DESIGNER’S BIAS REFLECTION

Personally, I believe bias refers to the prejudices and/or preconceived notions that exist subconsciously within our minds due to our unique worldviews. It is the ignorance with regards to this bias – the lack of awareness that it exists – that produces harmful results. Designer bias is simply a subset of this definition referring specifically towards the bias that hinders the ability of engineers and designers to create the optimal solution to a given opportunity. This could include, but is not limited to, the hindrance of the ideation of innovative concepts, or the inaccurate painting of stakeholder values. In any case, designer’s bias is a prominent issue and needs to be identified by engineers and designers in order to maximize the value of their designs.

There are several instances where designer’s bias has affected my design work. Firstly, during the framing process when we were first initially introduced to the opportunity synopsis, my mind immediately flew to the idea of sorting plastics without having done more research or interacted with the stakeholders themselves. Reflecting on it now, I realize my mind was so quick to make such a connection due to how frequently I am exposed to news or education on this issue. Some of my team members were also subject to this designer bias and as a result, we spent many unproductive hours brainstorming requirements and potential solutions to an opportunity that was poorly framed in the first place.

Another example of how designer’s bias restricted my design work was my experience with anchoring bias during the diverging phase of the design process. To provide a rough definition, anchoring bias is essentially a bias that “anchors” a person’s thoughts and ideas to a certain reference point they were exposed to earlier. I have always had difficulty overcoming anchoring bias and I often rely on other team members with different perspectives and creative ideas to help me overcome it. In this context, our team would often use classic brainstorming to diverge and come up with potential designs for the opportunity. Not that it was planned, but prior to this brainstorming, we would always discuss some of the ideas that would come into our minds first. Hearing an idea that I thought was efficient and practical would cause it to stick in my mind, ultimately causing all of my subsequent ideas to be similar and greatly limiting my creative process.

Working in a team, our group was also subject to the Curse of Knowledge cognitive bias. Although this bias often takes form as assumptions made during the design process that affect the value it provides to the stakeholders, I feel that this bias had an even larger effect on our team members. To be more specific, each member on our team has their own expertise with respect to this design project – something that no one else is proficient in. This might be the CAD modelling, experience with microprocessors, knowledge of web development, etc. When integrating different components of the project together, it is important that each member responsible for each component has a clear understanding of the requirements for their component so that they are able to come together seamlessly. But in some cases, due to the Curse of Knowledge bias, team members responsible for one component may leave out certain specifications for another member responsible for another component, assuming that the other is experienced enough to understand it without explicitly mentioning it. This frequently led to miscommunications and setbacks in our design process. That being said, I believe working in a team is absolutely crucial to minimizing designer’s bias. I believe that the numerous different perspectives and fields of expertise that each member brings to the group effectively helps keep other team members’ biases in check.

Avoiding designer’s bias is difficult as biases are inherently hidden from our own perspectives. I believe that to avoid bias is to strive for objectivity and truth, and while it is impossible to be completely rid of bias, there are numerous tools that expose any biases one may be subject to, as well as tools that help prevent them. For the diverging phase of the design process, diverging tools such as “wishing” and “challenging assumptions” are extremely effective in preventing anchoring biases and help one see how they are being held back by their own mind. During the framing process, it is critical that all group members understand the importance of communicating with stakeholders and understanding the nuances of their statements in order to accurately frame the opportunity. Ultimately, I believe the best tool for avoiding designer’s bias is developing one’s empathy. As I discussed in my first reflection assignment, empathy allows one to gauge a better understanding of another’s perspective. This allows them to more easily identify incorrect assumptions and preconceived notions that they had about someone or something else beforehand. I believe training one’s empathy, coupled with the tools mentioned earlier, is the most effective method of acknowledging and minimizing one’s designer’s bias.