DESIGNER’S EMPATHY REFLECTION

Personal Perspective

Empathy, from my understanding and belief, is the ability to understand not only the reason behind other people’s emotions, but their experiences that cause these emotions as well. Furthermore, it is the ability to be aware of what others feel based on observations of their behaviour and surrounding circumstances, without them having to explicitly tell you. Empathy towards another person requires one to endure a similar experience that they are undergoing in order to obtain a more accurate grasp on their emotions. Without this experience, one is only able to exhibit sympathy.

Empathy has always been of high value to me in my engineering design process and design identity. Although I did not emphasize the word itself, its importance is evident in my positionality statement from Praxis II. In the statement, I wrote that I value “truth, understanding, and objectiveness”. In the context of empathy, these values hold for my interactions with people. I seek truth in people’s feelings and I value the ability to detect other’s emotions even when they do not explicitly reveal them. I care about understanding those feelings and reflecting on their experiences through similar ones I have gone through in order to connect with them on a deeper level. I always try to exercise objectivity; I value being able to see how my own biases affect my worldview/perspective so that I can counter them and attempt to evaluate situations fairly. In my experiences with engineering design, these values have translated into empathy with both team members and stakeholders. When working in a team, empathy has allowed me to understand opposing viewpoints during conflicts or just discussions in general. For example, in Praxis II, a group member requested that I complete a certain task by a certain time even though it was unideal in my situation due to workload from other courses (though still workable). But after discussing our respective situations, I realized that in order to continue with their portion of the project, it required the completion of my part first, and not completing it by the time they specified would have left them with an unfair amount of time to finish their task. When working with stakeholders, empathy lets me gauge a better understanding of their perspective on the opportunity and reminds me to make conscious effort to steer away from biases that skew my interpretation of their experiences and statements.

As I have gained more experience with engineering design, I have seen many changes in myself as an engineering student. In the context of empathy, I have come to realize the crucial differences between empathy and sympathy, and I understand more and more just how big of a role empathy plays in good design. Previously, I thought of empathy as simply the ability to understand the reason behind someone’s emotions, but through many experiences I have learned that that is only defined as sympathy. I’ve learned a critical difference where, to be empathetic, you must actually experience what the other person endures so that you are able to feel what they feel to some degree. Consequently, the design becomes more personal in a way, allowing for not only greater diligence and passion in the design work, but a better and more detailed understanding of the opportunity as well. For example, in Praxis II, the opportunity my team was designing for was making rose grafting more accessible for Parkinson’s patients. I did not feel invested in the in the project because I experience neither the difficulties of rose grafting nor the frustrations of having Parkinson’s disease, therefore skewing the importance of some of the requirements developed in our model. But when solving my own problems, such as automating processes on my laptop or even just organizing my desk, I understand everything I want on a very particular scale and am therefore able to solve them in a way that provides me the greatest satisfaction. Identifying this difference made me realize the importance of empathy and its discrepancies from sympathy when designing solutions.

Engineering Profession Perspective

Empathy is a crucial skill/trait from the larger engineering community perspective as well. It helps engineering designers in many ways. Similar to the personal perspective, empathy allows designers to better understand stakeholders, their circumstances, and helps them identify certain issues that the stakeholders themselves have difficulty communicating. This is extremely important for designs to become successful in target communities since success of designs are dependent on how well and effectively the design addresses the opportunity that was presented. In my opinion, one of the greatest factors that determine how well a design addresses the opportunity lies within the process of framing the opportunity itself – where the requirements are developed. Therefore, empathy *must* be present in this stage since it is critical that designers truly understand the opportunity to be solved in order to develop accurate and effective requirements that lead to an effective design.

Without experiencing another person’s perspective, it is often difficult to be empathetic towards them. Therefore, as a designer, it’s often difficult to understand someone’s needs, wants, and constraints in depth. To do so, it is necessary to “put ourselves in their shoes”. As designers, it is part of our responsibility to frame the opportunity correctly in order to create the most effective solution. While it is relatively easy to identify explicit needs and wants stated by stakeholders, the process of accurately interpreting and translating their statements into engineering requirements is much more difficult and involves truly understanding the nuances of their statements. Even more difficult is the ability to uncover implicit preferences that stakeholders themselves do not explicitly mention but are hidden in their habits and behaviours. To understand the nuances of the experiences of stakeholders, designers must experience them for themselves to some degree, allowing them to identify other less obvious and latent issues that also contribute to the opportunity. Similarly, this idea also applies to the potential users of their design – it is necessary that the designers test their creations themselves so that they are able to understand if their designs truly meet the requirements (including all the nuances) of the opportunity.