

(RE) NAMING THE PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF DESIGN PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

While design methodology can be applied to ever-wider problems, ‘people’ remain the centre of design’s focus. In this evolving landscape, it remains relevant to question which words should be used to refer to these people. While a wide range of words exist, each one can potentially influence or limit the way people are considered and are present in design process. Different terms suggest different levels of participation by those concerned, in an evolving context where more active roles are sought for the people concerned by design interventions. This paper discusses chronologies of accepted terminology for different people involved in design processes and highlights recent evolutions and debates around certain words. Based on literature reviews and in-depth interviews with design practitioners and researchers, seven issues around user/people terminology are identified and could constitute a basis for further research. This discussion paper aims to confront ambiguities and encourage considering appropriate, responsible language use in evolving design process. (Re)naming the people at the heart of design methodology has ethical implications and is particularly relevant in the design education context, influencing the status given to people involved in future design activity.

Keywords: User research, human-centred design, design for sustainability, participative design, design terminology

1 INTRODUCTION: ARE YOU A USER?

Fifteen years ago, Sanders and Stappers [1] wrote about “the person formerly known as the ‘user’”. Ten years later, a special issue of the magazine *Occula* on “The place of the user in design” is introduced [2] by « *Usager* »: *un terme inconfortable*. “User: an uncomfortable term”. The introduction continues by pointing out that the term ‘user’ is used by convention, despite being criticised by human science and design communities. Yet today, some of the fastest evolving parts of the design field contain the word “user” or at least “U” in their very titles. Within the rapidly growing UX/UI area, actors in the field [3] suggest that due to the fact that professionals in this area come from ever wider variety of backgrounds, the glossary of terms used might need to be revisited once a year. Beyond the fact that “confusion about terminology can disrupt projects” [3] it is important for designers to be able to define, describe and communicate what they do, with words that will not generate confusion. Within the UX field, with the job title ‘user experience’ designer increasingly becoming “product designer”, it may be relevant to question the words used for the people on the receiving end of this ‘product’ design.

The need for carefully chosen terminology also increases as the design process becomes more participative. In current design practice the people being designed for take, in reality, a wide range of roles in the design process [2] and the way we name a user is already attributing her or him a particular role in the (design) project. Approaches and terminology need to reflect this evolving status of non-designer participants and be respectful of their input [4]. In this changing landscape the question of how designers view the people they are designing for [5] may also be raised. The language used can have an impact on their relationship and help to avoid a form of “us” (experts, researchers, designers) and “them” position which may be increasingly less relevant. This relationship and related designer mindset and posture is already being widely questioned in Design for Sustainability: in Social Innovation and Systemic and Transition design approaches [6] [7] the focus is on lifestyles and actively equipping communities to be the on-going (re)designers of their environment.

The aim of this discussion paper is to (start to) explore these emerging issues and ambiguities and encourage considering the most relevant terms for more respectful, responsible language use in our evolving design process. Questioning the most relevant ways of naming the people at the heart of design methodology has important ethical implications and is particularly relevant in the context of design education, influencing the status given to people involved in future design activity.

2 CONSUMPTIONS TO EMPOWERMENT

To contextualise the questions raised in this article we briefly present some of the strands of the history of user-centred design and of the words used to describe the people at the receiving end of this professional activity. The history of research for understanding people's lives by first hand and in-context observation can be linked to the discipline of anthropology, which continues to influence and contribute to design methodology. This study of the human may be traced back to Ancient Greece but is a named discipline from the 1700s [8]. The branch of anthropology most influential for design, human/social anthropology, is established in the early 20th century. Today emerging post-humanist ethnography [9] approaches continue to inform design research and practice.

Design's concern for social issues has roots before the 20th century, but these issues were not necessarily seen as central. Design pioneer Henry Cole saw his teapot design as more representative of good design than an educational children's game he designed and commercialised in the same period [10]. Despite 19th century figures such as Catherine Beecher and William Morris addressing the quality of domestic environments and improvements in people's daily life [11], the First Things First manifesto in 1963/64 [12], (reiterated [13] at the end of the 20th century), illustrate ongoing frustration in the design community that design is not more concerned with real life and social issues.

