DISCOVERING CORE VALUES

HELPING STUDENTS TOWARDS EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY

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PAPER ABSTRACT: Industrial design processes have moved over time from object-based to value-based. The values-based process message is ubiquitous, and students enter programs increasingly pre-primed to be empathetic. However, there is often a gap between the perceptions of the designer and the behavior of the user. This can be driven by differing (or subconscious) value sets, and students often fail to reach a point of authentic common ground and prioritize their own values over those of the user. A deeper understanding of values helps create a path towards more authentic empathy – or the capacity to share the lives of others. This study will briefly review mechanisms of personal value creation and basic definitions of empathy and review the multi-year results of a workshop where students engaged in an exercise to help them uncover core values and design speculative products related to key parts of their identity. Over several years, students have reliably identified some form of the values of IDENTITY, SECURITY, MEMORY, LEGITIMACY, and POTENTIAL with insightful product interpretations.

Keywords: Values, Empathy, Common Ground, Diversity

1. INTRODUCTION

Populist entrepreneurship and self-improvement blogs ask questions such as, "Have you aligned your brand with your highest and most closely held values?" and assert that when one is experiencing difficulties in performance, relationships, and mental health, it is most likely because one is "not living up to [their] values" (Lyons, 2021). Companies experience success, when "a brand connects to its audience based on shared value …fueled by authenticity …resonating on closely held social and ethical issues." (Walden, 2020). No longer limited to academic insight, it is generally acknowledged that understanding and living our values is a key ingredient to success.

Following this understanding, the goals, processes, and products of industrial design have moved from being primarily object-based (Attraction, Function) to value or lifestyle based (emotional, symbolic, ethical). Design students are taught to empathically gather customer data, analyze & organize their insights to assess opportunities, and develop a value proposition to deliver a superior good, service, or experience (NASAD, 2022).

Students understand the importance of being empathetic as they uncover user needs somewhere between survival and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). However, as they move forward with studio projects, they struggle to identify authentic values in their target user groups, sometimes superimposing

their own values onto those they are trying to design for. Although there is evidence that students are bringing a more instinctive understanding of empathy with them (Author, 2021), they are not quite sure how to do it effectively.

The first half of this paper will provide an overview of values; the explicit and implicit effect of values on beliefs, attitudes, and actions; and make connections to the ideas of empathy and self-awareness. The second half of the paper will describe the results of an exercise done over 5 years with 4th year undergraduate Industrial Design students to help them understand/uncover their own values in an attempt to access to a more authentic version of empathy.

2.   VALUES AND BEHAVIORS

Values reflect what is important in people's lives and influence how they perceive themselves and the world around them (Benish-Weisman, Oreg, and Berson, 2022). Although some would argue that there is no commonly accepted definition for the concept of values (Rickaby, Glass, and Fernie, 2020), others put forward that values are "relatively stable, motivational constructs that guide people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards achieving specific higher other goals" (Dinh, 2012). Values are *motivational constructs* with affective components that influence actions, behaviors, beliefs, and biases.

Values develop over time and under a variety of influences such as:

Environmental Influences: Environmental characteristics such as national and regional culture, religious influences, and even generational placement can influence the creation of values. Strauss and Howe imply that large societal forces and social mood influence the values of entire generations (Strauss, 1997), going so far as to assign default archetypal values repeating generations. However, reviewers argue that this represents an oversimplification of the values development process (Publishers Weekly, 1996). Nevertheless, there are broad environmental influences that contribute to value creation.

Authority Figures and Role Models: Parents, teachers, and other authority figures act as mentors and socialization agents in support of a child's natural tendency to internalize the signals they see around them (Grolnik, 1997). McCracken's posits that celebrities from a variety of sources (movies, sports, social media influencers, even fictional characters) are "complex bundles of cultural meaning [that] consumers…take possession of…and put them to work in the construction of their notions of the self and the world." (McCracken, 1989).

Powerful Peers: As a child enters adolescence, peers take on an increasingly important developmental role. Although the direct adoption of values between peers is uncertain, behavior and goals become more similar under peer influence during this time. (Benish-Weisman, Oreg, and Berson, 2022).

During development, personal values may shift in priority and importance. But at some point, often early adulthood, core values coalesce and occupy a critical position in determining long-term attitudes, beliefs, traits, and norms (Schwartz, 2012).

