

Empathic encounters – Co-designing possibilities for a good life

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Abstract This short paper presents a design competition case study in which the aim was to design concepts for maintaining a good life in small villages in northern Finland. The research aim was to find how two collaborating groups, namely students and the residents of the village, experienced empathy during the two-month co-design process. The initial findings show that different aspects of empathy are needed and emphasized during the different co-design phases. In the context of co-design, it makes sense to operate in an empathic way; for designer, though, it is also valuable to know when to focus on the building, support, or communication of empathy.

Keywords *Empathy, Empathic design, Co-design, Community*

Introduction

As designers, states Thackara (2006), we need to foster new relationships outside of our usual stomping grounds. This means that we have to learn new ways to collaborate and do projects, enhance the ability of all citizens to engage in a meaningful dialogue about their environment and context, and foster new relationships between the people who make things and the people who use them. The case presented in this short paper looks at how these goals of collaboration, engagement, and fostering relationships were met. One common denominator was the capacity to be compassionately empathic.

This short paper first discusses the role of empathy when designing with people from a theoretical perspective. Then, it introduces a case study carried out in northern Finland, where the elements of empathic design were studied from the viewpoint of participating residents and the students designing with them, where the design aim was to develop structures for a good life in small villages. Finally, the conclusions present various aspects of empathy that might be needed when grounding an entire co-design process on empathic values.

Designing with people – different aspects of being empathic

Over the past few decades, designers have developed elaborate skills for designing with people. Participatory design and co-design take up networked, global, and complex approaches that are popular worldwide in advocating the inclusion of users in the design process from beginning to end. Co-design here refers to any act of collective creativity shared by designers and people untrained in design working together in a design development process (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). We have to stop thinking of design as just the construction of products, services, and systems and start thinking about these as means for people to act, realize their desires, and satisfy their needs (Frascara, 2002). This requires from the designer a better understanding of people, of society, and of the ecosystem.

Researchers and designers working with communities and socially concerned issues need to be empathic, to engage in the design process empathetically. Empathic design draws on information about the user and his/her everyday life, and it includes inspiration for design and empathy, or 'a feel' for the user (Postma et al., 2009). Mere feeling is not enough, however; understanding of the situation is also needed. Empathy allows designers to imagine themselves in the position of the user, and vice versa. Cipolla and Bartholo (2014) add that in addition to being empathic, a socially responsible designer needs the ability to work "where you are" and the skill to meet in dialogue the "others" in the same context. Wright and McCarthy (2008) state that empathy evolves in the context of ongoing relationships and communication, without which people have only their own, individual emotional responses upon which to base their experience and thus design contribution.

There are multiple tools and techniques to stimulate empathic encounters, such as empathy probes (Mattelmäki and Battarbee, 2002), empathy mapping (Gray et al., 2010, 65–66), narratives (McQuaid et al., 2003), and observation (Leonard and Rayport, 1997). Design empathy is needed when going from rational and practical issues to personal experiences and private contexts. To be empathic is to be interpretative, respectful, and mindful. Battarbee (2015) calls empathy an "*out-of-ego-experience*", which means two things: first letting go or stepping out of your own perspective, but then returning to it, influenced by the experience. In her opinion, this frame-shifting between feeling and thinking is key to the wise application of empathy in design. Kimbell (2013) sees a move away from thinking of empathy as an individual trait towards a collective capacity. In her opinion, the opportunity is to create a version of empathy that recognizes its potential to constitute new configurations of people and things. Battarbee (2015) describes empathy as a trick of the heart and mind. When we engage in empathy, it changes us. It alters how we feel, think, and act, and this can be used as a fuel for the design process.