The history of professional design activity integrating people's needs might be traced back to Henry Dreyfus, and 'designing for people'. Dreyfus bemoans clients in the 1930s only wanting him to make things more attractive for the 'consumer'. His own design approach is informed by observation of details of 'people's' lives (see publisher's preface)[14], whilst also mentioning 'human engineering': "our job is to make Joe and Josephine compatible with their environment". Despite a focus on peoples' behaviours, Dreyfus generalised from these to produce standardised solutions that might "affect the lives of millions of people". While focused on 'people', the approach was one of turning human factor data into universal body types to inform large scale design [15]. Sometimes cited as the origin of Human Centred Design, the work of Herbert Simon (Sciences of the Artificial) may also be concerned with understanding/controlling human behaviour rather than values of human dignity [16]. User-Centred Design and theorising the necessity of integrating user needs in all of design process can be traced back to the work of Donald Norman and also of Gould and Lewis [17] in the 1980s[18]. Towards the end of the last century user-centred design starts to shift beyond needs towards notions of emotion, pleasure and affect.

The history of participation in design [1] dates from the 1970s and the Scandinavian Collective Resource Approach involving workers to develop improvements in the workplace. In the first Conference on Design Participation, 1971, Nigel Cross introduces the need for "citizen participation in decision making...user participation in design" [1]. Co-design and participation have perhaps really become part of design process only in this century [19], leading to wider understanding and also questioning of issues surrounding participation[2][18].

We can therefore trace an evolution of the status of people we are designing for from "people encouraged to consume" in the 1930s, to real people (Dreyfus) in the 1950s, as citizens (1960s), their human behaviour, and their user needs (1980s), their emotions (1990s), their involvement, (2000s), and to their creativity and empowerment today.

Beyond this rapid overview of an evolving landscape, today growing attention is paid to those not directly concerned. The holistic approaches in current design practice, in the face of environmental challenges, increasingly take into account those who are not yet or will never be users. Deni & Cattoir [2] emphasize the need for changing focus ("*déplacement du regard*") towards minority or extreme users and non-users, recognising that not all people have the same voice or capacity to participate. This widening of focus, which can be seen in systems-oriented design for example, highlights the need to include non-stakeholders in the overview of (mapped) systems [20]. Transition design [6] and "life-centred" approaches [21] involve considering non-users, "invisible humans" and also non-human entities such as other living organisms and also eco-systems. New design approaches suggest the need to moving beyond human-centred design [21][22] and consider 'more-than-humans' [18].

Evolutions in the design landscape bring the need to consider multiple actors and entities, beyond the “user” and even the human, and question how our terminology can respectfully address the growing range of roles taken by non-designers within design interventions.

3 METHODOLOGIES

A literature review was carried out to identify new terminology for the people concerned in design process, identify current research and discussions addressing issues of terminology and trace the evolution of terminology in design research literature, in particular in relation to emerging fields of design for sustainability (DfS).

In parallel to the literature review a series of exchanges with practitioners, educators and researchers in the design field were organised. 15 people in all from design research, practice and education contributed to this research, from six different countries (UK, US, France, German, Belgium and Japan), working in different languages. The design domains represented by the participants include UX (6 participants), Ergonomics, Product, Services, Strategy (1 participant), Social Innovation (1 participant), Furniture, Industry, Research and Education. The participants ranged from recent graduates to senior strategic design management level. In this article, where relevant each participant is referred to by a letter, and principle activities (UX, ID, P(product), SI(social innovation), ED (education and research)). The research aim was to identify most commonly used terminology, and also parts of the terminology that appear to generate problems and ambiguity. The initial question asked to all participants was “what do you call them?”. Based on a free listing exercise, participants were asked to note all the terms for people/users they use or encounter in their design practice. They were asked to then add comments to the noted words and also mark those most used. Participants were able to answer in their own time. Participants were also given the option to comment and annotate an existing list of possible “user/people” words in English or French (six of the participants are based in France). Only four participants chose to comment the existing lists. In the case of most participants the cover letter/e-mail also included comments about the subject which constituted a non-intended but valuable supplementary source of analysable information. Following the listing exercise, written exchanges and/or in-depth on-line interviews were carried out with the majority of the participants.

For this first exploration of the subject it seemed valuable to exchange with designers working in the field of UX, both for the focus on the “users/people” in this field, but also as the terminology in this area may be the most affected by the diversity of professional backgrounds, and the rapid evolution of the discipline. For future research it would be valuable to aim for a more systematic representation of a wider range of design disciplines, in particular designers most directly related to emerging forms of DfS, but also with designers working in social innovation.

Just under half of the participants in this study are involved in design teaching and research. While the feedback from design researchers and educators provided useful insights, it is clearly important to keep in mind that terminology in research and education may not reflect the design industry as a whole.

In-depth interviews were not possible with all participants, but the research highlighted that both the in-depth interviews and written exchanges represented a form of correspondence and ongoing discussion. This notion of time, distance and exchange seems particularly relevant in this context, giving participants time to be sensitised to the questions and perhaps pay attention to things that might otherwise go unnoticed [23]. One participant mentioned that he had tried out new words following discussions around the subject, and another commented “*this is an interesting one [beneficiary] and came up on a recent project*”. One interview included several members of the same design team, which created an interesting discussion generating reactions to suggestions made but would have been interesting to follow up with individual and written exchanges.

