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Employability - using design activities to enhance students' reflections on value and meaning

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Employability
– Using Design Activities to Enhance Students’ Reflections on Value and Meaning

ABSTRACT

There is a wide consensus that the future labour market will be very different from today and will also increasingly be dominated by free agents (Weforum, 2018, Upwork, 2018). To meet the radical changes in the market, educational institutions are searching for new initiatives. Lately, a novel concept has arrived, also in educational institutions, employability. The term employability is subject to a variety of definitions. In this paper, we subscribe to Cole & Tibby’s (2013) definition of employability that focuses on enabling students to be successful, not only in their working life but also in their personal lives. In the field of design research and practice, we see new initiatives that aim at helping young people develop new competencies, skills and activities to create quality in life (SIGWELL, Design Research Society) and to design both a meaningful private life and a fulfilling working life (Birsel, 2015, Burnett & Evans, 2016). In this context design is not concerned with the creation of a product, rather, design skills are being used on a personal level.

In this paper, which has its foundation in the field of design, we present a brief framework, the 4-Foci Model that is associated with the concept of ‘a life design attitude’ (Sørensen, 2019). This paper argues that to enhance employability in an educational setting, one activity could be introduced early in the education, namely training students to focus on two questions: How can I use my knowledge and practice to create value for other people? And how can I use my knowledge and practice to create value and meaning in my life? In a world where human beings are increasingly searching for meaning and purpose (Sinek, 2011, Pink, 2009) we tend to overlook the idea of letting students focus on the value and meaning they can create in real life. Although these questions appear to be a rather simple activity, they are challenging and require creative design competencies, such as seeing different perspectives, reframing, imagining, empathizing, etc. The paper presents insights from a workshop for 100 journalism students. The paper points to the central role of creativity and design activities in education.

INTRODUCTION

Many educational institutions are tremendously focused on entrepreneurship. Typically, these initiatives are offered to students at the very end of their studies. This leads to the idea that entrepreneurship is ‘a tool’ or a ‘quickly learned competence’ rather than ‘an attitude’ or an entrepreneurial ‘spirit’ (Blenker et al., 2011) that needs to be practiced during the entire education (Sørensen, 2019, Sørensen & Davidsen, 2017). Lately, employability is also being introduced in educational institutions. At Aalborg University (DK), employability is described as the ability to create value: Employability is “…the individual’s ability to gain access to and be able to work in the labor market...employability relates to the student’s growing professional and personal insight, knowledge and skills, and influences the ability to create value in the labor market” (karriere.aau.dk). Employability is about the ability to create more than economic value. In this current research project (Sørensen, 2019) we subscribe to Cole & Tibby’s (2013) definition of employability as lifelong learning: “It is about supporting students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, behaviors, attributes, and attitudes which will enable them to be successful not just in employment but in life.” We also endorse their definition because it embraces the perspective of life in a broader sense. It relates to a new interest – and need for – not only helping students get a job, but also guiding students in creating a meaningful personal life as well as a working life. According to recent research into youth culture, young people need ‘tools for life’s maze’ (Katzenelson, 2018). Furthermore, a recent rapport from
OECD claims that educational institutions need to focus not only on students getting a job but also on how students learn to create ‘quality in life’ (OECD, 2018).

‘Design’ is typically associated with product design or the styling of words or products, like packaging or a campaign. Yet, design is increasingly used in various innovative processes in businesses, society and government (designcouncil.org.uk). Lately, design is also being integrated on a personal level, as in the terms ‘life design’ or ‘design for quality of life’ (Sigwell, Design Research Society). At Stanford University more than a thousand students have taken a course in ‘life design’ and with good results (Burnett & Evans, 2016). Inspired by this research and previous research in design for personal value clarification (Sørensen, 2011, 2012, 2013) we are working on the development of ‘an attitude’ together with the 4-Foci Model. The intention is to offer students some training in ‘life design’ (Sørensen, 2019) and in the 4-Foci Model, which invites people to balance: 1) an inner focus, 2) an outer, business focus 3) an ‘other’, human-centred focus and 4) an outer world perspective.

