

Teaching soma design

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Context

The article was written by Vasiliki Tsaknaki, Madeline Balaam, Anna Ståhl, Pedro Sanches, Charles Windlin, Pavel Karpashevich, Kristina Höök and it was presented on the DIS conference of 2019 in San Diego which is in California, USA. This conference took place from Sunday June 23 until Friday June 28. The ultimate goal of this paper is to hopefully give more students the opportunity to be taught about soma design. They do this by targeting universities and teachers and explaining to them what soma design is, how it's different from aesthetic design, and by showing them how they did it and what the results of their research with a course on soma design. Anna Ståhl is employed at RISE SICS in Sweden which is a research institute for applied information and communication technology, the rest are all employees at the Royal Institute of Technology MID department Stockholm which is also located in Sweden. Kristina Höök is known for her work in the field of somaesthetics, she for example even wrote a book called designing with the body: *Somaesthetic Interaction Design*.

What do the authors claim?

The author's main focus is on soma design process where all movements, experiences, and values become a resource in the design process. With somaesthetics one is able to examine and improve on all connections between sensations, feelings, emotions, and subjective understanding and values (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 1). With this in mind, they conducted a 7-week course where they observed how the student's prior design knowledge would clash with this new design position. They claimed that students are trained to understand the problem and narrow it down to a solution, as it is described, "The problem is that interaction designers are not skilled in designing with movement, emotion, and holistic engagements" (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 3). By the end of the seven weeks, the authors were surprised by the results the students showed. They still showed behaviors such as talking ideas, and they had to be reminded of acting them out as "a key component of a soma design process is to repeatedly return to and feel the fine-grained details of the interaction filtered through a first-person engagement" (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 8). One last point was that students would need more time to fully be able to complete and extend their own somaesthetics abilities. They may have to "deconstruct" a product, in order to uncover new possibilities (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 9) and be able to shift to a felt engagement discussion of ideas.

Issues for discussion

Some of the main issues when it comes to following or teaching soma design are the following. Firstly, students must leave behind the rationality of a design process and focus on engaging it from a first-person filter. As mentioned on page 9, students need to stay in the undecided in order to be able to focus on their own sensations and feelings. Secondly, when designing a product that already offers a specific design case (in our case, cleaning, cooking...), students' imagination might be constrained too much. In addition, the range of available materials can also influence the student's capabilities of imagining and exploring the aesthetic potential. Thirdly, students hesitated to return and feel their somesthetic experience (slow walking through the forest) throughout the course. It is important that the coaches remind the students to focus on their experience before starting with the crafting.

Findings

The author noticed that exploring the existing product line of Electrolux in the design process influenced the designs of the students strongly. For some this led to interesting combinations, but some were noticeably limited in their imagination. This is a general aspect that we've noticed when designing as well. Holding onto the existing perception of what a product looks like can limit imagination. For innovation it is important to not hold onto this too strongly. The author states that the short course of 7 weeks can only show the beginning of the subject, and to properly apply somaesthetics you have to further train this ability. We feel like this is the case for any process, getting familiar with it and understanding the basic principles is only the start. After this, you have to apply it consistently to master the skill. The author states that the provided materials were insufficient for the students to experience the aesthetic potential of some things, and a more comprehensive design toolkit would be beneficial for the students. While it might be true that this would've allowed students to more easily create certain experiences for their process, we feel that the extra thought that is required to prototype an interaction or experience with limited resources can also be beneficial and spark innovation. The author states that they noticed it was difficult for the students to connect with the experimental experiences they started with throughout the whole design process. Documenting a somaesthetic experience to return to later is difficult, as it cannot simply be captured in a picture or text. To keep the benefits of the experiences throughout the process, it could be good to consider how you can revisit these experiences, and regularly do this when starting design sessions. Another thing the author noticed in the students was that the moments they took to slow down and reflect on their own body, despite being scarce and scattered throughout the process, helped to "broaden their design space and understanding of their bodies" (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 9). Explained in text like this, this is something that is difficult to grasp. We feel that this is something you would have to experience yourself, to see if it indeed offers the value that the author claims it does.

Why should you read this?

This paper presents a clear overview of what soma design is. It bases its findings on a workshop done in a technical university, therefore it provides the reader with various examples, which makes understanding this design technique easier. In addition, the paper covers all the aspects of this technique, how is it taught, what challenges the students face, and what can be improved. This makes the reader feel involved in the process and it opens a big range of discussions. As designers it is fundamental that we step out of our comfort zone and discover new techniques to ideate innovative designs. This technique leaves back the traditional approaches to interaction design and HCI, and focuses on the growth of technologies. It helps the designer to explore rich engagements and their senses, or as mentioned, "imagine what could be" (Tsaknaki et al., 2019, p. 1).

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