of the user's life (Kouprie & Visser 2009: 447).

Participants noted empathy as one of the key outcomes of the workshop. However, two factors hindered their ability to optimally experience and reflect on the user's life within the workshop experience. Firstly, there was an unbalanced number of students and community representatives. This was countered to an extent by the number of local student participants, however many assumptions were made that were only uncovered once primary interactions took place at the later phase of the project (see endnote 3). Secondly, students had limited prior knowledge of the reasons for youth unemployment in Namibia. The student community members could provide some subjective insight here, but this was often misguided or rooted in opinion. This notwithstanding, participant feedback indicated that shared empathy (emotional and cognitive) also had a positive effect on the level of intrinsic motivation experienced by participants.

5. 2 A SPACE FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

Throughout the course dynamic group work and peer relationships were noted by the facilitators. Participants' feedback supported this, and they noted that the collective weave activities created a safe, creative space for them to explore their own perceptions, as well as those of their fellow participants. As many of the participants had never met, a democratic method to facilitate initial social interactions was needed, and which allowed for personal narratives to be shared in a non- threatening manner. This resulted not only in empathy for one another, but also helped participants to open up to each other and work toward a common goal within a very short period of time. This in turn resulted in a trusting and non- judgmental space where mutual learning could take place.

Students noted mutual learning as an outcome, especially the experience of working with people from different backgrounds and learning how they solve problems. The activities utilised within the workshop was democratic as it can be used by designer and non-designer alike. There was also very little design specific language used by facilitators. The focus was more the on facilitation of explorative discussions and visualising lived experiences.

By focusing on what appears in lived experience, we will find something very different than general meaning or punctual sensation. Instead, we will find lived reality that in its concreteness and incompleteness is the basis of the subject and the object as well as the origin of experience (Bengtsson 2013: 46).

Despite the relative success of creating this space for

shared learning and experience, logistics did negatively impact the sustainability of the participation. The workshop took place at the University as well as on locale at PDC 2014. Logistically this made sense, however unfortunately the community members could not join the second part of the workshop at PDC 2014 because of lack of funding. Furthermore more authentic mutual learning might be encouraged by levelling power relationships by moving the workshop to the community context from the beginning of the process.

5.3 A SPACE FOR PARTICIPATORY SENSE-MAKING

The reconstruction of the narratives into a physical form constituted a move away from theoretical framework that includes the Cartesian separation of mind and matter. The use of the collective weave framework allowed for the interaction of mind, the body and the environment as equally important

...cognition is not an activity of the mind alone, but is instead distributed across the entire interaction situation, including mind, body and environment (Wilson, 2002: 630).

The physicality of the structure, and the possibility of embodied interaction within that environment, contributed to the participants ability to make collective sense and dealing with complexity. Wilson's (2002:625) viewpoint of embodied cognition links to this in that "...cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interaction with the world"

5.4 A SPACE FOR A NEW COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Sabiescu et al (2014: 1) notes the application of participatory design in community and developing contexts as being particularly challenging because of possible knowledge gaps between the designers and the community members. The use of these design processes within an educational setting produces the additional challenge of working with young designers that might not yet have developed the needed interpersonal skills to work with sensitivity within this domain.

The collective weave co-design tool used within an educational setting proved successful in addressing these challenges by working towards incorporating local participants into the very fabric of the exercise.

Participants included students from the Polytechnic of Namibia as well as from Rlabs, a scholarship program free to Namibian community members. These participants represented the unemployed youth as they joined Rlabs to develop entrepreneurial skills (to address their unemployment status). Rlabs are described as a "breeding ground for new champions, innovations [which] generally feed into developing new products and services, community work and social innovative ideas." (www.rlabs.org/what-we-di/rlabs-academy/).

By framing the workshop as an educational activity for the youth by the youth, and including the above

mentioned student community representatives, with and without a design educational background, the space between designer and community member quickly became blurred. All participants became part of a community of practice with the aim of social development.