![The 4 Foci Model](image)

**THE 4 FOCI MODEL:**

- **Inner focus** — focus on your values, your strengths and weaknesses, what you are passionate or curious to try out, how to take care of yourself. Related to inner focus is e.g. knowledge about the brain, how to take care of yourself, focus, control of your thoughts.

- **Outer business focus** — how you can transform what you are good at into something that adds value in a business or in the world. Related to the outer business perspective is basic knowledge about a business, business modelling, value propositions and users’ pain and gain.

- **Other focus** — how to understand and interact with other people. How to co-create and be a good ‘co-creator’ yourself. Related to the ‘other focus’ is knowledge about ethnography, user research, empathy mapping, how to understand other people, how to co-create, build communities and be a good co-creator and citizen yourself.

- **Outside world focus** — how to understand the world, your history, the present, society, democracy, the changing values and trends. Related to ‘the outer world’ perspective is knowledge about time and history, democracy.

*Fig. 1: The 4-Foci Model (Sørensen, 2019)*

As mentioned, a central element in the understanding of employability is the ability to create value (AAU, 2019). It could be in your life (an inner focus), for other people (other focus) or in a business (outer business focus), an organization or the world (an outer world focus). In a world, where human beings are increasingly searching for meaning and purpose (Sinek, 2011, Pink, 2009) we tend to overlook the idea of letting students focus not only on the value and the meaning they can create in real life, among users, and
in a business context, but also on how to create value and meaning in their lives – early on in their education. As Ken Robinson argues, “you need to find your element,” which to Robinson includes exploring the diversity of intelligence, the power of imagination and creativity, and the importance of commitment to our own capabilities. But according to research (Katznelson, 2018), young people are abandoning their dreams; they have difficulty formulating a sense of who they are; they have difficulty explaining what is important to them. Many young people are limited by a performance culture. Joan Husted, career advisor at DMJX, explains that students are increasingly asking themselves: Is this the right education for me? Will it create meaning and value in my life? What does my future look like with this education? Students are looking for value and meaning in life, but they need guidance. To demonstrate how a journalism education can be used our career advisor asked five journalists to describe their very different careers. The students’ response was, “we cannot see ourselves in any of the five different careers or as a more traditional journalist; therefore we are considering quitting.” This example reveals a very narrow-minded perspective of each of the different types of careers, rather than recognizing them as an inspiration for other and additional ways of building a career. This points to an urgent need for creative competencies and flexible thinking (Katznelson, 2018): to envisage new opportunities and also imagine various ways in how a specific practice can create value and meaning both for users and for oneself – in an inner and an ‘other’ focus.

EXPERIMENTS

The experiment we refer to here is a new and optional workshop, “Preparation for Internship” at the Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX). However, in order to prepare students for a larger future, we extended the scope of the course. The workshop now aims at guiding the students in their preparation for an internship but also helping them to prepare for their future personal life and working life. We intend to train the students in specific design activities: mapping experiences, expressing who they are, what they want, recognizing broader perspectives, changing perspectives (reframing) and prototyping different future scenarios (Sørensen, 2019). Our 3-day workshop was part of a week-long course. On the first day of the workshop around 100 students participated; on days 2 and 3 there were 45-50 participating students. The full research is described in another paper (Sørensen, 2019), whereas this paper will focus on and elaborate on two assignments: 1) expressing an ‘inner focus’ and 2) switching focus and perspective from ‘an inner focus’ to ‘an outer business focus’ including imagining and empathizing with users. In the workshop, the students were introduced to the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2012), which is a simple and easy-to-understand business model. Moreover, they were presented with the idea of describing different ‘value propositions’ (Osterwalder et al., 2014) – the value you are offering your users.

Today the students (and some teachers) often tend to focus on the final product: an article, a podcast e.g., which is different from focusing on the experienced value that your product creates for other people.

