

# A Guide to Empathetic Design

*Reaching Your Audience Through  
Innovation and Understanding*



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## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

### **Introduction**

The notion of empathetic value in training and education is not a new one. In fact, the opposite is true. The combined discoveries of evolutionary biology, neurocognitive science, and behavioral psychology reveal a set of core human principals illustrating the affectionate, highly social, cooperative, and interdependent nature of humans' biological empathetic predisposition (Rifkin, 2010, p. 2). Empathy precedes understanding, which in turn precedes learning behavior. By extension, comprehending the larger context of our world through both a social and biological lens informs our understanding of learning and subsequently the vast importance of empathy in education and training. The ability to understand, relate and communicate the thoughts, feelings and emotions of learners is vital. So why then, despite the seemingly universal agreement of empathetic value in the design and implementation process, is it that so few contemporary eLearning initiatives realistically account for the systematic design and reflection of empathy in training.

This whitepaper explores the act of consciously applying and integrating empathetic techniques in educational design, supported through the analysis of theoretical frameworks and definitions, empirical evidence of empathetic impact in training, and the application of empathetic reasoning in design models.

### **Re-defining Empathy**

Empathy is largely perceived as a uniquely person-to-person characteristic, one that is derived from the complexities inherent in the human psyche. The question arises then, how do designers not only recognize the intangible characteristics of empathy, but harness, even structure their design around them? Tania Singer of the Laboratory for Social and Neural Systems Research at the University of Zurich alludes to this notion of various methodological challenges of "bringing such an idiosyncratic and context-dependent phenomenon into a scientific environment," especially one that requires a reproducible structure as does instructional design processes and modeling (Singer, 2009, p. 82). These complications associated with the inclusion of empathy are reflected in both the development and the implementation of training across technological platforms where human interaction may be

# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

limited or all-together nonexistent. The term empathy is plagued by inherent subjectivity, easily lending itself to vague, often misguided interpretations. It comes as no surprise that the process of designing with empathy starts with defining the term itself and dispelling the related misconceptions.

Empathy is the ability to comprehend, respect, and act on the inner state of others; it does not mean agreeing with the other person's perceived experience or condoning the actions they take based on their interpretations. It also is not just limited to understanding another's feelings; empathy includes an ability to identify and articulate another's world view, ideas, expectations, wants, needs, and actions (Brake, 2014). It requires a deep understanding of the audience and their perceived experience across multiple senses. Just as important as defining what empathy is, is defining what it is not and the recognition of misleading connotations. One such hurdle obstructing the path to constructive, thoughtful discussion around empathy is the pervasive stigma of attached indifference and sympathetic nature. Empathy is far more complex than sympathy. Terence Brake, head of learning and innovation at TMA World, articulates this key differentiation in an article for Training Magazine. "Empathy is often confused with being too *soft*—overly sympathetic and compassionate, even sentimental. It can be associated with tolerating bad performance or bad behavior, which is more likely to do with avoiding conflict than being empathetic" (Brake, 2014, p. 1). This distinction is vital in designing with empathy. It relies on the ability to distance the meaning of empathy from raw emotional reactions to a far more holistic notion of cognitive empathy. This is to go beyond the emotional reactions themselves and understand where the emotion derives from, the thoughts, the perspective and the associated mental map of the learner (Allan, 2009).

### **Client Relationships**

At the center of demonstrating empathetic design in learning is the ability to develop a comprehensive understanding and healthy relationship with the audience. To facilitate this role one must go beyond simple recognition of empathetic value and position themselves to gain access to key insights within a working environment. This process in itself requires an empathetic approach with clients, subject matter experts, and learners before content design ever begins. Realizing design recommendations that will facilitate real traction within the

# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

actual working environment is a direct function of an empathetic understanding, not just of the target audience but of the clients themselves. At times there can exist a significant disconnect or lack of empathetic understanding between those responsible for informing design, whether that be management, HR, or SMEs, and the learners taking the actual training. The objective here is to determine what the client actually values and how to design the training in a way that satisfies that. At first this may not directly involve content design, rather a focus on numerical targets that they're trying to reach. Once a clear understanding of goals has been established, then it becomes about providing content-driven data to help reach reasonable objectives. Demonstrating empathy in this situation is essential in collaborating with the client and guiding the attainment of useful information (Allan, 2009). In this sense the client must be as open to genuine empathetic reasoning as the designer.

