

DRAMA IN DESIGN: AN OPEN BRIEF TO DESIGN FOR WELLBEING

Tjhien LIAO¹ and Oscar PERSON²

¹Department of Design, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University

²Department of Design, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University/Department of Product Innovation Management, Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, Delft University of Technology

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a design module in which student teams were challenged in an open brief to design for wellbeing. To design for wellbeing is difficult. Wellbeing is ambiguous, hard to define and highly personal. In the process of defining their own briefs, a drama workshop was set up to help the students share their understandings about wellbeing. In the paper, we describe the early stages of the design process, when the students conceptualized and shared their understandings of wellbeing through drama and autobiographical writing. To support our analysis, we introduce Bolton's [8, 9] theory and practice of drama education. Bolton's work points to a new venue for research on drama in design – namely, the broader learning process of drama that occurs beyond the staged presentation. In illustrating the implications of Bolton's work on drama for design, we describe how the students drew valuable learning experiences from their autobiographical writings and from preparing staged presentations in designing for wellbeing.

Keywords: Drama in design, learning, wellbeing

1 INTRODUCTION

In the design literature, drama, theatre and its associated activities are introduced as 'promising' techniques for design [1, 2, 4, 7]. In short, drama is introduced to stimulate discussions amongst designers, researchers and users. The interaction that follows from these discussions is suggested to bring about knowledge and insights that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to acquire otherwise. In this light, drama is brought forward as a way to integrate knowledge about a user (or user group) into the design process by supporting the interaction between designers, researchers and users.

In this paper, we investigate the role of drama in design education. Based on students' work in a design module, we describe how a drama workshop was used to conceptualize and share understanding of wellbeing amongst students. In describing the workshop, we explore how drama was used as a learning process in dealing with ambiguity of wellbeing when designing. We also point to how the broader learning process in drama extends beyond the staged presentation.

With respect to past work on drama in design, we corroborate and extend the discussion on the learning processes of drama. In particular, in deepening the discussion brought forward by Mehto, Kantola, Tiitta and Kankainen [7], we focus on the broader learning processes of the students' work where the staged presentation only provides a limited account on what was learnt in the workshop. Building on the work of drama education scholar Bolton [8, 9], we open up learning processes both before and after the staged presentation. With respect to the former, we focus on the potential of autobiographical writing as an important source of inspiration and information in design.

We structure the remainder of the article as follows. We begin by providing a brief review of past work on drama in design, pointing to the relevance of drama in exploring new ideas and in establishing a collaborative inquiry amongst designers, researcher and users in staged presentations. Next, we introduce the work of Bolton as a theoretical lens to understand how learning in design can also take place beyond the staged presentation. To illustrate this point, we present how a design workshop was organized to support students in designing for wellbeing. We end the paper by discussing the implications of embracing learning processes beyond the staged presentation in future work on drama in design and to what extent this approach may prove useful in other areas of design.

2 DRAMA IN DESIGN: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of past work on drama and theatre in design is found in user-centred and participatory design where it has been introduced as a tool to support interaction between designers, researchers and users. Two common areas of interest in this literature concern learning and knowledge sharing with respect to (1) the exploration of new ideas through drama and (2) the collaborative inquiry/play that drama allows. In relation to the exploration of new ideas, Kuutti, Iacucci and Iacucci [1, 2] for instance explore future and novel uses of mobile technology using drama as backdrop for observation. Framed as performances, they follow users during everyday activities (such as shopping) in real world surroundings (such as shopping malls). They establish scenarios, and use (on the spot) performances to structure the interaction between designers and users in the pursuit of finding new ideas. A designer intermittently interacts with a user by posing different kinds of questions that might stimulate new ideas on the spot. Within these interactions, performances are introduced as a means to explore, envision and act out new ideas for future mobile technology. Put differently, drama is introduced to establish moments of spontaneous creativity and collaborative inquiry between users and designers. Borrowing from Sawyer [3], Kuutti et al. [1] refer to these spontaneous inquiries as moments of “collective emergence” in which a performance comes to be and develops as spontaneous conversations. As moments of “collective emergence”, they particularly stress the social and interactional aspects of creativity in drama, emphasizing the moment-by-moment nature in this interplay.

