'IMPOSTER DESIGNER': SETBACKS AND SELF-DOUBTS ON A JOURNEY TOWARD IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

This conference paper empirically reports the setbacks and self-doubts that confront design students, academics and practitioners as they journey forward in their professional lives in search of impact. Results from thirteen (13) iterative design workshops with 258 participants point to a critical need to elevate well-being as core capacity for complex problem solving in design education, practice and research. This is especially important, given the systemic expansion of design scope and subsequent desire for increased impact. This conference paper further disseminates the emerging concept of 'designer resilience' as a new approach to design pedagogy that acknowledges the inherent difficulties of pioneering systemic change.

Keywords: Resilience, complexity, setbacks, self-doubt

1   SCENE SETTING: A PHONE CALL

I've been working on student well-being and improving design education since 2020. As part of this my work, I keep close contact with Alumna/Alumni to hear their stories, experiences and wisdoms.

I take a phone call with an Alumna of the Master of Strategic Product Design program at Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, TU Delft. They are now a Co-Director at a design agency working on systemic problems related to healthcare reform, the future of work and climate-resilient cities. The conversation proceeds like this:

Alumna: "We design across all these systemic problem spaces, with people who have so much knowledge and expertise. Who am I to advise design directions to people with 30 years' experience in their industry, you know?!"

Author: [… listening…]

Alumna: "We do all this work, but I am struggling to see our impact… or what role design has to play." I hypothesise that these questions and concerns confront many more designers. These questions stay with me in the days that follow. I continue to think about them as I work to improve design pedagogy through my own research on designer resilience.

2   SYSTEMIC DESIGNS BUT WHAT IMPACT?

The tangible benefits of a new designed service or product can be isolated through various scores and measures – customer satisfaction, sales, memberships, usability and ergonomics. Comparatively, conducting systemic design to realise transitions (in renewable energy transitions or universal healthcare, for example), requires time to muddle through complexity [1], build, test, implement and observe the impact of design interventions longitudinally [2]. At the end of the design project, a system lives on, evolving potentially well beyond the designer's imagination or best intentions [3]. For this reason, isolating design impact within systemic framing, however desired, is fraught with difficulty.

For emerging designers in the first decade of their careers, the need to visibly see/feel their contribution to present-crises is essential confidence building during early and critical learning on the job. In a time of existential threats and ever-powerful technologies, feeling like an "imposter designer" is no place to linger.[1] Design educators must be sensitive too, to striking a balance in learning environments. The

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[1] The imposter designer continually questions their capabilities and knowledge, even though they are accomplished and bring value to society when they design. The term is appropriated from 'imposter syndrome'; which is a behavioural health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments among

balance is fine at times. Educators must train design students in a way that acknowledges the limitations of the design and thus promotes transdisciplinary appreciation, without disaffecting hope or underlying drivers to study design in the first instance [4].

3   DESIGNER RESILIENCE

Even with good and just ideas, designing the world that ought to be is a difficult journey that opens individuals to critique and prejudice [5]. However urgent and necessary change is, processes of reform bring designers into inherent resistance. Designer resilience is defined as a meta-cognitive capacity and adaptability to be drawn upon when designing gets difficult [6]. Designer resilience consists of ten essential principles and associated practices that initiate critical reflection, reflexivity between designer and context and emotional self-awareness [7]. At its core, designer resilience provides students, practitioners and researchers with the tools to elevate their well-being during design work and build community.

There are different layers of designer resilience as indicated in Figure 1. At the most central layer, each designer requires resilience to deal with the inherent challenges of the design process and of design collaborations. The next layer of resilience is aimed at shaping an uncertain future design career and accompanying design identity. Finally, a contextual layer of resilience towards a feeling of responsibility towards people, society, and the planet wraps around the inner spheres. This paper explores the setbacks and self-doubts that persist across these layers, and are of subsequent reason therefore, to promote designer resilience in design education, practice and culture more generally.
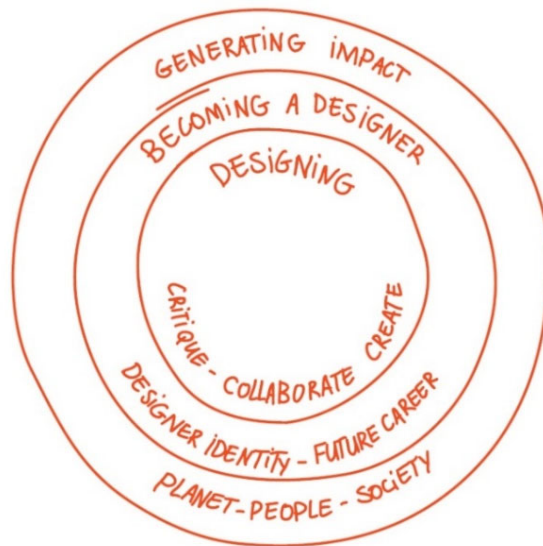

