

# Stimulating empathy in ideation workshops

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## ABSTRACT

In participatory design users are involved in the design process, but oftentimes in industrial practice this involvement is limited to specific moments (e.g., a user study or a user test). Then designers have to work with indirect results about users. This paper describes a study about promoting empathy in conveying user insights to designers who have been partly or not even involved in meetings with users. Arranging the communication in a way that the designers can empathize with users is difficult, when they have not met the users. Based on our prior experiences with this problem, and a review on design and psychological literature, we formed a structure for how empathy can be stimulated in ideation workshops. An important step is to stimulate designers to recall their own experiences about the topic in order to be able to create a deeper understanding of the users' experiences.

## Keywords

Empathy, user experiences, design approach

## INTRODUCTION

Involving users in product development is a fundamental part of participatory design. How these people can be involved and how their input can benefit the product development are central questions. In the ideal case, users and designers would work as one united team [3,6,8]. But often in industrial practice, the two parties remain largely separated for a variety of reasons (e.g., budget and timing). In those cases, user research specialists first gather the insights, and then communicate these to the design team [9]. In such situations, which are unfortunately still quite common, an essential goal in the communication is to convey the richness and diversity of the user insights. The challenge arises to bring the users alive for the design team in order to support a deep understanding. The communication step should not only convey facts, theories, and interpretations *about* users, but should also instill

empathy *with* users.

But often, user insights are communicated in ways that are too abstract for the design team, e.g., numbers in large quantitative reports. Designers in practice complain that marketing data gives them no inspiration or feeling for the user's situation and experiences [12].

## EMPATHY IN COMMUNICATION

Empathy is a person's ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings, ideas and circumstances. For designers who have not directly been in contact with the users they receive information about, special attention must be given to the communication of user insights.

Design literature suggests several recommendations for representing user information with a feeling of contact:

- Showing raw data (e.g., photos of users in their own environment, original quotes, original handwriting, self-made photos and drawings) has been advocated to enhance empathy [4,11]. Interpretations and conclusions can be accompanied with raw data, to emphasize that there has been contact with real people.
- Presenting user insights in stories stimulates empathy [2,7]. Personal stories are helpful in creating coherent structures of data and convey information in a lively way. For example, stories in which the user's environment and the user's activities over a timeline are represented are engaging and easy to remember.
- To convey the liveliness visual material is recommended because it provides rich texture about the users' worlds [4] (e.g., video fragments, photos, drawings and maps of user data).
- Open-ended presentations, in which the audience must complete the final interpretation, stimulate involvement, in part by giving the design team co-ownership over the interpretations [10].

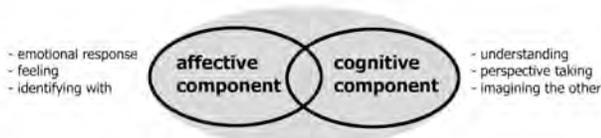
Although these are all valuable single recommendations for representing user information, there is a lack of insight in the underlying principles of empathy. From a review of psychological literature [5], some aspects of empathy for communication in design activities are worth considering:

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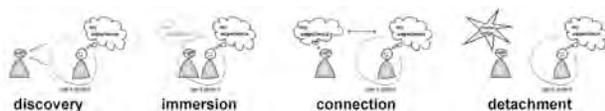
- Experiences are personal, which makes it difficult to relate to and understand. Empathic understanding is therefore always limited: the empathizer cannot become totally another person, but is able to balance and switch between the other person's perspective and his own.
- Empathy has affective and cognitive components (see Figure 1). The affective component enables the empathizer to experience the feelings and emotions of another person; the cognitive component is a more detached understanding, in which the empathizer reasons from the perspective of the other person. Combining and balancing these components is needed to gain empathy and use it in designing.
- Empathy is not a state at one moment, but achieved through a process. The empathizer can enter, wander around and step out of the other person's world.