In relation to the collaborative inquiry/play that drama allows, Brandt and Grunnet [4] adopt methods from drama and theatre to explore novel uses of technology. From a participatory design perspective, they extend the work of Boal and Johnstone [5, 6] on drama to the field of design. In doing so, Brandt et al. [4] build on the ideas of active participation and meaning making of the audience in exploring drama as a way to reveal power relationships between different stakeholders in a design project, and to reach consensus amongst them. Drama offers a frame of reference in ‘staging’ meetings between designers and users in which for example power relationships are acted out in language and body gestures, providing designers and users the possibility to more effectively communicate their experiences and knowledge with one and another. Similar, Mehto et al. [7] describe the use of drama and theatre to facilitate collaborative inquiry/play between users, designers and researchers in drama workshops. Rather than focusing on the exploration of technology, the emphasis in Mehto et al’s [7] work is on the use of drama to explore issues of retirement. In this context, they introduce drama as an alternative form of inquiry in comparison to traditional techniques such as interviewing. In addition to the collective emergence that is brought about through drama in design, they recognize that drama and theatre activates and supports design teams to create and explore material that is of relevance to the user group. They also point to how active participation in (interactive) theatre can strengthen group identity and understanding.

In sum, the literature above emphasizes staging and dramatizing scenarios as a form of learning. Put differently, presentations of drama are introduced complementary to a (use) scenario of interest where the staged presentations typically form the main subject of study. However, are learning processes of drama only found in the staged presentation of dramatized scenarios? From an educational perspective, important learning processes also seem possible in activities such as planning, scripting or discussing a staged presentation. Indeed, several of the authors above point to a learning process taking place before as well as after the staged presentation. However, while most authors recognize this, such learning processes are typically treated as a secondary interest. In extending the scope of past studies, we therefore direct interest to these broader learning processes of drama in design.

3 DRAMA AS AN ENTERPRISE FOR LEARNING

In understanding the broader role of drama in design, we turn to drama as an enterprise for learning, and the work of drama education scholar Gavin Bolton [8, 9]. Exploration and collaborative play/inquiry are also found in the work of Bolton. However, Bolton positions these activities within a broader frame of reference with respect to the role of drama in education. He points to learning processes of drama taking place before, during and after the staged presentation. In specific, Bolton brings up the idea of seeing drama as an enterprise for learning where the participants are engaged in a partnership with one and another. In this partnership, as argued by Bolton, both students and teachers share responsibility in setting a stage for learning. Moreover, the staged presentation only serves as the tip of an iceberg with respect to the learning process that takes place in drama. Creating a staged

presentation requires pre-work. Research has to be done prior to inventing what to present. To this end, the time spent towards the staged presentation forms an effort in which learning comes to be.

The broader view on drama described above highlights a delicate, but significant shift in the general understanding of drama in design (where the staged presentation typically is the focus of interest). For Bolton [9], the staged presentation is only a presentation. In concurrent with Brandt et al's work [4], it also fulfils a critical role in channelling knowledge that can be elaborated and scrutinized by an audience. That said, the learning processes occurring before (and after) a staged presentation should not be downplayed in favour of the staged presentation itself. Bolton suggests that drama is a creative and collaborative act of selecting from a body of knowledge and finding their own dramatic form for its presentation. [9] Within drama, a shift occurs from *thinking* about a subject matter to *dealing* with a subject matter. "What was first undertaken only as a method of dealing with a certain subject-matter will become itself the main concern." [9: 43] From this perspective, learning takes place in determining the subject matter and in determining how the subject matter should be presented on stage. As a result, in addition to the staged presentation, determining these things equally becomes relevant concerns in understanding drama as an enterprise for learning.

Learning processes beyond the staged presentation are also found with respect to drama in design. Similar to Bolton, Metho et al [7] point to how learning takes place in creating the script for the staged presentation. In creating such a script, Metho et al [7] describe how they prepared a workshop with teachers, church employees and nurses in order to acquire emotionally rich ethnographic data on retirement. In staged presentations (dramaturgical readings in a workshop), they then re-enacted the material from the workshop in order to sensitize the researchers/designers about the needs, motivations and desires of the user group. Mehto et al [7] observe that the process of recycling the insights in this way points to a kind of learning, which is inherently human and social. However, while Bolton [9] in a similar way points to the possibility of using drama to acquire a richer understanding of a particular situation, event, individual, etc., he does not necessitate a user group for learning and staging. The script for a staged presentation can be created in many ways, and learning can equally occur differently. In short, from a design perspective, involvement of a user group is not the only way for learning and to generate a meaningful script for a staged presentation. Following Bolton, designers could for instance draw on their personal experiences and knowledge as a source of inspiration and information in preparing a staged presentation. However, how these broader learning processes of drama could come to be in design is not discussed in the literature.

4 THE CASE: A DRAMA WORKSHOP IN DESIGN FOR WELLBEING

In investigating the broader role of drama in design, we report on the learning that took place amongst students in a drama workshop on designing for wellbeing. As mentioned before, design for wellbeing is difficult. It is ambiguous, hard to define and highly personal. At the same time, it represents an issue that concerns us all. As a result, in describing the students work in the workshop, it provides the opportunity to reflect on learning in drama in a situation when the specific user group is unclear, and when the personal experiences of the designer become a prime source of experience and knowledge on a topic.