4 PEOPLE WORDS AND FRUSTRATIONS

Over 40 different user/people words were commented and/or proposed during the discussions with designers. The feedback from participants suggests that few terms are appreciated by all, and many terms generate both positive and negative reactions.

‘Users’, and related words (end user, *utilisateur*, *usager*...) generated a diversity of reactions from positive to negative, whilst being the terms most commonly used by most (but not all) participants. In both the French and Japanese languages two different words closely related to “user” are used in design process. The French *utilisateur* and *usager* suggest respectively people concerned by

commercial/paying products and those using public/non-commercial services. In Japanese there is a similar distinction between:

利用者 (*riyosha*): someone who benefits from the use

使用者: (*shiyosha*) more general, someone who uses as a means to

These more specific user words seem to be better accepted, but perhaps more the ‘using as a means to’ than (the more passive) ‘benefitting from’.

Numerous frustrations were mentioned by participants around various terms used for people in the design process. These give (by opposition) an interesting indication of what qualities might be needed in future terminology: “reduces relation to use act alone”, “lose notion of emotion”, “lacks sense of agency/choice”, “too broad”, “not accurate enough”, “don’t feel comfortable using”, “use out of habit”, “anonymous”, “sounds media-oriented”, “sounds marketing”, “too binary, as if the user only has one facet”, “no longer has meaning”, “impersonal”, “inaccurate”, “has a marketing/business connotation”, “dehumanising”. This list also highlights one of the noticeable points from participant replies, namely that commerce, marketing and consumption related terms are widely criticised.

As confirmation of the above point, the smaller number of positive attributes linked to people/user words in design give an idea of qualities the desired terminology could have: “unique person, with own tastes, story”, “easy to throw around”, “non-specific”, “elevates someone”, “makes them interesting”, “encourages us to think about their needs and desires”, “underlines their singularity”, “puts them on the same level as experts”.

Finally in this research we can note (provisionally) that there may be more dissatisfaction than satisfaction around the people/user terminology. This is a point that needs to be confirmed in future research and may be linked to methodology issues.

5 DISCUSSION AND NEW QUESTIONS

The participant replies and the literature review highlight the following issues that could be the object of a second phase of research around the evolution of people/user terminology in design.

The word “user” continues to be valuable, suggesting there still a need for a simple, non-specific term and the need for shorthand. The term ‘user’ emerged in 1970s - so is now 50 years old. Is this term now too focused on use alone? While most participants recognised that “user” or end user, or *utilisateur* (see previous section) was the most common term, these words also generated the most ambivalent comments and suggested a certain dissatisfaction. Interestingly the term “user” was also seen as beneficial because it was generic and easy to use “it’s non-specific” (D_ID/P), “it’s not about their taste, just how they use it” (C_ID/P). At the same time other participants found using the term uncomfortable, because they feel it to be “impersonal & dehumanising” (G_UX)

The need for precision was widely commented and terms such as end user, novice user, occasional user, primary user, indirect user and many more were highlighted. Equally, as a mark of respect for the people who are now much closer to the designer in design process, participants mentioned trying as much as possible to describe the person through what they do, and their job title and the actual job/task done by the people: operator, engineer, installers, visitors, attendants... “I always try to state the role of the end user we’re designing for” (G_UX). “We design for people who do specific work, so we call them by their job name” (P_ID). Adaptation across related design disciplines is also an issue mentioned - with participants mentioning their need to adapt depending on whether the discussion is more economic, industrial design, management, environmental/SDG, work context change or living environment/transition focused, or the need to adapt to different client terminology habits.

Is natural or technical language more appropriate in design process? People (or ‘folks’ in some (US) cases) is what might be used in natural conversation. But the word ‘user’ was commented as being more specifically related to design process. Changing language between design team moments and moments with interviewees was also mentioned for this reason “*utilisateur serait un peu technique*” (user would be a bit technical) for use in user interviews. In UX and user research podcasts [4] the word “people” is much more used than “user” to refer to recipients of design research. Equally the instances where “user” is used are also often in relation to an activity such as “user-research” and “user-interviews”, perhaps illustrating that “user” doesn’t work in natural language. The notion of “corporate” language was commented on by a number of participants, but perhaps “technical” language is also an issue? In an activity which progressively incorporates non-designers in all phases of projects, is there still a place for “technical” language, and for activity terminology that may be too generic and perhaps inaccurate?