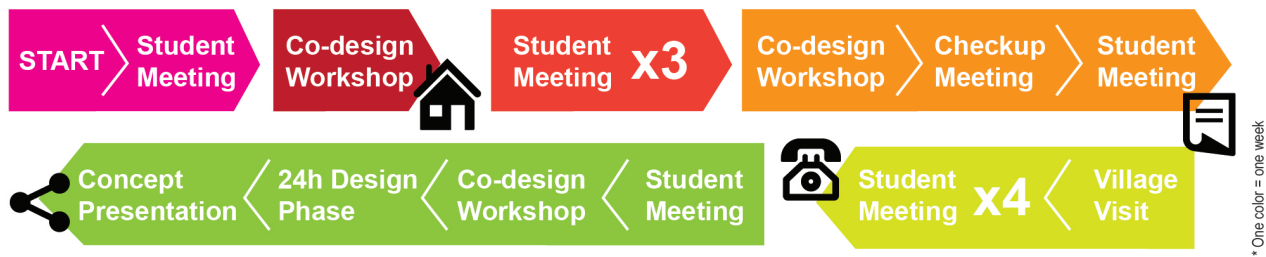


Figure 1. Progression of the co-design process in the Autti village case.

Against this background, the present article defines empathy as the ability to be compassionate. This kind of empathy is a combination of understanding and feeling, of cognitive and affective empathy, expressed in action. Design anthropologist, Elizabeth Tunstall (2013) encourages designers to move from having empathy to building conditions of compassion among the participants in a project. Empathy as an ability to act compassionately also means the skill to be socially responsible and take into account local perspectives in the design process.

The Good Life in Villages competition

The Good Life in Villages design competition was part of the Arctic Design Week 2015, organized in Rovaniemi, Finland and funded by a Lappish hydropower company, Kemijoki Oy. The contest sought new ideas for developing a better quality of life for the ageing population in Lapland and in Arctic areas in general. The resulting service concepts were created applying the principles of open design. For the contest, four teams of university students from different fields, such as design, sociology, gerontology, IT, and education, were each assigned a village and asked to come up with a “des-ign” solution. This short paper looks at the Autti village project.

Life is peaceful in Autti, but changing. There are still grocery stores nearby, yet young people are moving away in search of higher education and work opportunities, leaving the village feeling a little bit empty. “We miss young people, it’s very quiet”, says one of the residents (Dowdy, 2015). The use of an empathic design approach in this case felt suitable. Empathy already existed in Autti between the villagers as the community feeling and the habit of helping others was mentioned multiple times. As students were visiting the village as outsiders, however, they needed to empathize with the lifestyle, habits, and surroundings of the villagers in order to design with them. It was believed that by employing a participatory co-design process, it would be possible to build active empathy between people who did not know one another before and who had only started working intensively together during the two months duration of the competition.

The data and methods used here include a student report of the case that was made after the competition and a theme interview that was made first with three students of the team and then with five active

residents who participated in every step of the design process. To talk about empathic issues, questions like “What do think of the co-operation during the competition?” and “How did you design a suitable solution?” were asked.

Experiences of empathy during the competition

Three co-design workshops were held at the Autti village in order to build connections between the student group and residents of the village. In addition, the students visited the village and a few residents attended some of the student meetings during the competition (Figure 1). Residents felt that this beginning was totally different from anything that they had experienced before. First, students wanted to talk with the residents about their daily life and thoughts. One of the residents said, “It was great that they did not present a fancy SWOT analysis or had presuppositions about what should be developed.” Students were able to focus on residents’ experiences. Residents felt that they were valuable as co-designers and described the approach being cozy and informal. For the designer this kind of approach sets a challenge in analyzing the results and finding the main design drivers.

A key element of these empathetic encounters was that students went to the village and spend their time with the residents. They knew that the atmosphere in the village could be sometimes quite negative and pessimistic because of the political atmosphere, which supports urbanization and centralism. The students felt that they could not build solutions for a good life alone, so they concentrated on the positive aspects by learning to give compliments and building procedures of encouragement with the residents. After some good laughs together, a realization that the villagers could actually make a difference in their surroundings emerged. Residents said that during the design process they started to see and understand how many things were actually happening in their village. This also engaged the students in the development. They felt that they got something for themselves, so they wanted to give something to Autti in return. As the residents were enthusiastic and more and more came to each workshop, the students started to believe that their work had a meaning and good results could be achieved.