An elaboration of the two assignments follows:

1. Inner focus: Map your experiences, describe yourself: your life journey, your heroes/role models

2. From ‘inner’ to ‘outer’ focus: Try to transform your inner focus, what you are good at, into something that adds value in a business and/or for some users/a specific user: An example: An inner focus perspective: “I am passionate (my interest) about making podcasts for young people.” A reframing into an outer, business and user perspective could be: “Young people often feel lonely (my user’s pain). I can offer/intend to learn (as I am a student) to develop podcasts and interaction with young people in a way that makes them feel included and part of a community (what my users gain).” *
RESEARCH DATA:

In the research we have used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods (Brannen, 2007). Our research data consists of the following elements: 1. PADlets: 36 students have submitted a personal PADlet with assignments. 2. A questionnaire: 40 students participated in an on-line questionnaire. Video interviews: 10 students participated in a personal video interview about their experiences from the workshop.

INSIGHTS FROM THE JOURNALISM WORKSHOP

On day 1 the 100 students were working with ‘an inner focus’. The students had to express more personal issues, like describing themselves, their life journey, heroes etc. On day 2 & 3, 50 per cent of the around 100 students did not participate. According to Pia Færing, Head of Internship at DMJX, many students feel discomfort expressing more personal issues, like describing themselves. One student said: “It was a bit challenging [to do the workshop]. I got frustrated at the fact that I had to describe myself.” Færing argues this might be an obvious reason why so many students did not participate, which is in line with Katznelson’s research and definitions (2018). On day 2 & 3 most of the 50 participating students generally had fewer problems expressing their inner focus. Yet, they had difficulties formulating the value they create in a business organization and/or for end-users. Most descriptions started with a personal perspective, from ‘an inner focus’ like this example, “I would like to write good, meaningful features to reach and touch people…” Some describe the effect they tend to create, which can be seen as a tentative description of the value they create, but still, they all had difficulties empathizing with the user and describing the concrete needs of the user. The following sentences show how the students tend to stay in ‘an inner focus’, for example describing their value in vague terms and as a commonplace: “I can deliver stories that show attention to the detail, which is useful in the media industry…from me, the users can have well-written articles.” Also, a few students focus on their own value. “I am passionate about taking the audience into a universe that has a story that can be told in a scientific and linguistically challenging way…in feature stories, where I also get the opportunity to develop my language.”

In the video data material, most of the students declared that they find the 4-Foci Model and the assignment to be highly relevant (xx %), which indicates an understanding of the assignment as well as a willingness to try. Therefore, the assignment seemed to reveal that the act of shifting focus and perspective simply was a new and challenging exercise. In the following extracts from the videos four students answer the question, whether they found the assignment and the 4-Foci Model useful:

1: Yes. Actually, I think...I tend to keep my focus ‘within myself’... [I will] look into what I am actually capable of, and how businesses and companies can also use [these competencies] – I will really focus on that.

2: Yes. I think it is very useful, in particular, to reflect on how I add value to other people. I would like to work on that focus.

3: Yes, I really think it made good sense when we had to create the sentence, first what I am passionate about and then how can I transform this into something that adds value in a business organization, I could really see a point in that.

4: I have spent time realizing what I want and what I am good at...for a long time I was convinced that passion was enough, that you could sell yourself on being passionate, but there is more to it...
CHALLENGING STUDENTS’ VALUES AND MENTAL MODELS

In every type of innovation, a very important issue is our values and mental models that steer our habitual way of thinking and acting (Senge, 1990). Generally, our brains work against absorbing new “stuff” through our mental models that create a strong aversion to ‘the new’ that differs from what we are used to.

According to Brandel (2015) our values and mental models about a journalist is traditionally “a gatekeeper, an authority/expert, responsible for every part of the story cycle and a person working for the public” (see fig.3). This is in line with the students’ descriptions of the value they create for users: “I am passionate about writing stories that are long reads and have depth. In this way the media user can get updated and be taught” – which demonstrates a traditional understanding and mental model of the journalist as ‘an authority’, responsible for the story and writing for the public, not with the public. The users or the public have no influence, but are passive consumers, being ‘taught’. As a student explained, “Creativity is not something that belongs in journalism education...you do not associate creativity with journalism that can topple the government.” Unfortunately, is seems as if some or many of the mental models in journalism (education) represent a barrier to ‘new’, creative knowledge and competencies.

