

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Empathy Mapping: Bridging Cultural and Linguistic Divides in
International Online Education**

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Abstract

The concept of empathy, commonly used in user experience (UX) design, has gained traction in distance education communities (Matthews et al., 2017). Empathy offers designers insight into users and their contexts (Neubauer et al., 2017) and helps designers “understand how instruction would be experienced” (Parrish, 2006), thus improving the overall outcome (Lewis & Contrino, 2016; Neubauer et al., 2017; Parrish, 2006). UX designers use a visualization tool called empathy mapping to chart information about their users. Empathy maps are used at the outset of a project and continue to evolve and inform the project as new data emerges. This paper reviews literature from the fields of instructional design, distance education, and user experience design to describe the problems in current distant education design practices; to argue for the practice of empathy in distance education design; and finally, to describe empathy mapping and how it can sensitize instructors to students’ circumstances, remove instructor bias, and help instructors make evidence-based decisions in the design and delivery of their courses.

Keywords: elearning, education, empathy, distance education, user experience

Introduction

With online learning, the barrier of geographic distance is easily overcome, thereby increasing the participation of international students, and while such an international dynamic offers incredible opportunities, it also presents challenges. Sadykova & Dautermann (2009) address the challenges of cross-cultural distance education at four levels: the institutional, the technological, the student, and the faculty. Focusing on students and faculty, the authors identify a reciprocal relationship that is created by their interactions with one another. They explain, “the quality of cross/inter-cultural experience one receives in a particular course depends on the work done by the instructor and the student inside the virtual classroom” (p. 101). When learner and teacher come from two different cultures, misunderstandings related to language, modes of communication, and ideas about education and classroom behaviour are bound to arise (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Milly, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). These miscommunications are only magnified by the virtual dimension of an online course in which the subtle communication cues of in-person interaction, that can help overcome cultural and linguistic differences, are obscured.

In an effort to improve the experience in a cross-cultural virtual classroom, Sadykova & Dautermann (2009) call for the establishment of a third space, “a new contingent cultural space [that] is derived from the needs of everyone present” (p. 102). It is a space that requires an openness to, and understanding of, different perspectives and backgrounds. It “entails listening and giving all others the opportunity for self-expression, as well as a commitment from all parties to grasp this opportunity for generating new perspectives.” (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009)

Essentially, this proposed third space is a space of empathy. The concept of empathy underlies many of the recommendations prescribed for overcoming cultural differences in distance education (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Milly, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009), and has recently gained traction in instructional design communities (Matthews et al., 2017). It is also fundamental to the field of user-experience design. Empathy is “the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling” (What is empathy? 2021). Using empathy in the design process helps designers better understand their users, and as a result, helps them meet their needs (Kouprie & Visser, 2009; Neubauer et al., 2017). And while much of the academic literature calls for the incorporation of empathy in the instructional design process (Gray, 2015; Matthews et al., 2017; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Milly, 2010; Neubauer, 2017; Parrish, 2006; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009), there is little focus on *how* designers and instructors might evoke and deploy empathy in practice (Matthews et al., 2017).

Drawing on literature from the fields of instructional design, distance education, and user experience design, the following presentation describes the problematic relationship between designer and learner in current distance education design practices, explores the concept of empathy and how it might be practiced in the design of distance education, and describes the process of empathy mapping, suggesting that empathy maps are a way of sensitizing designers and instructors to students’ circumstances, removing instructor bias, and helping designers and instructors make evidence-based decisions in the development and delivery of their courses.

The Problem with Current Design Practices

Counteranthropomorphism [is] the tendency we have to remove the humanity of people we can't see. These may be people on the other side of a wall...or people mediated by technology in a virtual classroom.