Unfortunately as the community members from Rlabs could not attend the PDC conference (as discussed in 5.3) this was not sustainable). It might however be noted that all participants continued to socialise outside of the workshop despite this.

5.5 AN ENVISIONED SPACE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Whilst constructing the story stings into the final installation a shift in thinking was noticed. Participants started identifying strengths and resources within youth communities, including for example entrepreneurial spirit, positive cultural values and strong community bonds, and how these resources might be amplified in envisioned scenarios. This way of thinking had a powerful effect. Conversations included not only the Namibian context but individual participant contexts as well.

The collective weave framework supported the move from a problem centric to opportunity centric inquiry. The started to see unemployed youth not as problems to be solved but rather focused on discovering the positive capacity within youth communities.

6. CONCLUSION

The collective image weave was the first phase in a larger community driven UFISA intensive course. During the UFISA course students undertook a participatory design project in which their initial perceptions were challenged (or justified) through community research. Once primary interaction and community based research activities were completed, students explored design solutions to some of the challenges they noted.

During the collective image weave, completed prior to the UFISA intensive course, students from participating universities and Namibian youth collaborated around developmental issues in Namibia to encourage open dialogues between participants, within a safe and supportive space. Participatory, service and co-design processes are all grounded in the ability of stakeholders to collaborate freely and meaningfully. The collective image weave facilitated the establishment of a common communication and interaction platform, irrespective of the background, language or culture of participants. This common platform encouraged trust among participants (students and community members) and greater empathy, allowing for an open, creative exploration of the topic - a crucial step in the design process for social

development.

The potential of collective image weave to engage participants, encourage empathetic interactions and produce powerful personal narratives was observed during the activities, as well as in comments from participants. The implication for participatory design activities include an evaluation of how relationships between designers, researchers and community members are shaped before the design process commences, and how to encourage community members to share their stories as part of the contextual analysis.

It was also noted that the collective weave framework successfully addressed the challenge of possible knowledge gaps between designer and community member when co-creating by framing the workshop as an education exercise in which every participant were a student. This contributed to the successful formation of a community of practice.

Furthermore the participants move towards opportunity centric enquiry is noted as a surprising and positive contribution to the framework which could be explored further in future iterations.

In future the environment in which these activities happen may also add to the experience. In this project it was noted that the design space was outside the community, mainly at university and conference premises. Participants noted that working *with* community members, *within* their environment could facilitate even deeper contextual exploration.

7. REFERENCING

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ENDNOTES

1. Over twenty workshops and engagements have been carried out to experiment with this framework by the creator of the framework. See <http://imagery.tumblr.com>). Recent workshops by Chueng-Nainby involves an extension on Sanders and Stappers (2014) notion of collective dreaming: *Collective Wishes for Kindness, Engagement and Exhibition at Dutch Design Week 2014 and Hong Kong Social Innovation Festival 2014*.
2. The My Dream World (www.unelmienmailma.com) project is an ongoing youth development project in both European and African countries. Particularly, the project aims to increase young people's ability to participate in the development of services and thereby, in the construction of a responsible and democratic society (Miettinen et al. 2014a). New ways are identified to promote the participation of the youth in reforming the service structure of their communities, and to emphasize their role as developers of their own communities (Kuure and Miettinen 2013). By using service design tools, youth participants in Namibia were able to explore solutions to unemployment that supported their career path, and helped them manage in a difficult employment and educational situation. My Dream World design workshops acknowledge the theme of connectedness when creating service concepts - using different resources, networks and peer-to-peer ideologies (Miettinen et al. 2014a).
2. The "User Centered Design for Innovative Services and Applications" (UFISA) programme facilitates collaborative activities and intensive courses between universities in Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Namibia) and Finland, to respond to developmental opportunities within communities (Miettinen et al. 2014b).
3. The second part of the UFISA Intensive course grounded service design with participatory design. Participants included students from participating universities, unemployed youth from Havana, Windhoek. The participatory design sessions were hosted at the Havana community centre that forms part of the Empowering Communities for Youth (ECY) project. This part of the project is referred to, but not expanded upon in this paper.