

Guest Lecture #1 Reflection: Lisa Mercer's work on Operation Compass and Racism Untaught**Q. What takeaways did you leave with and what was something interesting/new that you learned?**

A. I learnt a lot, and the lecture helped me broaden my perspective towards design process to a great extent. In the following questions, I answer most of the takeaways, so in this question I would like to point few things which I don't cover later (some might be just trivial facts, but was still a learning for me):

- Familial trafficking is most common form of trafficking.
- Victims of trafficking are unaware that they are being trafficked. This makes the whole problem exponentially harder to solve.
- Truck drivers are under surveillance all the time, that is the home office can see when truck driver is driving, idle or sleeping. It really blew my mind.
- Always mention your purpose of visit clearly: Professor made a mistake of not informing the director of Truck Driver Training School her good intentions right in the start, so it caused her problems later on since he thought that she was investigating them for human trafficking.
- If some designer wants to really solve a problem, then he/she must get into the user's shoes or else you are just playing around with dumb luck. Professor did an extensive amount of research to know how a truck driver lives his/her daily life.
- Good intentions don't equate to positive response. Considering how sensitive the world is currently and how important it is to be politically correct, one should always evaluate its design's social impact.

Hat's off to Professor Lisa Mercer for her efforts. I'm really impressed and motivated by her efforts.

Q. What did you learn about the design thinking process?

A. One of the main thing I learnt regarding design thinking was social impact and how a systematic design process undergoes. Professor Mercer explained this design thinking with respect to "Racism Untaught" project. She explained how Racialized Designs can be discussed and would empower designers to identify, develop, and integrate anti-racist concepts into their own environments. The period of discovery could include, but will not be limited to, personas, empathy mapping, heuristic analysis of existing work, the human ecology theory, and developing cross-disciplinary and community partnerships [5]. She proposed to break down project development using five areas:

- Context: Elements of Racism - Professor asked the group to find different elements of racism present in the ads, and why some of them makes sense, and some don't. For instance, why redlining makes sense. Such questions make the designers look for similar context in other cases.
- Define: Methods and Theories to Define the Problems - Professor asked students to define the right designing questions and ask the stakeholder what they thought about it, since it's an interdisciplinary task.
- Ideate: Artifact, System, or Experience - Define qualitative and quantitative methods to define an ideas and what process one should go through to get the design idea approved.
- Prototype: Low, Mid, and High Fidelity Design - Convert the idea to prototype.
- Test: Learning Objectives & Conceptual Understanding - Understanding the impact of the product is important, since there can be cases where the intent is good but may have unintended consequences.

Q. What specific steps did Professor Mercer take in the development of Operation Compass that you could use this semester in your project?

A. I was personally amazed by the efforts that professor Mercer put in for Operation Compass, and how beautifully the whole story was recited. Following are the few steps I can take for this semester project:

1. Verify your assumptions (explained in next question's answer).
2. Identify the real users of your product: The end user may not even be the person who the product might even be targeted at, that is the app she built was for human trafficking victims, but the end user were truck drivers, plumbers and restaurant workers.
3. Identify where the real data lies, and dig deeper: Professor researched about the National Human Trafficking Hotline data, and found that only 300 out of 33k calls were from truck drivers. She dug deeper by personally meeting these drivers and tried to identify the real reason behind this.
4. Ask better questions: Professor could have just built an app for truck drivers, but she asked a better question keeping the real users in mind, i.e. "How can I modify technology to let truck drivers report".
5. Get out of the comfort zone and show commitment: Professor went to the lengths of going to Truck Driver Training School to understand truck driver overall behaviour.
6. Check if the product doesn't cause an unintended trouble to the user: The app had a section of 'upload photo', which could get the users into some trouble because it was against the pornography laws, so it had to be taken down.

7. It's good to be adventurous, but be safe: Professor would do date nights at truck stop restaurants because it's not safe to go to truck stops without a man (dedication!). She would also exercise safety when she would go to shady places like South Dallas, by keeping Dallas PD and Mosaic in the loop.

8. Learn your audiences' vernacular: Professor mentioned that after talking to drivers and learning their vernacular, she was able to interview the truck drivers more efficiently and wouldn't disturb the vibe by asking the context of incidents every time.

In overall process of Operation Compass, I would incorporate the above set of rules, and just following the following steps as professor did:

1. Identify the target audience.
2. Identify the end user.
3. Interview lots of people, since human connection is important.
4. Broaden your perspective.
5. Keep your product simple, as she did by keeping reporting section as the main use case.

Q. As Professor Mercer mentioned, why is it important to understand the assumptions we make about a problem and the impact and the unintended consequences of our work?

A. There are two modular levels of an answer to this questions -

1. Assumptions: It's important to verify our assumptions and provide qualitative and quantitative reasoning as to why that assumption is valid and true in the problem we are tackling. If the assumptions prove to be invalid, then all the efforts may go in vain. Professor Mercer provides two instances where she posits the aforementioned statements:

- In 'operation compass', professor was motivated to solve the human trafficking problem by choosing to focus on sex trafficking and labour trafficking, because she *assumed* that they were the most common form of trafficking, while she found out that familial trafficking is the one which is most common, which made her reconsider few stances and redirected her approach.
- In 'operation compass', professor *assumed* that if she launches an app to bridge the gap between the human trafficking victims and concerned authorities, it would all work out well. After talking to a gentleman at Mosaic, she found that human trafficking victims aren't even aware that they are the victims, so these victims won't even download the app in the first place. So this helped her identify that rather than focusing on victims, she should focus on how a crime witness who is educated on human trafficking can be connected to the concerned authorities. Later, she also found out that educating these witnesses was also an important factor.

2. Impact and Unintended Consequences: Like misconceptions, our design work can cause a perfect storm of unintended consequences. One may have designed a product flawlessly with good intentions, but it may hurt some part of community's sentiments, because ignorance is *not* always bliss. Professor Mercer provides multiple instances for the same:

1. Robert Moses, an urban architecture, developed the public transportation system in New York City. The bridges were purposefully designed low in order to prevent city buses from going under them, thus limiting the Black and brown communities who primarily use public transport from entering certain areas of the city. He not only purposely developed these structures low, but implemented this public transportation into policy, hence, defining a systemic form of inequality that exists to this day [1].
2. "Nivea, White is Purity" advertisement is another example where it contributes to the ideals of white supremacy and anti-blackness by promoting self-hatred in the black community. The company responds by saying that they missed the mark in thoughtfully representing women of colour. Yet Dove's Summer Glow Nourishing Lotion markets itself for "Normal to Dark Skin," as if dark skin were not normal [2].
3. To attract Indian-American voters, a Republican party group in Houston released a campaign ad with an image of Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu deity. It read: "Would you worship a donkey or an elephant? The choice is yours." It was the most inappropriate, despicable and offensive manner to garner votes. Though their intention was not to offend anyone, but it was a tone-deaf note [3].
4. Professor also mentions the infamous Kendall Jenner's Pepsi ad fiasco, which trivialises Black Lives Matter movement. As professor explains, this ad was compared to a widely shared photo of Ieshia Evans, a black woman who stood firm while being charged by riot police during a protest against police brutality in Baton Rouge, LA. Professor also added that Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., tweeted, "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi," which spoke volumes [4].

References:

- [1] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14606925.2019.1594965?needAccess=true>
- [2] <https://www.newsweek.com/nivea-ad-causes-backlash-687965>
- [3] <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/20/politics/texas-republicans-hindu-theme-campaign-ad-trnd/index.html>
- [4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>
- [5] <https://racismuntaught.com/project>