—Jesse Stommel (2018)

When designing for a distant audience, one of the primary challenges designers face is understanding who they are designing for. When we do not know who our users are, it is difficult to anticipate how they will interact with our designs, and whether our designs will be useful to them (Neubauer et al., 2017). Research finds that in current educational design practices, decisions are largely driven by factors that do not include the needs of the learners; priority tends to be given to time and budget constraints (Matthews et al. 2017), the needs of the institutional stakeholders (Matthews et al. 2017), technological considerations (Parrish, 2006), and desired learning outcomes (Matthews et al., 2017; Gray, 2015). And while the learner is also a factor, traditional learner analysis practices do not provide the designer with enough information about their learners to create effective learning experiences (Gray, 2015; Matthews, 2017). Colin Gray (2015) explains that current learner analysis in instructional design practice results in profiles that read more like market segments, including components, such as the basic demographic characteristics, reading level, and past experience with the instructional content (e.g., Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2010). These components are not without value, but they are also not sufficient to develop empathy with the learner, and to develop a rich understanding of how the learner may perceive and interpret the designed experience (p.203).

Gray says that learners tend to be “normalized.” Rose & Tingley (2008) describe learners as “homogenous, faceless entities” in the context of instructional design. With only a cursory understanding of who their learners are, designers often have little choice but to draw on their own experiences and perceptions (Matthews et al., 2017; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Milly, 2010; Neubauer et al., 2017; Pattell, 2013) which likely differ vastly from those of the actual learners. Jim Patell (2013) of Stanford University’s Institute of Design says, “we are working across cultures, across geographies, across political systems and across myriad differences in the contexts of daily life...we cannot assume to understand their preferences.” And their preferences matter—learners need to feel engaged, connected, and inspired in order to succeed (Parrish, 2006, p.72). To create course content that resonates with learners and inspires them, designers need to conduct “substantial, engaged research about the people who will be using or engaging in the learning experiences [they] design” (Gray, 2015, p. 210). “As a pursuit necessarily tied to the growth and well-being of other people, educators...cannot ignore the whole person for whom they are designing, including factors that may not easily be derived through *traditional* approaches to analysis or development” (Matthews et al., 2017, p. 490).

Practicing Empathy in Distance Education Design

The most critical ID [instructional design] skill is the ability to step outside one’s own perspective and see the design through the learner’s eyes.

—Patrick Parrish (2006)

In an effort to define empathy in the context of design, Kouprie and Visser (2009) explain that it “is related to a deep understanding of the user’s circumstances and experiences, which involves relating to, more than just knowing about, the user” (p. 440). “Relating to,” versus “knowing about,” is an important distinction. Current practices in instructional design may tell designers something about their learners, but does little to help designers actually relate to their learners in any kind of authentic, effective, or useful way (Gray, 2015).

Based on a review of psychological literature, Kouprie & Visser (2009) identify two components of empathy: the affective and the cognitive. Affective empathy is about feeling: it is an emotional response to another. When you smile, I smile. Cognitive empathy is being able to understand another person’s situation and imagine it from one’s own perspective, putting one’s self in the shoes of another, so to speak. Both components are necessary in order to effectively use empathy in the design process, “one of the two...will not suffice, for understanding the user’s world” (p. 442). Designers need to understand their learners’ individual circumstances (which is the cognitive component), and they need to be able to have an emotional response to those circumstances (which is the affective component).

The next question that arises is: How much empathy is appropriate in what, nevertheless, remains a professional context? The issue so far has been that designers do not empathize enough, but is it possible to empathize too much? In a qualitative study of empathic practices in distant design learning, Matthews et al. (2017) found some disagreement among practitioners about how much empathy designers should have with their learners. While some designers believe that direct interaction with their learners enhances their work, others feel that there is a “threshold” that should not be crossed. One designer noted the risk of “[getting] so far into the learner’s brain, that you may lose your original compass” (p. 489). Indeed, using empathy as a tool without adhering to a process could become a slippery slope.

To guide designers through a process of empathizing, Kouprie & Visser (2009) developed a framework that is based on psychotherapeutic practices. The framework involves “stepping in and out of the [user’s] life...stepping in is needed for deep understanding...stepping back [allows] for competent action” (p. 444). Their process consists of four phases:

1. In the **discovery phase**, the designer enters the learner’s world, either through approaching the user directly, or studying materials from user studies.
2. In the **immersion phase**, the designer spends time in the learner’s world, and takes their point of reference.
3. In the **connection phase**, the designer attempts to find meaning and emotional resonance with the learner.
4. In the **detachment phase**, the designer leaves the learner’s world, and designs with their perspective in mind.