These aspects have led us to the insight that empathy could be regarded as a process in design too. A process in which the designer steps into, wanders around and steps out of the user's world. During this process the designer combines cognitive and affective aspects to empathize. This process is not instantaneous: it needs (thinking) space and time. We believe that for gaining empathic understanding the designer must involve his own feelings too. Trying to relate to the user experiences by bringing up one's own related experiences is an essential step of the empathy process.

This process for achieving empathy in design is depicted in Figure 2. It consists of four phases: discovery, immersion, connection, and detachment. In the *discovery* phase the designer allows himself to become absorbed in the user's world. In the *immersion* phase the designer internalizes the user's world into his own. Then in the *connection* phase, the designer connects, cognitively and affectively with the user's experiences. In the final phase, *detachment*, the designer moves back from the merged worlds to a position of separate identity.



**Figure 1** Two-component model shows that both affective resonance and cognitive reasoning are essential for applying empathy in designing.



**Figure 2** empathy process in design [5]

This process of empathy in design has been the basis for a set-up which can be applied in an ideation workshop. One aspect of this process is given extra attention: addressing the own experiences of the designer. Figure 3 illustrates the set up of the ideation workshops, consisting of six steps:

1. Three days before the actual workshop the participants receive a sensitizer.
2. The workshop starts with a 15 minutes presentation by the researcher.
3. The participants fill in a few cards about their personal experiences concerning the topic.
4. The participants receive a card set with selected quotes of the users, and are given 30 minutes to just immerse themselves with this information.
5. On a large sheet of paper, the participants organize cards into emerging themes for product directions. They are explicitly asked to compare their own cards with the users' cards (45 minutes).
6. In the last step they present their new ideas to a specialist.

The first three steps comprise the *discovery* phase, step 4 the *immersion*, and step 5 involves the *connection* and *detachment* phase.



**Figure 3** The overall steps in the workshop set-up. The steps marked with a \* were different for the A and B design teams.

## METHOD

Four workshops were performed with this set up and with different teams, under two different conditions. We explored the effect of designers recalling and connecting their own experiences about the topic to the user insights. Teams A1 and A2 therefore carried out all six steps above, but for team B1 and B2, step 3 was omitted and the instruction to relate and compare to their own experiences was left out in step 5 (see Figure 4). We expected that teams B would show less empathy than teams A.

Four design teams of Philips Research participated in ideation workshops. Each design team consisted of three to

four professional employees. All had a scientific education and had been part of idea generation meetings before, but only one had a professional education as a designer.



**Figure 4** Only teams A compared their own experiences (left) to the users' experiences by comparing their own filled-in cards with the users' cards.

**Case data**

User data was gathered using contextmapping techniques. Participating users were eleven elderly people. The topic was maintaining social contacts. This user group was chosen to ensure that none of the participants in the design teams for the workshops were or had been a member of this user group themselves, so they had an intrinsic need to make use of the data supplied by the researchers.

**Procedure**

All teams followed the process as depicted in Figure 3. Teams A were asked to bring up their own experiences before the immersion step with the users' experiences. They were given empty cards, which they had to fill in with their own experiences about their social world (step 3). After this step, they received the card set with the user quotes and were asked to immerse in them. During the organizing step (step 5), they were explicitly asked to 'detach' from their own experiences by comparing their cards with the users' cards and design for the users only.

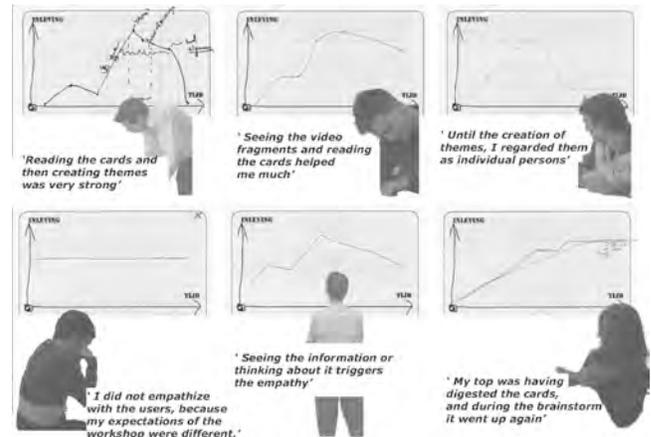
For measuring the effect on empathy, several methods were used; EQ questionnaires [1], observations (how designers deal with the results, discussions, referring to yourself, referring to others, referring to the users, etc), self-reports, and a debriefing interview after the workshop.