Figure 1. Three layers of designer resilience

4   RESEARCH DESIGN

Over the last twenty- four (24) months, together with a dedicated research team[2], we have undertaken a collaborative research-through-design approach to elevate well-being and resilience as a topic across our community. Through iterative workshops with Master of Science students at Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, TU Delft, we have engaged 187 MSc design students in designer resilience work. We have also engaged twenty-five (25) global design teachers and forty-six (46) senior design practitioners to ensure that the project receives broader perspectives of practice and research. In total, we have conducted thirteen (13) workshops. These workshops range in duration from 45 minutes to full day sessions.

Workshops can be as simple as working through a particular setback within a design project and identifying subsequent transformative learning – to – specific sessions that work with design educators

high-achieving individuals (National Library of Medicine, 2023, URL:
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK585058/).
[2] See acknowledgements

on ways to reform what is a higher education system focused on student performance, enrolment growth, and rankings. In addition to gaining HREC approval for our project, the planning and execution of workshops has received guidance from Faculty Academic Counsellors' who are trained clinical psychologists.

Data analyses consisted of a thematic analysis of workshop materials, reviewing our own workshop notes, reflecting on our own experiences as educators/students and recalling participant anecdotes that left a major impression on us. As with previous research, limitations of the approach are accepted in order to prioritise student safety and engagement, which we view as a vital precursor to working on topics of well-being and resilience [6]. In Figure 2, we show a few impressions from our workshops.

W11 IDE Academy – Wellbeing & Resilient Designers
N = 45 MSc Students | Location: TU Delft | Duration: Full Day | Date: 04-05-2023
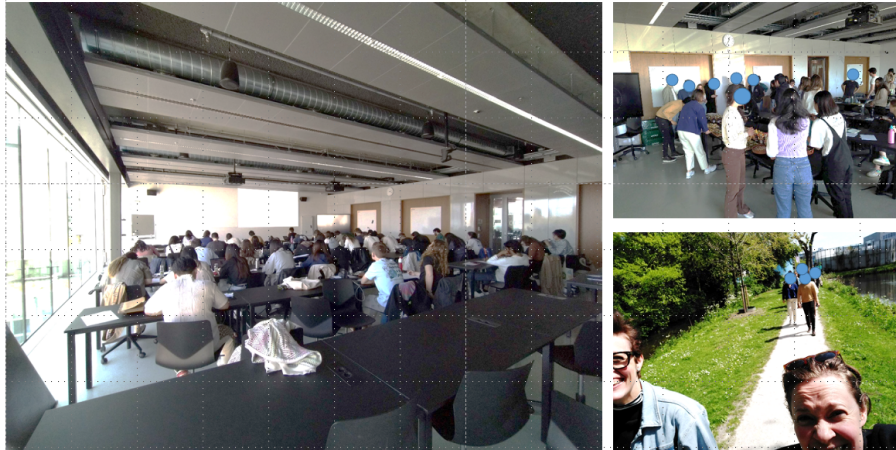
W7 Education Day 10 Principles of DR Workshop
N = 16 Educators/Academics | Location: TU Delft | Duration: 45mins | Date: 10-11-2022

- First time presenting complete 10 DR principles
- Very well received!
- 'Draw a storm exercise' undertaken
- Educators from other faculties could associate with some, but not all principles indicating there is general and specific value
- Where is the line between general and specific
- TPM Prof notes how design specific do not line up with her discipline, but that there could be more emphasis on community as resilience

Figure 2. Workshop Impressions. Top right, two images: Feed your students a nice lunch, then take them on a walk in the sun to discuss how their design education is progressing

5   RESULTS: IDENTIFIED SETBACKS AND SELF-DOUBTS

Provided below, are a list of setbacks and self-doubts expressed during workshops. These setbacks and self-doubts promote ongoing existential conflict within the designer. For clarity, I opt to present these in dot point format associated with each layer of designer resilience.

Setbacks and self-doubts at the level of designing:

- Harsh or prejudicial criticism of work can have a profound effect on an individual's confidence to openly share creative work. Creative work by nature is always open to critique. There is no deducible or correct answer in design and thus the designer must negotiate critique and brave criticism.
- Paralysis within the design process due to a lack of confidence can accumulate due to negative

events. Designers may feel they intuitively know what to do but lack the confidence to try. Many design students in particular report feeling despair when stuck within a process or project.