The workshop was organized as an exercise in the User Inspired Design (UID) module that is organized yearly by the Department of Design, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University. The goal of the UID module is to improve the students' understanding about user-centred design processes and their results. The students participating in the course are organized in cross-disciplinary multi-national teams. In 2010, 24 students participated in the module with educational backgrounds in engineering and design. The drama workshop discussed in this paper constituted the first educational activity in the module, targeted towards helping the student teams in formulating their own brief on the topic of wellbeing.

In preparation for the workshop, the students were asked to reflect individually on their lives in relation to wellbeing. The students were given two tasks. The first was to write two autobiographical passages, one on wellbeing and one on un-wellbeing. The second was to select an object representing their view on wellbeing and bring it with them on the day of the workshop. The idea behind these tasks was to sensitize the students on the concept of wellbeing based on their own experiences. It was mentioned beforehand that the autobiographical accounts would be shared with others.

One of the concerns of hosting the workshop was to have the students engage with one another in an environment that would encourage drama. Instead of the classroom or the design studio, we chose to

do it at a production studio located within the university premises. In this, mostly empty, space we placed a stage, large enough for four people to present plays on. A large panel functioned as background. We prepared a wide variety of theatre props for use, which were borrowed from the studio prop storage. The props were picked and selected for their hand-able size. For example, there were tools, to indicate activities or specific professions. There were pieces of furniture to simulate specific environments, like living rooms.

4.1 The drama workshop

The workshop day started with a general introduction to the production studio space. The students were asked to introduce themselves making use of their personal object of wellbeing. Next, the students were introduced to the variety of props, selected for use in preparation of the staged presentations. In order to have the students share their understanding of wellbeing, the workshop covered three main activities: (1) drama based on imaginary characters, (2) drama based on autobiographical passages, and (3) the critical observation and commenting as audience.

4.1.1 Drama based on fictive / non-fictive characters

The first part of the workshop was meant for the students to get to know each other. In addition, this part was also meant for the students to get familiar with the activity of drama, such as creating a script, preparing a staged presentation, and participating as a critical audience.

In preparation, the students were asked to think of a fictive / non-fictive figure. The teams were then asked to discuss the characters and to summarize their possible unwell-beings. The following task for the teams was to discuss and decide who of the character's unwell-being was the strongest. This discussion was aimed at eliciting opinion and judgment in relation to wellbeing, based on fiction. The following task was to sketch the characters unwell-being. This included the setting, environment, etc. The students were encouraged to include details, objects, people, sounds, smells and feelings. Next, the teams were asked to transform the character and the experience of unwell-being into a staged presentation using the available props. After each presentation, the question went to the audience: "Who was the character?" and "What was the experience of unwell-being".

4.1.2 Drama based on autobiographical passages

In the second part of the workshop we turned to the students' autobiographical passages. Here, the students were asked to discuss their personal stories within their team. The task was to identify similarities and differences between each of the autobiographical passages. They were also asked to explore each other's stories and to identify underlying motivations and patterns of wellbeing or unwell-being. The following task was to prepare a staged presentation of either one or a combination of the autobiographical passages. As a starting point it was suggested to the students that the play could be, "a day in the life of..." The students were encouraged to think of the details, objects, people, atmosphere, sounds, smells, etc. During the presentation, the audience was encouraged to observe critically, to identify themes and motives concerning wellbeing within the staged presentation. The staged presentations were recorded on video.

4.1.3 Critical observation as audience

After each staged presentation, the audience was asked to make sense of it. Characters were analyzed, roles scrutinized, and the overall meaning of the play was put to discussion. The audience was also encouraged to discuss the staged presentation from the different perspectives based on the different characters on stage, in particular in relation with wellbeing or unwell-being. Through this discussion of the different perspectives we aimed at re-negotiating the meaning of the play.

5 "MY FAVORITE BIKE!": LEARNING BASED ON AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Bolton points out drama as a collaborative enterprise for learning. Drama is a creative and collaborative act of selecting from a body of knowledge and finding their own dramatic form for its presentation. In this sense what is observed amongst participants resembles closer to "a group contracting to feel their way into a value system" [9: 197]. In drama, participants are engaged in the making of meaning. "Dramatic action was to do with attending to meaning, or, rather, meanings, to be negotiated..." [9: 176]. Drama sets in motion a process of collective *making* and *affirming*. Although the role of emotion plays a central role in this process, Bolton emphasizes the communal aspects in

drama. Bolton points out, that in dramatic work the emotional experience, “invariably turns out to be the kind that a community can share: the participants collectively suffer fear, anxiety, sadness, disappointment, hope, or belief, etc.” [9: 200]. Drama allows us to reflect on this. As an example of this communal learning, we discuss one staged presentation in detail to illustrate the broader learning process of drama that took place in the workshop.

