Learning by doing

A small study of the contingent skill of failing
**Introduction**

This comic is based on real events. For dramatic effect and for purposes of framing, some aspects have been simplified, and some parts have been left out. The focus of this episode is a rather crude presentation of my subjective experience. Its purpose is to help spark discussions and thoughts about the role and methods of a designer.

The process described here is part of my masters thesis in interaction design. The subject that was explored is the changing role of a designer in a flat-hierarchy, grassroots environment. When a designer is stripped of the authority given a designer, how does it influence design methods, behavior and experience of a designer?

The story does not portray a beginning, nor an end, but is rather an portion extracted out of a larger context.
“The designer can help grassroots initiatives by making their design more efficient. The designer is now rather a ‘re-designer’, or ‘facilitator’.”

**Weaknesses:**
- Lack of organizational and economic skills
- Implementation process
- Superficial and temporary
- Re-invents wheels

**Strengths of a designer:**
- Visualization techniques
- Working from user perspective
- Bring novel insights
- Fast prototyping

A designer might look naive and stupid.

"But where to engage...?"

- Hey guys! I want in! I’m an interaction designer, I want to work with grassroots!

- ...What is interaction design?

- Interaction design is about creating meaningful interactions between people and their iPhones, but I want to do animal rights.
“Well, I think I’ve waited long enough with interfering with their business...”

I think this is about that.

“Read it in an article somewhere...”

“I got a grip of the situation.”

“I want to provide novel insights!”

-I see, well.. to me, that is about this.
Later, going home...

“UH OH!”

“I know nothing!!!”

“Oh shit! I am naive and stupid!”

“Well... it could have been worse... I guess I’ll just go back to...”

“... to building boxes: prototypes.”

To be continued...


**Discussion**

The comic tries to tell how I found myself in a situation that I had been reading about for weeks. And how I failed to recognize the situation despite trying to prepare myself for it. Note that the story told is my subjective experience of the events, it is not said that this is how it is actually perceived by others.

I would like to relate to Donald Schön. If the act of acting in a social environment which one is not familiar with, can be said to include elements of artistry. Then this knowledge and skill, can only be obtained by practice. *Learning by doing.* Do one have to go through a phase of feeling naive and unexperienced, in order to learn how to recognize one’s own weaknesses in a given situation? *Learning by failing.* The character in the story is apparently worried about failing, and to look stupid. As recognized as one of the fundamental goals of users in interaction design/HCI litterature: users do not want to feel stupid and/or embarrassed. How should a designer act in this situation? How is failures portrayed in design for social innovation and interaction design litterature? Are failures even considered to be failures?

What is the difference between the awareness of one’s weaknesses and other practical skills?

**Notes**

1. The essence of this is captured in the introduction to the paper “Designing for social change”, by Ruby Ku and Christina Tran from Austin center for design.
   “year after year, thousands of young designers graduate and go off to work at prestigious agencies where they solve usability problems for entertainment websites or reconfigure packaging designs to shave cents off the cost. What if all those designers were instead focusing their time and efforts on societal issues such as poverty, equality, and sustainability?”

2. The fundamental idea behind this is that people are experts on their own situations. Improvements are therefore best developed by the people concerned with the issue.

3. As described by Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn and Anders Hillgren in the conference paper “Participatory design and ‘democratizing innovation’” (2010).


5. Jan Michl quoted by Cameron Tonkinwise in “Politics please, we’re social designers” (2010) (available at http://www.core77.com/blog)


7. “critiques stress that designers engaged with social issues need to reflect on their weaknesses in order avoid to ‘re-invent the wheel’ and being naive”
   Mentioned in “Dealing with dilemmas” by Anders Emilson, Anna Seravalli and Per-Anders Hillgren.

8. Another experiment in the scope of my masters thesis on interaction design. See thesis or contact me for further info: daniel.palmr@gmail.com