Yet, journalism education (and education in general) is currently facing unprecedented upheavals (WJEC, 2019). Researchers and practitioners have defined new possible focus areas in journalism education (Westergaard & Schultz Jørgensen, 2018, Haagerup, 2017, Allen et al., 2015). One general recommendation is greater openness in the journalism process and a better understanding and dialogue with users. Brandel explains that a radically different way is taking a design perspective and putting people first, like in many other industries. In the field of design, it is pivotal to focus on how to create value for specific users, as it enhances the possibility of creating unique value propositions (Osterwalder et al., 2014). Also, in the field of design, the user perspective and co-creation have been central for decades. Sanders & Stappers argue (2008) that users are getting increasingly included as ‘co-creators’ in various types of processes, in business, health care, politics, etc. (DesignCouncil.org.uk). Today, the user perspective is included in many industries, but in the field of journalism, the ‘qualitative’ user perspective and design thinking are still relatively new.
(Brandel, 2015). Some might argue that journalists are focused on users, but often this is happening in a more distant and abstract way, like relating to different segments of a market. In design research and practice we argue that feeling empathy, trying to understand the user`s perspective, stepping into the shoes of someone are essential skills for creating and co-creating value for users (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, Michlewski, 2014, Osterwalder et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

From research, and the real world, we know that young people are limited by a performance culture. They are abandoning their dreams; they have difficulty formulating a sense of who they are, and they have trouble explaining what is important to them (Katznelson, 2018). In our research, we subscribe to Cole & Tibby`s (2013) definition of employability that focuses on enabling students to be successful, not only in their working life but also in their personal lives. Likewise, OECD recommends that the educational institutions should educate students not only for getting or creating a job but also for creating value and meaning in life (OECD, 2018). Using this knowledge as a point of departure we broadened the scope of the course “Preparation for Internship” to also relate to the students’ future life.

The focus of this paper is on design activities such as mapping and visualizing experiences, having students express who they are, what they want, having them see more perspectives, changing perspectives (reframing) and prototyping different future scenarios. We need to train students to be open to more viewpoints and to reflect on the two simple questions: How can I use my knowledge and practice to create value for other people? And, how can I use my knowledge and practice to create value and meaning for myself? We argue that reflecting on these questions can be stimulated by introducing the 4-Foci Model that appeals to creative design competencies such as seeing different perspectives, reframing, imagining, empathizing, etc. In this paper we focus on training the students to reflect on their ‘inner focus’, sensing themselves (Katznelson, 2018) and changing perspective, from an inner focus to an ‘other’ focus – how can I reframe what I am good at into something that creates value and meaning for other people. From our workshop we can conclude 1) that the students had difficulties expressing ‘an inner focus’ and 2) had difficulties switching from ‘an inner focus’ to ‘an outer focus’. Although some of the data material indicates that these assignments are meaningful to the students, the students’ final course evaluation states that a worrying large part of the students do not consider creative activities to be important in the future. Also, a large part seems to be dominated by a specific mental model and understanding of ‘journalist’ (Brendal, 2015). Irrespective of barriers the participants might have, we still argue that the ability to imagine and create value and meaning in different foci is a key life skill and a requirement to enhancing employability.

LITERATURE


*As the user perspective is central in most businesses, and to make things simple, we worked with a combination of the business perspective and the user perspective. However, it would be more correct to work separately with a business organisation perspective and a user perspective. This could be expressed as follows: Question related to ‘an outer, business perspective’: How can I create value in the business organisation? Answer: I can develop podcasts as a new product in the org. Question related to ‘an other perspective’: How can I create value for users? Answer: Young people often feel lonely (my user’s pain). I can offer/intend to learn (as I am a student) to develop podcasts and interaction with young people in a way that makes them feel included and part of a community (what my users gain).*