Students felt that having workshops was a good way of building empathy (Figure 2). In the workshops, they



Figure 2. Students and residents working together in co-design workshops. (pictures by Kemijoki Oy, photographer Antti Raatikainen)

divided participating residents into smaller groups and thus created more intimate surroundings for discussions. In building empathy, students wanted to make sure that they used tools and methods that enabled the participation of everyone. For example, they had “peaceful moments” before discussions, so everyone could think about and write down their angle on a specific question or idea. Empathy was also evident in the students efforts at building a concept that could work for Autti’s residents. For example, they did not want to build a mobile application because of the low level of smart phone usage in the village.

Residents believed that by genuinely working together, they achieved better results, increased motivation to continue, and also wider acceptance for the concept. At the end of this process, the student group presented the results of their empathic encounters in a main seminar of the Arctic Design Week. This presentation and the final concept promoted the “grandma energy” of Autti, and the negative image of a slowly emptying and vanishing settlement of elderly people was transformed to a positive image of a powerful elderly people who run a vital village.

Solution built for local needs

During the collaboration, three different, new viewpoints of Autti and its services were produced. The “village of death” saw Autti as a respected and beautiful place for elderly people who usually want to stay at home as long as possible; the “culture church” brought up the possibilities of existing premises and their potential for residents and tourists; and the “authentic village,” the concept chosen for further development, focused on the authentic people and Lappish experience of Autti. The team portrayed the village as “a hidden treasure” and won the competition with a design concept that focused on getting passers-by to stop and experience the village. The short-term plan included a “treasure map” of Autti’s nature, culture, and leisure possibilities, in addition to the provision of some rental bicycles for summer and kick sleds for winter. The long-term plan included authentic “grandmother houses,” which tourists can visit and also stay in (for longer or shorter periods) with the residents.

Telling, listening to, and experiencing stories can be used as a way to build empathy, and the treasure map created a new story for the village. It tells in an easy-to-understand way what might be interesting in Autti and why people might want to stop there. This

concept was chosen as a winner of the competition for three reasons: it genuinely gives a voice to the villagers, it is perfectly doable, and it has potential for further development (Toimiva Kaupunki, 2015). In fact, since the competition, the residents of Autti village have been actively moving this concept towards realization. They have prototyped the map in a village market, they are collecting a list of interested people, and they are forming a storyline for the places to visit. Finally, although these stories can be uploaded to a smart phone by using QR codes in the map, villagers want them to be available only for people who come to visit Autti in person.

Conclusions

Based on this case study, it seems that designers need to be able look at empathy from different viewpoints during the co-design process. Here, the design process was seen as an iterative process for co-learning and building knowledge that would result in a suitable design solution for a village. At the beginning, when designers are moving in, the capacity to build empathy among the people participating is valuable. In the Autti case, empathy was developed through conversations, sharing, and listening. Design challenges were formulated by the participants together, not beforehand by consultant-like experts. Both parties in a co-design project need to be ready to share and discuss. The designer does not only need to be empathic, moreover, since empathic participants also want to understand where the designer is coming from.

During the development and evaluation of ideas, it is important to be able to sustain or continue the cycle of empathy. This requires positive relations among people and a certain commonality of events experienced by them. In the Autti case, the students were able to guide residents to valuable insights and new perspectives of their village. The residents saw their village in a new light and were surprised at how much was actually occurring in their small village. Thus, being empathic and mindful meant that students were able to develop design solutions that worked for the residents and in their surroundings.

At the end of the day, a (design) culture that embraces empathy is a culture of good listeners and storytellers that communicates both emotionally and analytically (Battarbee, 2015). In this case, with the conclusion of the co-design process, a new story for Autti was formed. The village was portrayed as a hidden gem of

Lapland waiting to be discovered. When designers are moving out, being empathic involves planning the implementation together and dividing the responsibilities. This involves knowing the limitations and skills of the participants and actual possibilities of their everyday life, and it is only possible if empathic encounters have succeeded in enabling an understanding of the participants' situation and values. Then, with the help of modern technology and social media tools, conversations and connections can last longer than the life span of the design project, as observed in the Autti case.

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