



Against empathy: moving beyond colonizing practices in educational technology

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Abstract

Empathetic design is the ability for the designer to predict the cognitive and emotional experience of learners as they engage with the design product and process. It aims to center sensitivity toward learners, and the design process as a whole, which suggests potential application in educational settings. In the shift to digital, empathetic design may help instructors imagine learners' thoughts and feelings engaged during the learning activity, and make iterative changes in response. Though empathetic design highlights sensitivity toward learners, by attempting to 'be' the other, it may unintentionally enact practices, and ideologies, of colonization. Recommendations for praxis via humanizing pedagogy are offered.

Keywords Design · Empathy · Critical theory · Emotions · Learning

Impact/value

Tracey and Hutchinson (2019) made a valuable contribution through their framework of "empathetic design," defining empathy as the ability to share the feelings of another. The authors noted that their framework centers "sensitivity" (toward the user, toward the design process, and for collaborative practices of design), and empowers designers to understand the user's experience (conceptualized as "the ability to 'be' as the other", p. 1261) and recognize potential limitations of the design. One of the important dimensions of empathetic design is a forward-looking activity called empathetic forecasting, in which the designer aims to predict the user's emotions engaged during the learning process (p. 1260). In describing an exploratory study that implemented their framework, the authors reported that their design allowed instructional designers to "emote user frustration" (p. 1269) that contradicted design intention (e.g., anticipated feelings of excitement through engagement

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with the learning object, the Virtual Hospital). Significant value of this work comes from its iterative process, in which reflection (i.e., on user experience) feeds into revised product design. For example, the authors noted that empathetic forecasting was especially pronounced at the beginning and the end of the design process, and that through corollary skills of experimentation and imagination, designers were able to “actively envision a collaborative activity...and contribute to a shared learning experience” (p. 1269).

Application

Empathetic design aims to be an interdisciplinary design process that “promotes interaction and collaboration” (p. 1260) among diverse professionals, with the goal of creating interactive curricula. As in other design frameworks (Dam and Siang 2020; Cook and Bush 2018), a core component is the recognition of diverse learners, experiences, and perspectives, and the integration of these experiences into product design. Design frameworks aligned with “human-centered design” (Baran and AlZoubi 2020), may facilitate the articulation of a range of possible emotions and experiences arising from the learning experience and contribute to overall learning. For example, the “shift to digital,” exacerbated as a result of the global pandemic, is making explicit the continued prominence of the digital divide, as millions of students, and even teachers, find themselves without basic internet access, or without a connected device (PR Newswire 2020). Further, many students (i.e., English learners; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); rural students) who face educational obstacles find themselves further marginalized by educational inequity as a result of the pandemic (Strauss 2020).

Pedagogical approaches that center humanizing practices (Baran and AlZoubi 2020; Shelton et al. 2020) seek to align curriculum, activities, and assessments with the lived realities of learners. In our courses, humanizing pedagogies that use traditional, formal assessments (i.e., exam) also offer learners the opportunity to develop nuanced, systematic knowledge through revising incorrect responses. Or, instructors may eschew traditional assessments altogether in favor of activities that prioritize creative reflection—in the second author’s educational technology course, pre-service teachers identified three technologies that facilitated course-content, but also made possible their three pedagogical commitments. One student recorded themselves painting a watercolor with the concept of growth as a theme of the painting. The student envisioned this activity as a chance for them to “test out some new brushes,” while demonstrating their commitment to personal growth and development. Humanizing pedagogies emphasize flexibility, learner agency, and activities that are as creative and complex as the world in which we live.

Limitations

Though the recognition of the affective dimension of the learning experience is a welcome contribution, here we offer a brief consideration, centered on the concept of “empathy” and how it may be unintentionally aligned with political ideologies of colonization. First is our concern that the theoretical proposition of centering “empathy,” imagined as “the ability to share the feelings of another,” (p. 1261) runs the risk of not demonstrating sensitivity, but rather may reinforce practices of domination through a process of othering and occupation. In the design project described here (2019), empathy is conceptualized not only

as emotional co-presence, but as “the ability to ‘be’ as the other” (p. 1261). Though the authors may suggest that the term “other” is shorthand for “the user,” critical scholars (Spivak 1985; Said 2003) proposed that “othering” is a core tool of colonization that produces a self/other dichotomy: “the invention of the other was and is always an imperial construct” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009, p. 3) as “others” are inherently objectified through a positional process that strips them of humanity and dignity, and casts them into a subaltern (i.e., lowly) position. Thus dehumanized, it becomes possible to occupy the other.

In this design framework, designers are encouraged to temporarily “step into the life of a user” and encouraged to “live in the user’s world” (p. 1261). Living in this world, and inhabiting their life, even temporarily, is an act of possession—of body, of mind, of voice. For Tuck and Yang (2013), with this possession, it is possible to “pose as voicebox, ventriloquist, and interpreter of subaltern voice” (p. 225). For Sara Ahmed, the challenge of centering empathy is the threat that it can be used for colonizing ends, as a way to position others as less knowledgeable, less valuable, and less able to speak for themselves: “in this way empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome” (2004, p. 30). As an instrumental component of the design framework, empathy, from a critical perspective, is not a neutral tool but rather one with a colonial history.

Suggestion

In this design study, learning is conceptualized as predictable, individualistic, and capable of being measured accurately and objectively, apart from its context. Critical scholars turn these ideas on their head, centering power relations as a key intellectual tool to interrogate broader epistemological (*What counts as knowledge, and who gets to produce it?*), ontological (*What does it mean to be or become?*), and political (*How are systems of oppression sustained?*) concerns. A critical approach to design considers who is empowered to design, who is positioned as a “user” of this design, and how stable these positions are. It explores the psychological, cultural, and political implications of othering that occurred through colonization.

Now, as always, there is a need for humanizing pedagogy that centers the lived realities of learners, as well as the social, cultural, and relational dimension of education. The “shift to digital” offers instructors and students an opportunity to learn about ourselves and each other. Rather than trying to predict what others will say or do, humanizing pedagogy urges us to listen nonjudgmentally as people share what matters to them (i.e., themselves, their families, their cultures, and their visions). In this approach, “designer” and “user” are reconstituted as mutually constitutive, mutually dependent “co-learners.” In practice, this may mean that the design process identifies local, contextual problems best solved through participatory research collaboratives that empower the marginalized (Camarota 2017; Garcia and Mirra 2020). Let us imagine this place of education together. In the words of Bell Hooks: “Learning is a place where paradise can be created...we have the opportunity to labor for freedom...an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries” (Hooks 1994, p. 207).

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest

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