Example of a staged presentation

In one play, we see the first character, a cyclist, cycling with his hammock and his pot of tea. On his way he is making photos with his camera of the scenery that passes by. The scenery is played out by his team members who embodied passing clouds, jumping rabbits, patches of grass, etc. The cyclist decides to take a nap and positions his hammock. While he is asleep, a second character, wearing a balaclava covering his face, steals the bike. When the cyclist wakes up, he discovers that his bike got stolen. He screams “My favourite bike!” After a period of silence he looks around and sees his pot of tea. In a moment of change he decides to enjoy what is left – his pot of tea. While he sips, in a moment of reflection and bliss, the same rabbit passes by.



Figure 1. Cyclist photographing a jumping rabbit

Through the discussions of their autobiographical passages, the students shared their understanding of wellbeing. As illustrated above, this team came to understand that the essence in their understanding of un-wellbeing was “sudden change”. And, in extension to that, they understood a positive change towards wellbeing as the “conscious choice” to cope with the sudden change. This understanding of wellbeing occurred before the actual staged presentation. It emerged in the pre-work through the various activities that happened in advance of the staged presentation.

As Bolton suggests, drama is attending to meaning, or, rather, meanings, to be negotiated. During this presentation, the student team presented a moment of crisis forming the background for un-wellbeing and the individual’s choice to cope as a positive change towards wellbeing. Or, as stated by one of the students:

“Wellbeing becomes an issue, when you face a crisis. Wellbeing comes under pressure when a sudden change happens in your life.” - Male student

Bolton points out the broader view on drama as a collaborative enterprise for learning. Within his view of drama, there is an indirect approach to a subject matter. As noted earlier, instead of *thinking* about a subject matter, the participants *deal* with a subject matter. Likewise, in our workshop, we see a shift from *thinking* about wellbeing to *dealing* with wellbeing. What was first undertaken only as a method of dealing with wellbeing, the planning of the staged presentation, has now become itself the main concern. Doing a staged presentation requires pre-work. This pre-work covers all the activities that go in advance of the staged presentation, such as planning, organization and significant choices that require collaborative decision-making. Collaboratively, the student teams had to develop stories, consider characters, create and assign roles, think through plot and motivations, etc. Then there is an array of production questions to be addressed. Props have to be introduced, stage positionings have to

be coordinated, etc. The planning of the staged presentation becomes a collaborative effort in which each team member shares the burden. As Bolton suggests, within the teams, drama becomes a means in which knowledge is not abstract, but based in human action, interaction, commitment and responsibility. This enterprise for learning, this process of making knowledge concrete, is part of drama, as the following student comments:

“It is like a little project but then in a shorter time, because you have to plan the scene, and you have to decide the rules and then you actually do something, like a final project, and everyone has a part in it.” - Male student

6 DISCUSSION

Drama provides ‘promising’ techniques for design. The emphasis in past studies has been on staging and dramatizing scenarios as a form of learning. In other words, staging scenarios and the staged presentation form the main subject of study. However, are learning processes of drama only found in the staged presentation?

Based on student work, we investigated the broader learning processes of drama in design. Building on Bolton’s work on drama education [8, 9], we pointed to important learning processes beyond the staged presentation. We described how a drama workshop was used to conceptualize and share understandings on an ambiguous topic such as wellbeing amongst students. In the preparation of the staged presentation, we observed a shift from *thinking* about wellbeing to *dealing* with wellbeing. This shift points to a learning process that extends beyond the staged presentation in activities such as preparing, scripting or discussing a staged presentation. With this we point to a new venue for research on drama in design education– namely, the broader learning process of drama in design that occurs beyond the staged presentation alone. Our aim was to help the students in formulating their own briefs within the theme of wellbeing. We observed this approach to be helpful when the brief is open and within a process where designers may not necessarily know what to design and for whom. The drama in our workshop was grounded in the personal moments in life of the design students themselves. This approach assisted them in reaching out to others’ experiences, by making one’s own experiences explicit through drama. Collaboratively, they learnt about themselves, before they learnt about others. To conclude, our approach to drama placed the experience of the designer more central within the design process. The work of the example group resulted with a concept in healthcare. However, we believe this approach does not limit itself to healthcare only. The literature addressed in this paper already covers a wide range of themes where drama was involved in design. We therefore hope that our case will stimulate more research on the role of drama in design, and how to best benefit from it in design education.

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