Ideally, an individual would be explicitly aware of the effect their personal values have on their choices and behaviors. However, the expression of values is often an automatic (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003), reflexive and intuitive process that operates at…conscious and non-conscious levels (Dinh, 2012). This hidden dimension of value influence leads to situations where "the motivation [to action] proceeds without deliberate intention [and users to do unexpected things] that cannot be readily explained by cost-benefit decision paradigms" (Dinh, 2012). These implicit values also influence how information gets interpreted and people will "accept something as true if it supports what [they] want to believe", especially in situations that challenge "personal beliefs, group identity, or moral values" (Ditto & Lopez, 1992).

People can also have different self-identities with accompanying sets of values that may drive different behaviors in response to "different contextual clues" (Laboeuf, 2010). Some users might unconsciously (but authentically) act differently in different situations and contexts. Hornsey and Fielding contrast surface attitudes with attitude roots where the underlying fears, ideologies, worldviews, vested interests, and identity needs sustain and motivate a variety of surprising beliefs, attitudes, and actions that are different than our own (Hornsey, 2017).

For students, inconsistent user behavior can be puzzling. When confronted with world views and behavior that is different than their own, does not seem to be driven by familiar facts, and which may change dependent on the circumstance, students find it difficult to make "accurate judgements of others' perspectives" (Liu, Rim, Min, and Min, 2022). Students will often ignore authentic user behavior rather than acknowledge a set of values that they are unfamiliar with or don't agree with. Even though students attempt to craft a superior product/customer relationship (Frow, 2011), there is a gap between their theoretical belief in empathy and their experience practicing it.

3. EMPATHY AND SELF AWARENESS

A basic definition of empathy is "the capacity to share the mental lives of others" (Read, 2021) and is a matter of "feeling with…another person and being moved by [their] situation" (Snow, 2000). Empathy comes from understanding what another person is thinking and feeling and why.

As students are mentally and emotionally flexible enough to find a common point of connection, empathy begins to emerge. However, although they work to understand the values, attitudes & actions of others, they might not be aware enough of their own value structures to build a space of common ground, which Read describes as a place where two people who share an empathic relationship can meet and get things done (Read, 2021). The Schwartz theory of Value Creation would indicate that because there is a set of core values that crosses even cultural barriers (Schwartz, 2022), there is a path to common ground even though individual expressions of value might differ.

As Tasha Eurich has observed, "when we see ourselves clearly, we are more confident and more creative…make sounder decisions, build stronger relationships, and communicate more effectively"

(Eurich, 2018). In the spirit of self-awareness, helping students to understand their own deep values is a strong first step to helping them build bridges of empathy.

4. VALUE EXERCISE

As part of a longer *expressive design* workshop, students participated in an exercise that was meant to connect them to some aspect of their core values. The exercise consisted of 1) an inventory of personal belongings, 2) the identification of objects that are the most important or essential to them, and 3) the design of a series of speculative objects that were reflective of an essential personal value.

Personal Inventory: Students were asked to do an inventory of their possessions/belongings - those that were in their apartments as well as those that may be at remote locations, such as a parents' home or even a storage facility. The inventory was not meant to be exhaustive, but they needed to think about their *things* and where they were and to become aware, to some new degree, of what their lives actually consisted of.

Students were asked to represent their personal belonging inventory using some type of diagram or graphic that gave them new insight about their belongings to share and discuss with their peers (Fig 01).
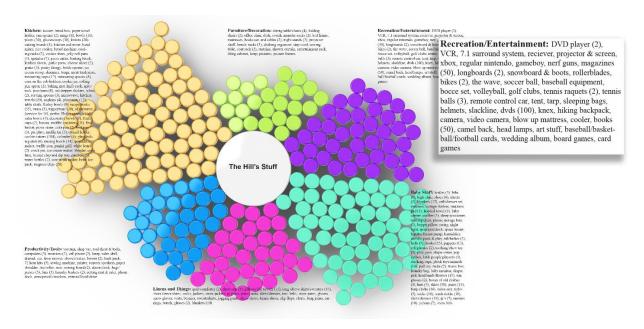

Figure 1. Student Belonging Inventory

Some students provided an actual "accounting" - down to the number/type of socks and pairs of underwear. Others arranged items by household member (discovering what impact adding a spouse, and in some cases, a child meant), while still others organized their belongings by how often they accessed them (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, never). Each method provided new and useful insights and the discussions were lively and engaging.