Facilitating this task can be difficult. Influencing staff to objectively observe work practices and individuals within their organization while encouraging complete transparency can easily cultivate an atmosphere of vulnerability. Author and content strategy consultant Sara Wachter-Boettcher insightfully elaborates on this point. "Empathy begins with vulnerability. And being vulnerable, especially in our work, is terrifying" (Wachter-Boettcher, 2014, p. 1). This is such a simple yet profound truth. Vulnerability is not inherently negative, in-fact it can be the basis for allowing genuine insight and truthful observation, however, vulnerability can indeed prove to be an extremely challenging hurdle. All too often building a constructive relationship with clients is halted by the defensive knee-jerk reaction in the wake of an uncomfortable exposure. Building trust through understanding, communication and empathy, allows us to dissolve client discomfort and free us to design in an open, productive environment with the clients support.

This sentiment becomes all that much more important in the realm of eLearning and technology driven learning platforms. Ability to innovate and fulfill the learners' intellectual needs is just as vital as technical ability and delivery. In fact, technological evolution opens up another component of empathetic design to consider in client relationships, that is, the complex ways that education and information is distributed. It is vital that designers and developers collaborate with clients and reevaluate how definitions of roles, business models, and sales have historically been developed and how they might change with emerging technological trends. The transition to eLearning training initiatives can largely depend on the ability to empathize with internal struggles and delivery challenges. In essence, applying an empathetic approach to client relationships allows for better communication with subject

# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

matter experts, how to best facilitate change, and ultimately what must be done to achieve learning objectives. This is what ensures that strategic documents and design deliverables actually appeal to, and impact the learner.

### **Content Design**

If client empathy is all about positioning oneself to acquire the right information and establishing support to do so, then designing content with empathy is all about shifting attention to the audience and actually collecting, integrating, and building with relevant information. Designing empathetic learning modules begins by fully understanding where to look for genuine information and perspectives. This requires going beyond basic analytics of the user base (although this should be accounted for as well) and discovering applications, interactions, preferences and learning that happens in actual job functions during real time. The process of acquiring this information is hugely extensive on its own. It could include anything from learners' goals, needs, circumstances, influences, distractions, and even limitations. Instructional designers must evaluate these functions of a learner's day-to-day.

### **Facilitating Empathetic Creativity**

The notion of empathy in training implies cultivating a connection with the learner through design that extends far beyond the reach of generalities and superficiality. It suggests a deeper understanding, and for that matter, willingness to develop creative, innovative, and even provocative design that truly speaks to the audience. Admittedly, there seems to be a natural impetus towards the connection between art and creativity, particularly when in reference to the visual design of training, however, true empathetic design must hold fast to the core principles and desired results of the training goals. It's important to note that these two factors are not mutually exclusive and many great eLearning modules are artistic in their own right. The essential realization here is that artistic design without empathetic creativity is not actually design at all. Aaron Gustafson, founder of Easy! Designs, author, and a leader in digital design theory provides a balanced explanation of bridging the design and art worlds. Art is very much about self-expression. Design is about realizing problems and providing



# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

insightful solutions (Gustafson, 2013). Gustafson quotes Jeffery Veen, Vice President of Products for Adobe, at the Beyond Tellerand Conference in Germany, “I’ve been amazed at how often those outside the discipline of design assume that what designers do is decoration—likely because so much bad design simply is decoration. Good design isn’t. Good design is problem solving” (Gustafson, 2013, Video 3:24). Art, by nature is self-indulgent, it exemplifies individual personality and subjectivity. The key of empathetic design is striking a balance, harnessing the creative/artistic spirit for a specific instructional purpose. Creativity should be used as a means of strengthening communication and relevant messages relating to the learning objectives. Designing instruction creatively while maintaining empathy towards the learner must keep design open to the possibility of artistic/provocative “flashiness” in the appropriate, opportune contexts.

