

Can Design Underpin a Strong Wellbeing?

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Being creative is not only for artists. Many of the techniques associated with it could be successfully applied to other areas of life. To explain some of the background to this. At the moment I study research, before that careers guidance, and first design. I acquired a disability in 2006. In adapting to the changes in my own body and lifestyle I have come to understand that a lot of the things I learnt during my first degree could be applied to 're-designing a life' if you like. So, I've set about doing that. What I discovered was more information, some that I was not initially aware of myself, about the different ways a person adapts their life to accommodate a health condition. Also, the different ways they could adapt. Being a research participant myself allowed me to better articulate some things that would be harder to explain to someone else. So, to conclude, can design underpin a strong wellbeing? I think it can. This involves uniting two world views, that of the artist and of the scientist. Two views that might seem too different. Straddling both is a person, that's what I feel I do very often. What helps with this? To remain open minded. To understand that in adapting to a disability each day could be different.

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Creativity, Wellbeing, Change

First, I want to say a bit more about creativity. This is something that's unique to human beings. The first thing that could be asked is why any adult would want to be a creative person, as in some circles it's not got such a great reputation after all. Despite that LinkedIn publish a list of the words people most commonly use to describe themselves in profiles and in 2012, top was creative. Being creative is not only about making great art, it is also about being successful in all aspects of life. Being creative is a skill that can be practised. It is not a gift only given to a chosen few. Creativity is like a muscle that needs exercising, and the more you do that the better it gets. Being creative involves living with an optimistic objectivity, thinking that something could work, treating something with optimism and hope. There is no creative value in being cynical.

If we were able to assess a person in the process of being creative we'd see they go through different stages. First comes preparation. This stage is all about absorbing knowledge and information about the creative challenge you're facing. Then comes incubation. This is all about preparing your brain to take on new knowledge, making new connections and then stepping back and looking at what you've done. It's in making new neural connections that result in a great idea creates that 'ah-hah' moment.

Regarding the design process and wellbeing, thinking about the process and how it maps onto wellness I'm going to split it into stages. First comes define. In design, this is where needs are interpreted and aligned to the objectives of a business. An example of how I applied this as a designer was by attending a design meeting with the business' buyer where we'd discuss the needs of the business and what products they'd like to develop.

An example of how I apply this to develop a strong wellbeing is through daily living. In my case a need I've identified is my right hand isn't as strong as my left because I use my walking stick in it.

Then comes the develop phase. As a designer, this is where I developed possible solutions after my meeting. I then took designs and samples along to a follow up where ideas were selected.

An example of how I apply this to continue to develop wellness is by purchasing hand strengtheners which I keep in my bag, I also try to use my left hand as much as my right and now use a walking stick with a softer handle.

And last comes the delivery. As a designer, I developed the ideas that had been chosen into sample garments. This was often together with a costing and a garment specification with measurements.

For wellbeing purposes, during the delivery phase I launch what would help into my life. I use my strengtheners as often as possible, for example when on a bus. Among other things I try to type with my left hand when I can, and use my soft handled walking stick when I'm out and about.

I have to tell you I've never regretted studying on my first course, I studied fashion design. My course was often talked of quite frivolously, but all I can say that it's served me, and continues to serve me, really well in lots of ways. It could be said, if we want to future proof a child's career and make sure their job isn't automated they should study on a course like that. Send them to art school.

We live in a world of constant, often disruptive, change. Fashion thrives on change. I can't think of another industry that does that. Not only does it thrive, it creates a desire for change. So, I think we could all fashion our futures in a way, and I want to tell you how that works in my own life.

As well as the concepts I mentioned before, one thing I try to do as often as possible is to use my imagination. Imagination is a limitless resource, and it is also free. A lot of people drink the same type of coffee, take the same route to work, eat the same type of foods, so by being creative and using imagination doesn't mean only making nice things or painting nice pictures. It can mean doing things a little differently than usual.

Another thing that designers do that I think we could all take note of is to be curious. Designers are insanely curious, about people, and about things. That's because they are always looking to be inspired. So, the next time you go to the cinema why not see a film you wouldn't normally consider, or search the internet for a page you wouldn't go to. While it's never been easier to access information or to connect with people we tend to gravitate towards what we know.

Don't be afraid to try new things or to make mistakes. Mistakes are something a person makes a few of, and in doing that at art college you realise that mistakes are part of life and more importantly you can learn so much from them. You realise that there are no mistakes so bad that they can't be remedied. It is really hard to put yourself in a position where you feel vulnerable. Mistakes can do that, but in doing that you create resilience. Mistakes made by designers are often very public and can be humiliating.

It's good to have lots of ideas, but don't fall in love with all of them. Fashion designers generate lots, however only a small proportion will come to fruition. Think of presentations you've made, or reports you've written. A lot of care and consideration went into them and if someone said they weren't right then you would quite rightly feel aggrieved. Designers learn to take this all on the chin. It might feel a bit strange and unpleasant the first time it happens but it's something you get used to and learn from.

So just as the clothes we wear and other things we use can have an impact on the environment, so design can have an impact on our lives, on our wellbeing, which brings me back to the title of this talk. We can all create meaning in the world and make a difference. Michaelangelo said he saw a figure struggling to be free in each piece of marble so the arts and the human body have been linked for a long time. Mary Shelley said 'we are un-fashioned creatures, but only half made up', what if design provided that other half? Design is at its nature human-centred. It might make use of technology and fit a certain price point but it starts with what humans need or

might need. What would make life easier or more enjoyable. It is rooted in human empathy.

Creativity in all its forms improves my mental health, which in turn improves my physical health both of which make for a strong wellbeing. This all began for me in doing an embroidery in hospital. The positive reactions to it from my fellow patients, doctors and nurses made me think about how this could help me, how it could develop. And so, began a journey of self-discovery. So, we are slowly moving from a nature-inspired design to a design-inspired nature, and we have the power to use design to our best advantage.

Conclusion

Good mental health is one of the most important determinants of wellbeing. That was confirmed by my research. An implication of my study is that the determinants of wellbeing are more closely tracked to provide information on what is being done to improve wellbeing. A real benefit of using my own situation in this research is that one can better say what's needed. This could also provide limitations to this research as it gives a very one-sided view. Going forward I plan to expand this study to include other participants.

1 – Michaelangelo – Italian Artist – 1475 - 1564

2 – Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley - author – 1797 - 1851

Acknowledgements

The healthcare professionals who care for me, the Confident & Informed research participants, my supervisor and my mother who proof-read this article.

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Appendix

As part of this study, I am also conducting another project called Confident and Informed.

Confident and Informed researches the experiences of those who find themselves at a 'cross-roads' in their lives. For example, they could be looking for a new job or home. Those people in question also identify themselves as disabled or have a long-term health condition. Confident and Informed also researches the impact that creative thinking and/or doing has on their lives. Creativity can mean activities connected to Art & Design, but it can also mean approaching things a bit differently in different scenarios and aspects of life. Confident and Informed ultimately endeavours to create more confidence and improves life skills in others.

Confident and Informed will have a website in 2017, the blog for this project is now live and can be accessed here -

<https://v3.pebblepad.co.uk/spa/#/public/rMnyntMZZcbb5hMwpp8pqqMxdh?historyId=gZFFVQ1LaD>