Belonging Prioritization: After a discussion/sharing session, students were asked to identify 5 items that they wouldn't want to ever be without. Quickly, categories such as Spouse/Family, Driver's License/Social Security Card, or laptop/cellphone were quickly removed from consideration. They weren't personal enough. The agreed upon narrative was: if they were moving to a remote island, where their daily needs would still be met (food, clothing, shelter), what 5 things would they gather from their belongings and take with them? What items were irreplaceable? What items have they hung on to despite having moved several times? What objects have they squirrelled away safe places?

Rather than identifying all 5 items at once it was much easier to have them think of one object at a time. Going around the room, the discussion progressed with each student only thinking about one item at a time and continued until they had each identified 5 items. Students who had gone previously were allowed to go back and change their answers at any time and refine their lists as the discussion progressed. There is an inherent bias to this process. As each student takes a turn, decides on an object, says it aloud, and it is recorded on the whiteboard, it sets a conceptual tone or a theme that other students often followed as they thought more deeply about what they have held onto over time.

Value Translation: Students are then asked to discuss what the objects MEAN to them. It is suggested that they consider why these objects are important to them, and where or how they got them. As students share their personal stories, similarities are discovered, and commonalities can be identified as the concrete objects turn into shared concepts and values. At this stage of their education, the students are familiar with the need to discard, and some objects were left behind as students came to a consensus (Fig 02).

Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
Identity	Identity	Identity	Identity	Identity
Memory	Memory	Memory	Connection	Belonging
Legitimacy	Potential	Progress	Growth	Investment
Security	Security	Security	Fulfillment	Stability
Escape	Leisure	Diversion	Investment	Adventure

Figure 2. Five Top Values by Cohort

Application Exercise: Bypassing the practical, very user-centered design process they were familiar with, students were asked to design speculative and expressive objects with themselves as the center. Their efforts should leverage their new conceptual understanding of personal core values and be based on the five core values identified as a cohort. What is a product whose purpose is to primarily reinforce one of these core personal values, and reflect a unique connection to you as an individual?

Each object was accompanied by a short narrative (among other things). Students reacted positively to the exercise, and the results were surprising and often touching. In the minds of the students, the projects reached a level of personal authenticity that was surprising even to them as shown in the following examples.

Example one: One student presented the jarring form of a baby with their finger in an outlet as a night light and shared:

> *Growing up I was quite the mischievous kid. My mom constantly reminds me of the time I painted my baby brother's head with her oil paints or the time I chased my older sister around the house holding my poopy diaper. I was also very curious about the world around me and was constantly getting into things and taking them apart. Many times, this got me into big trouble.*
>
> *This lamp symbolizes the mischievousness of my childhood. The baby sticking its hand into the electric wall socket represents my interest in things around me and how many times my curiosity got the best of me.*

Figure 3. Examples of Student Designed Expressive, Value-Based Objects.

Example two: One student designed a pair of skin-colored work gloves that came pre-printed with scars, grease stains, callouses, cracked nails, and other signs of hard work along with a protective face mask shaped like a beard. In his narrative, he says:

> *We discussed legitimacy as the way you prove to the world that you are valuable. This often comes through a college diploma or a portfolio. My father has neither of these, so I looked to see what he had to represent his legitimacy as an auto mechanic.*
>
> *He shows it through cuts and burns that turn into scars, through callouses, and through a beard. I've never understood how wearing a suit and tie proves anything about you. After all, anyone can buy that.*
>
> *I thought a lot about an old work shirt that belonged to my dad [that has his name embroidered on it above the pocket]. I wear that blue collared shirt with a lot of pride and some inner conflict because I know that it will be the last blue collared shirt I have once I graduate from college.*

5. CONCLUSION

Empathy plays a critical role in developing a robust design process and is a powerful tool for designers to help people and brands authentically connect to their highest and most closely held values.

Students theoretically understand the necessity of empathy, but practically have difficulty in creating a place of common ground where they can engage the user in a co-creative process and get things done. Both user behavior AND designer perception are influenced by values and operate on conscious and unconscious levels

"Know thyself" – probably the best-known of the Delphic maxims – is possibly a good place to start in helping students build a better process. Engaging 4th-year students in an exercise to help them examine aspects of their own values within the context of an expressive design activity has been insightful and rewarding.

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