- Having to work on projects that create interpersonal conflict with team members. Working in teams is an inevitable aspect of design due to the social nature of problem solving. Conflicts flow openly when people disagree on what the problem is, what needs to be designed, and how it should be designed. Pluralism creates tensions that lead to conflict.
- Not knowing what to do next in projects. When a designer tasked with solving problem does not know how to proceed, a wave of existential self-doubt follows – "am I an imposter designer?".
- Having to present a project outcome that you know needs another iteration. This often occurs in design education where students work within projects with tight deadlines and with limited design management experience. Standing in front of design work and presenting it, the designer is hyper-vigilant to the flaws of their project.
- Not being proud of a project outcome - feeling embarrassed. Often this was the result of a problematic design process where prior setbacks mentioned were encountered.

Setbacks and self-doubts on the way to becoming a designer:

- Not knowing what kind of designer to become. Graphic, communication industrial, interaction, strategic, service, social designer and more?! As the design field expands in scope, it is natural that those within it question where they 'fit'.
- Lacking the courage to share a learning journey with others. Designer resilience workshops provided a 'safe' environment in which personal stories were shared. Design curriculum must make more space for guided reflection. This is ironic, given design requires reflection as a source of learning.
- Being driven by grades and performance rather than learning. Good grades were described as a gateway to better job prospects and other professional opportunities.
- Failing a course then losing scholarships. Many of the international students in coursework carrying scholarships need to pass in order to receive funding.
- Being rejected by design schools during the enrolment process. One student we met with described how attempts to enrol in design education had been rejected due to flaws in their portfolio. This was a terrible experience, yet this individual bounced back and tried again with success.
- Feeling like you don't fit in anywhere. This more existential feeling can also be reframed as an indication of uniqueness or distinctiveness. Yet feeling alone or not fitting in is known to be socially and developmentally damaging.

Setbacks and self-doubts at the level of generating impact:

- Not seeing good and just ideas realised in society. Why design when the outcomes of the process remain on paper? This setback relates to the purpose and greater ambitions of designers.
- Coping with the pressure to create positive impact. Many students and practitioners spoke about struggling to sleep under the pressure to create impact in a project.
- Working for unethical clients but needing the work anyway. Much of this work comes as a result of productivity of outdated, unsustainable yet profitable industrial activity. Designers will always have to decide what kind of work they accept and decline.
- Thoughts of imposter syndrome. Questioning expertise was a pattern of our workshops. This relates back to confidence noted earlier in setbacks and self-doubts at the level of designing.
- Doubting the bigger legacy of a career. When working with practitioners and academics, we observed questions about legacy.
- Sacrificing time with loved ones to pursue positive impact. Commitment to creating impact posed a challenge for participants who made clear sacrifices relating to social and family relationships.
- Feeling that whatever work you do, it will not be enough to avert [xyz] crisis anyway. A wave of pessimism was observable in many participants who felt powerless when talking about grand and wicked challenges facing society and the real role design could play.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Design is profession where practitioners challenge the status quo in quest for impactful improvements to society. Where the designer adopts systemic framing of projects, identifying impact from subsequent design interventions is fraught with difficulty. Yet identifying one's impact is important for developing confidence and learning on the job – in plain terms, for knowing what works and what doesn't.

The results of this paper demonstrate that design students, practitioners and educators alike harbour deep self-doubts and insecurities about designing, becoming a designer and generating impact. These self-doubts and setbacks are persistent regardless of expertise. As I write in the early pages of this paper, feeling like an "imposter designer" in a world awash with existential problems and ever-powerful technologies is no place to linger. The results also show our design community is resilient, overcoming difficult setbacks and remaining dedicated to their craft no matter the burden of self-doubt they internally harbour.

The results of this conference paper have implications for design education. How we communicate the scale of world problems to our students and develop design capabilities must be carefully approached. As educators we must be careful not to launch naïve designers into society, who believe in the endless or superior power of design. We must be mindful also, of training designers riddled with self-doubts who will be prone to feeling like "imposters", even though they are capable and responsible.

Moving forward, design education must acknowledge and address setbacks and self-doubts of their community openly in order to unlock our collective authenticity, reflexivity and resilience. I propose designer resilience as a set of essential principles and practices capable of this reform. Future research will work to implement the approach in higher education curriculum and investigate the subsequent outcomes.

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