### **Adaptive Learning**

It is essential that the design structure does not presume a single, ideal state to fall back on, and instead is equipped to handle emerging landscapes and multiple contexts (Hoh, 2014). This can adhere to content optimization, interface design, and even interaction and gaming. Adaptive learning and responsive design emerge as viable approaches to meet the evolving and rapidly shifting demands of training on a multitude of platforms.

Adaptive learning can take place on both an intellectual level that relates to content design as well as physical adaptivity which correlates to technological responsive design. The adaptive learning style of design attributes for the potential diversity of the target population and maintains an open framework that lends itself to a more specific empathetic approach. Again, this methodology can also relate to delivery and content consumption. Access to media and modalities that one can effectively utilize in order to encourage a heightened empathetic understanding of the learner through collaboration and manipulation of learning activities through various contexts demonstrates this point (Paramythis, 2004). Responsive design, refers to adaptations that take place at the system’s interface and are intended to facilitate or support the user’s interaction with the system, without sacrificing the effectiveness of the learning content itself. To this end, considerations in the learning environment including: evaluation and performance tracking; calculating learner preferences

# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

and biases; and, navigation and intended use, should be fully represented and integrated into design processes. This could influence the employment of alternative graphical, color schemes, or font sizes, based on learner preferences to more complex branching scenario simulation interactions that identify learner preferences in real time. In essence, adaptive interaction refers to adaptations that take place specifically intended to facilitate or support the user's interaction with the system. The intention here is to optimize the fit between course content and user characteristics to create the most effective learning outcome (Paramythis, 2004).

The notion of adaptive design can even be applied to empathetic content discovery in which the application of adaptive techniques is used to consolidate empathetic learner reactions and reflect those realizations in real time. This is feasible through the evolution of empathetic response in contemporary technology driven training, where it is now possible to sense the affective state of a learner and respond with appropriate agent reactions. A key component to this technology in eLearning and subsequent effect on the learning outcome is the ability to design reactions to be realistically empathetic rather than reactionary. Research conducted by the Department of Instructional Technology at Utah State University suggests that learners in game based computer learning stayed longer in the game when they received affective support by the computer (Kim, 2005). This positive impact of affective response may provide an implication for the design of learner motivation in the future. Essential to this outcome was the correlation between the effectiveness of the response and the flexibility of the computers adaptive reasoning to empathetically reproduce relevant learner perspectives and thought (Kim, 2005). In other words, blind encouragement did not facilitate motivation as successfully as empathetic responses that more closely related to the learners actual feelings. It appeared that learners conveyed higher levels of interest in the task when reactions were designed to be empathetic. Similarly, when computer responses accurately expressed care about the learners' affective state by verbally responding with empathy, the learners' interest and self-efficacy were greatly enhanced (Kim, 2005).



# A Guide to Empathetic Design

## *Reaching Your Audience Through Innovation and Understanding*

### **Conclusion**

As current trends in training and development evolve the application of empathetic design becomes all that more important. Training is increasingly moving online and learners are engaging with content through a multitude of digital channels and devices. That means taking into consideration both virtual and physical content interaction. This requires a heightened sense of situational empathy in design. Failure in training objectives and the misreading of learners often occur as the result of rushed understanding. It represents the byproduct of precipitate action before true analysis. To quote Terence Brake once more, “empathy is a process of discovery rather than an instant blinding flash of insight” (Brake, 2014, p. 1). It demands time, attentiveness, and perspective to fully comprehend and act upon the learner’s true environment.