In order to go through this, or any process of empathizing, this presentation turns to the field of user experience (UX) design, where empathy maps are a tool commonly used to help designers gain a deep understanding of their users.

Empathy Mapping in Distance Education Design

Figure 1 shows an empathy map. In UX, empathy maps are developed at the outset of a project and continue to evolve and inform the project as new data emerges. Empathy maps chart qualitative data about who the user is, what the user's goals are, and what the user sees, says, does, and hears. The idea is that see, say, do, and hear will provide information about the user's environment, their circumstances, and his or her behaviour. This information will help the designer understand what his or her user is thinking and feeling. Based on what a user is thinking and feeling, the designer assesses the user's pains and gains. Pains represent the user's difficulties and gains represent their successes. Understanding what a user is thinking and feeling, that is, empathizing with a user, helps the designer assess a learner's pains and gains. Pains describe the learner's obstacles or challenges, their fears, their ideas of failure, and what makes learning difficult for him or her. Gains describe the learner's aspirations, his or her goals, his or her idea of success, and what makes learning easy for that person.

Figure 1
An Empathy Map

Empathy Map Canvas

Designed for: _____ Designed by: _____ Date: _____ Version: _____

1 WHO are we empathizing with?
Who is the person we want to understand?
What is the situation they are in?
What is their role in the situation?

GOAL

2 What do they need to DO?
What do they need to do differently?
What job(s) do they want or need to get done?
What decision(s) do they need to make?
How will we know they were successful?

3 What do they SEE?
What do they see in the marketplace?
What do they see in their immediate environment?
What do they see others saying and doing?
What are they watching and reading?

4 What do they SAY?
What have we heard them say?
What can we imagine them saying?

5 What do they DO?
What do they do today?
What behavior have we observed?
What can we imagine them doing?

7 What do they THINK and FEEL?
PAINS
What are their fears, frustrations, and anxieties?
GAINS
What are their wants, needs, hopes and dreams?

What other thoughts and feelings might motivate their behavior?

Last updated on 16 July 2017. Download a copy of this canvas at <http://gamestorming.com/empathy-map/> © 2017 Dave Gray, xplane.com

The data about learners that goes into the empathy map is gathered through qualitative research methods. These may include interviews or think alouds, via chat or video conferencing, qualitative surveys, and/or autobiographical sketches, using text, video or photographs, and storytelling techniques (Kouprie & Visser, 2009; Parrish, 2006). The idea is to gather information about the learners' environment (what they see, say, hear, and do), their beliefs and behaviours (what they think and feel), and their concerns and aspirations (their pains and gains)

(Ferreira et al., 2015). Once this data has been gathered, it can be organized into an empathy map. For the best results, this data should be gathered by the designers from the users themselves (Kouprie & Visser, 2009, p. 439, Bairaktarova et al., 2016). When the designer is not the researcher, however, the process of charting data on an empathy map can be a way for the researcher and designer to communicate, and come to a common understanding about the learner.

A lot of recent scholarship in instructional and distance education design has called for the practice of empathy in the design process, in order to produce more effective courses and improve student achievement. And while empathy has been deemed an important part of the design process, there has been limited focus in the literature on how instructors and designers might incorporate the practice of empathy in their process (Matthews et al., 2017). This presentation, therefore, turned to the field of user experience design, a field in which empathy is considered a fundamental tool for guidance. What we can learn from the professional literature on user experience design is that gathering and mapping the kind of qualitative data I have described, will

- sensitize designers and instructors to learners, who they might otherwise not have access to, by illuminating factors such as learners' backgrounds, their attitudes towards education, and their current circumstances, all of which will affect their learning experience
- help designers and instructors recognize and remove their own biases and assumptions, which can become particularly problematic in a cross-cultural context.
- allow designers to make evidence-based decisions about the design and delivery of their courses, which means they can incorporate methods, materials, and assignments that are relevant and appropriate to their learners, and will facilitate their success.

Conclusion

This paper has summarized a review of the literature from the fields of instructional technology, distance educational design, and user-experience design to address the issue of cultural miscommunication in online distance education. Based on the literature, this paper suggests using empathy maps as a method for overcoming cultural differences in the design of online distance education. Future studies might put this research into action, in order to better understand how it might work in practice.

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