Before the workshops the designers were grouped in four teams based on their filled in Empathy Quotient questionnaire in order to have similar empathy levels of each team. They had been told that this was a workshop to convey the user insights and create product ideas, but not that this was a study about empathy.

During the workshop, they received three times a self-report form in which they scored their levels of interest, involvement, inspiration, and empathy on a scale from 1 to 7. In the debriefing discussion afterwards, they were asked to reflect on the workshop. First they were asked about their product ideas (we observed if and how they referred to

the users during their presentation). Then they were asked to elaborate on the users' personalities (we observed how lively their images of the users were). Finally, we explained that we were interested in their levels of empathy. The first question was literally 'how empathized do you feel?' We gave them back their self-report forms, and let them reflect on their own filled in forms to explain in their own words what this could say about their empathic understanding during the workshop. They were also asked to draw a graph depicting their changes in empathy over time (see Figure 5).

After the workshops, we wanted an expert panel to judge the product ideas on how well these ideas would fit with the needs of the user group.



**Figure 5** Designers depicting their own experienced changes of empathy during the time of the workshop. These graphs provided starting points to reflect on their empathic process, as witnessed by the quotes.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Design teams A1 and A2 referred more often to themselves, and to the users, than the teams B. This could be an indicator of increased empathy. Also in their self-reports teams A indicate a higher level of empathy than teams B.

For all teams the empathic understanding during the workshops increased, and the differences between teams A and B were small, whereas the individual variations of the team members were large. The product ideas differed widely in quality, so they could not easily be compared between teams A and B.

In our observations and other results we did not find conclusive evidence for the claim that stimulating the designers to recall upon their own experiences (teams A) and comparing these, increases their empathy with the users. But the effect of taking a moment to recall the designers' own experiences and share these within the team created a more personal and open atmosphere. Teams A discussed more personal stories and were more aware of how different the experiences of these users were.

One thing that did stand out is the importance of taking sufficient time: time for sensitizing the participants before

the workshop, and time to carry them through the process are, in our opinion, key elements which distinguish this type of workshops from 'regular' idea generation sessions we see in industry and design education.

Besides these findings, we noticed the many other variables that seemed to influence the participants' empathy too. These variables all deal with the motivation of the participants. Among these variables the following were prominent and are interesting for further research:

- The involvement of participants in conducting user studies. If the participants would have met the users, their empathy for these users might be much higher.
- The connection to their project(s). Some participants were not currently working on a project for the elderly. Those who were working for elderly were much more interested and willing to learn.
- The personal state (e.g., tired, freshly awake)
- The attitude of the participants and of the facilitator towards users. If they are not convinced that empathizing with users benefits the design process, or when they are not curious about the users, their empathic understanding will not increase.
- The personal ability of the designers. Empathic ability differs greatly. Although we tried to balance this ability over the different teams, we noticed that the participants differed greatly in how they dealt with the user information.
- The situation of the workshop (e.g., place, time of day).
- Group dynamics can interact in subtle ways with the empathy process. A single dominant participant can affect the process in positive or negative way.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing the designers' own experiences seems an interesting and worthwhile topic for further research. It creates a more personal and open atmosphere within a design team. This atmosphere for supporting empathy with the users may be as important as the instrumental steps we outlined above.

The set-up of the workshop, in which we magnified the attention on addressing the designers' own experiences in order to connect on a more emotional level with the users, is a start. We believe that further research is needed to learn how to stimulate empathy in designing, whether users are involved or partly involved. We invite people to discuss further possibilities to explore the variables which can support researchers and designers to enhance empathy with the users.

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