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What is Co-design?

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Abstract

Maybe you've recently made a commitment to Inclusive Design. Maybe you've found yourself 'behind' in the 'racial awakening'. Maybe you've been asleep and missed the awakening of the last hundreds of years. No matter!

Now you're working toward inclusion, you're beginning to understand it is an important way to move forward, both internally, within your teams and externally, within your products. You simply can't check your politics and your bias at the door. Maybe you've recently drafted a Diversity Equity Inclusion Justice (DEIJ) statement. Perhaps you've built DEIJ into your strategic planning. You're conducting workshops, reviewing existing practices, and rethinking policies. So far, the 2020s have helped you see differently. And you want more, you want to move beyond the basics and action all this change.

Context

So, what is this I hear about co-design? What is this delicious advancement in how to marry design with social justice? Recognising, of course, nothing is neutral, and they have been linked all along.

Tread carefully friend, co-design will ask you to challenge much of what you might think, and it will require an authenticity in your actions.

You cannot simply mandate that co-design happen. It would be as awkward and silly as mandating trust or vulnerability or honesty happen at a particular time, in a particular place. In other words, it is entirely context-dependent, dynamic, organic, and situated. There are of course things you can do to make people and places more inclusive, more welcoming, more open, and freer of power dynamics and biases. Though, let's face it, you can't eliminate them, though you can be aware of them and name them.

Co-design requires you question many things you might be taking for granted, namely, the designer's role. In co-design the designer's role is more facilitator from the back, sweeper*, than it is keeper of brilliant design ideas. Now the designer must focus on delicately putting just enough structure together AND NO MORE to leave space for the co-design from anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

The structure is as importantly about the methods and equipment and practices and physical location and how 'invitations' happen, as it is about the mood and tone and authenticity and so many soft details that upend power and communicate intentions and expectations. Equity can happen here.

Our technologies, our businesses, and our hierarchies, however, aren't built this way, they are not built for equity and in many cases, they are built to perpetuate systemic barriers standing directly in

the way of equity. So, this work involves being acutely aware of the systemic barriers, where they appear, how they impact individuals in a group, 'differently', and how they can be gently poked to move aside a bit. Even if it is just for an afternoon.

In 2017 I wrote a version of the following about how co-design can happen. It contains almost all questions that have no clear black or white answers. This work requires we adjust and re-adjust our own role constantly and within communities. No two co-design experiences, you see, will ever be the same. They will be entirely reflective of the place, the people, the framing, and the moment. This is both the beauty and the ephemerality of co-design. And so, when we see the word 'co-design' used, we should be wary of it ever representing some one thing. It ought not.

Questions

So, we are left with the following, an interrogation of many of the unanswerable, but requisite questions we must ask of ourselves as we endeavour to practice co-design.

What is co-design?

Is co-design just doing something together? If so, then how is it different from participatory design? It seems it is not just doing something together, there is something more fundamental to it. It seems, to actually be co-design, the design activities must directly address the power differential, 'us versus them' for those involved.

Is co-design, then, when we're on the 'same level' and doing this design thing together? Does it fundamentally break down levels? And how?

But then why am I paid to be a designer as my job? And how do I avoid co-design looking like absolving myself of my work and offloading it onto the backs of others? Which makes me question, what is my qualification? What is my expertise? If I can't design for another person's lived experience, then what can I do? And what if I'm too close to the lived experience, does that somehow make me less of a professional designer and too human? What if I'm living the experience, am I supposed to try to be objective for the sake of the design? But I can't be objective, inclusive design showed me I have biases, and they will manifest in the ways I show up in design activities.

Who gets paid and how? How do you appropriately show appreciation? This territory seems well beyond *Starbucks'* gift cards. Who gets money and how much? And who decides? And how can that 'level' be broken down?

And how do we do this 'inviting' to participate? Words matter. If you're a participant and are invited to come to someone else's space, that can reinforce power. If you, a designer, invite yourself to someone else's space without first being welcomed, then you're a kind of settler.

This is new, and we want to create it but haven't figured it out yet. This is the ethos for approaching co-design, curiosity, and

uncertainty about outcomes. This is the moment you can break down the barriers between 'designer' and 'user.' However, many industries and many organisations are not there yet. Therefore, the very act of doing co-design will often be an act of resistance against the typical ways things are done.

Co-design is often aspirational. The word is aspirational. Declaring something a 'co-design session' is not enough to make it so. At the same time, this work does not mean letting go entirely. For example, co-design does not absolve you of empathy, it requires even more. And this is where equity can happen.

How can those of us with design jobs do this?

Bring Humility

When designers lead with humility, uncertainty and curiosity, co-design is possible. One way to demonstrate humility is to clearly communicate intentions with something like the following, 'We are not experts in x, we are not even people for whom x is personal, we are here to listen, to learn, and to try some things together'.

Positioning yourself as not being an expert helps co-design dynamics by leaving yourself open to learning something new. When you see collaborators as co-designers, it eliminates competition and jockeying to have the best ideas. Instead, you start trying to nurture the ideas of everyone, which is a fundamentally generous act. This allows for genuine collaboration and exploration and questioning. This is where learning happens.

Can you do co-design with an expert? What is an expert? Who decides?

Co-design requires an authentic conversation about expertise. Who is an expert? Who decides? What perspective is valued and why? Depth and breadth of something. Experience? Training? Intention? It does seem to be related to the privilege of doing research as a designer in many contexts, regularly, and learning from it. In this case, co-designers are experts in their own life, because they are living a life, their own life.

Is it possible to quiet the expertise? Is that desirable? Can we re-envision using expertise? This seems as though it can become quite awkward if it isn't done authentically.

At least we should know co-design is rooted in 'Nothing about us without us'. Have those for whom the outcome is intended designing alongside.

But how much participation and when?? Early? Middle? Late? Who decides? Who is the decider? Can *they* really contribute? Do *they* really contribute? What do we do with *their* contributions? Aren't these questions reinforcing the power dynamic? Does this not draw us back into the 'us versus them?' Word matter!

The problem of tokenising in co-design

The point of co-design should be to include individuals in sharing their own perspective while understanding that their own lived experience is valuable in and of itself. They do not need to feel a burden to represent more than their own self, and the urge to do so can be an indication of a mis-framing of the co-design.

The questions remaining are, how many is enough? How much is enough? Who decides? If we are valuing the expertise of individuals, then when will we know when we're done? If we don't have a recommended number of people, how will we ever be done? Can't this go on forever?

Yes, it can. Co-design need not be done, completed, or sufficient. Minimum viable products are not burdened with completion. Why then should co-designs carry that burden? Why can't co-designs be the path toward iterations, version 2s, advancement, additional features, and options? Why can't co-design be an opportunity for more? Why do we structure it to be a final say? Instead, co-design should be understood as 'what we know now, in this context, with these people.' And that should be more than enough.

I think we know we've done or achieved co-design after-the-fact. I think it's something we can see in retrospect. No one individual creates co-design. People, the way they come together and the way they agree to collaborate collectively, create co-design. Much of this is felt, not achieved in easily measured, rigorous methods. The feeling of co-design should be one of questioning what was missed, and that feeling should persist, evermore.

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* A sweeper is opposite of a leader, the last person in the peloton. The sweeper should know the route and be able to contact others in the group if trouble. And encourage those struggling.