There is evidence of ambiguity and diverging perceptions around people terminology. A number of terms are not as widely understood and standardised as we might assume within the design community. Participants pointed out that ‘user’ can “create qui pro quos, salespeople don’t see users as clients.” Certain terms give misleading emphasis (see the variety of meanings implied by translations/synonyms of ‘Stakeholder’ below). The terms persona, citizen, beneficiary and customer all generated diverging perceptions. The case of ‘customer’ is interesting as an example of a term linked to a design tool (customer journey map, or CJM) where the actual meaning of customer is probably closer to “user”. The term continues to be used despite the tendency to abandon words perceived as linked to commerce/consumption. A Japanese participant suggested that for ‘customer’ the *katakana* (i.e. English) version is used, despite numerous words for customer existing in Japanese. French participants commented that ‘target’ (in English) will not have the same stigma as the French *cible*, though the meanings are the same, so both may be used with different emphasis.

Does the terminology lack humanity? Participants mentioned the need to find words to “*recentrer vers l’humain*”, (refocus on the human) and not forget that we’re dealing with people. The fact that many terms feel dehumanising was widely commented. “People are our primary material (*matière première*)” (K_UX/ED) - “user” can sound impersonal. The criticisms around “user” words in general highlight what seems to be a shared desire for giving more humanity and empathy. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that early references to “human” in design process may have been about data and controllable/analysable behaviour, and the term ‘human’ was also in some cases considered impersonal. It may be relevant today to question if the focus should be ‘human’ or life? While the notion of ‘posthuman’ is sometimes used, for now the term is polysemic - evoking both a rejection of an insufficiently diverse ‘man’ focus, of non-human life forms but also of robotics [9].

Does the terminology create a distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’? Kerr et al. write that the concept of the user is problematic, with users playing a variety of roles to the extent that it can be difficult to distinguish between designers and users in ICT development [24]. Most designers seem to like the idea of terms expressing involvement of non-designers, but don’t yet feel this is the norm in their activity, particularly outside of the education and research communities. The listing exercise didn’t specifically ask about terms in relation to collaboration/co-design, but these words (participant, co-designer, co-creator, maker, contributor, collaborator) were generally very positively commented. Beyond the notion of co-design, the desire to give value to non-designer participants appears to be important - with emerging expressions such as *Wissensträger* (knowledge holder?), *expert en usage*, complex problem solver, power user/expert. At the same time, it may be important to give value without suggesting ‘expert’ users, as this might encourage working with only small numbers of ‘lead’ users, rather than generating real co-design[1]. Without expressing the notion of expert, the term adopter was seen as positive; giving/respecting the agency of the person involved. How to give value, to give credit to the importance, and to avoid an implied power/knowledge imbalance?

The fact that many people considered and researched during design projects are not current users, may become users or were past users suggests variations around the word “user” are increasingly insufficient. Terminology may need to better express those beyond the user; non-user stakeholders, non-users and prospects. Equally it is interesting to note that while discussions with participants highlighted the fact that projects take into account the needs of and impact on non-users, words for these secondary actors and implicated people were not proposed by participants. Is design terminology currently lacking widely understood terms for those beyond the immediately concerned? The term stakeholder seems unsatisfactory (seen as *too corporate* by two participants), or simply strange (in all cases the participants who reacted to the expression are English speakers). “Stakeholder” perhaps lacks the sensitivity of “*partie prenante*” (those taking part?), or the notion of *communauté par intérêt* (community with shared interests) [2] The Japanese term for stakeholder would also appear to share this quality of “people with interest” or “people related by common interest”.

Beyond those directly concerned, and beyond non-human “stakeholders” there seems to be even more of a gap in terminology, but this also appears to be an area generating discussion [9],[18],[21], which may bring answers and new and appropriate language. This theme was not specifically explored in participant exchanges.

6 FURTHER RESEARCH & CONCLUSIONS

The points discussed in the previous section will be used to structure future research with a wider selection of design practitioners, through both in-depth interviews and group discussions as mentioned

in section 3.2. This research generated a very positive reaction, suggesting a subject that people within the design community may be keen to see evolve. There seems to be an appetite for more respectful, more empathic ways of naming and addressing the wider range of people now involved in design activity. The names used for different design professionals are currently evolving, reflecting a changing design landscape and evolving roles. In this context it seems reasonable to question the names used for the non-designers and recipients involved in this landscape, as the roles and importance of these people increase. This preliminary research highlights that there may be dissatisfaction with parts of the current terminology, particularly for giving sufficient respect to the value, specificities and humanity of non-designer participants in, and recipients of, design process.

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