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Preparing for the Pluriverse: Encouraging a critical self-reflective practice to build cultural humility into service design

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Preparing for the pluriverse

Encouraging a critical self reflective practice to build cultural humility into service design

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Introduction

Service design is increasingly accepted as an approach to innovation in public service systems, with an especially high rate of acceptance in Norway. Service designers navigate within complex societal systems, ultimately crafting the experience of Norwegian values through public service touchpoints (Filho & Clatworthy, 2017). When designing public services in a drastically changing socio-cultural landscape (Norwegian Ministry of Culture, 2019; Thorud, 2019), an intersection of evolving cultural values and state policies exists. A gap between the cultural assumptions of the designer and diverse users are likely to emerge. Such a gap illuminates a clear need for cultural humility in public sector workers (Sugaipova, 2020) and designers as shapers of public services, should be no exception.

Within this landscape, we ask the research question: How might we shift the systems of service design to embrace a culturally humble design practice in Norway? Our study indicates that talking about cultural differences within design in Norway is taboo. Although designers have a general awareness about cultural differences, it is not integrated in practice. Based on these findings, the study created a design intervention aiming to spark a dialogue around cultural humility in the Norwegian service design context. This intervention shares a vision, the notion of cultural humility, and a framework for a reflective conversation through a digital platform. The framework offers an opportunity for service designers to build their critical self reflective (Fook

2008) muscles through reaction-based exercises, supported by artefacts that externalize related tensions.

Methodology

Two design researchers conducted this study over a period of 5 months in Norway. This study leverages a research through design (Frayling 1993) approach where generative conversations with 18 practising service designers were held. These conversations were supported by elicitation tools, framing devices and tangible artefacts (Rygh & Clatworthy, 2019) to understand how cultural humility can be built into service design practices.

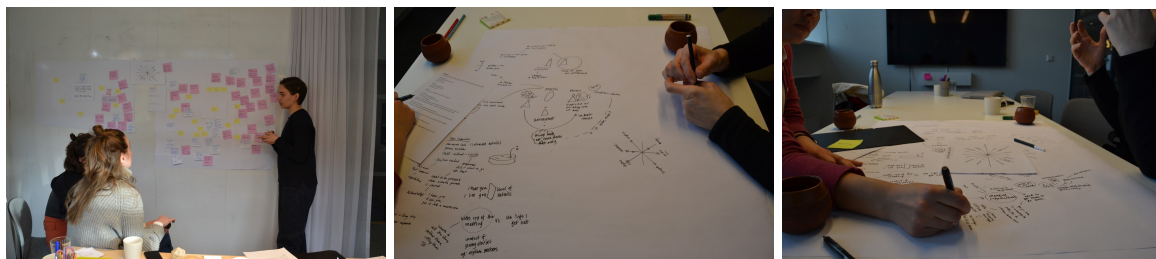


Figure 1: Semi-structured conversations being conducted by design researchers. Photos by Shivani Prakash



Figure 2: Artefacts created during the design process. Photos by Oda Heier and Shivani Prakash

A rich design research space was created (Sevaldson 2008) to support interrelations and discussion between the researchers. In this space, data was aggregated through gigamapping (Sevaldson 2018) to embrace complexity and examine tensions. Identified tensions were manifested into artefacts. This approach enabled an understanding of structural social relations

revolving around cultural differences, and how politics impact the thematics of integration and assimilation.

An abductive analytical approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) was used, where design literature and generated field data were analysed and aggregated into themes. Simultaneously, the design intervention was analysed using a ‘conversation tracker’. The tracker helped systematically map out the conversations that emerged and contextualised how cultural humility can be connected to design.



Figure 3: Process documentation during data analysis. Photos by Oda Heier

Design intervention

A digital platform was developed to introduce designers to the notion of cultural humility and its connection to design to further explore the research question. The platform walks designers

through the use of a conversation framework to explore how cultural humility can be built into service design practices. The conversation framework is crafted to be self-facilitated and used in pairs or larger groups.

This conversation framework was prototyped over 10 sessions with practicing designers and students. Conversations lasted between 1 - 2.5 hours. As this study continues, we plan to increase access to the digital platform for self-testing with 12 additional designers.

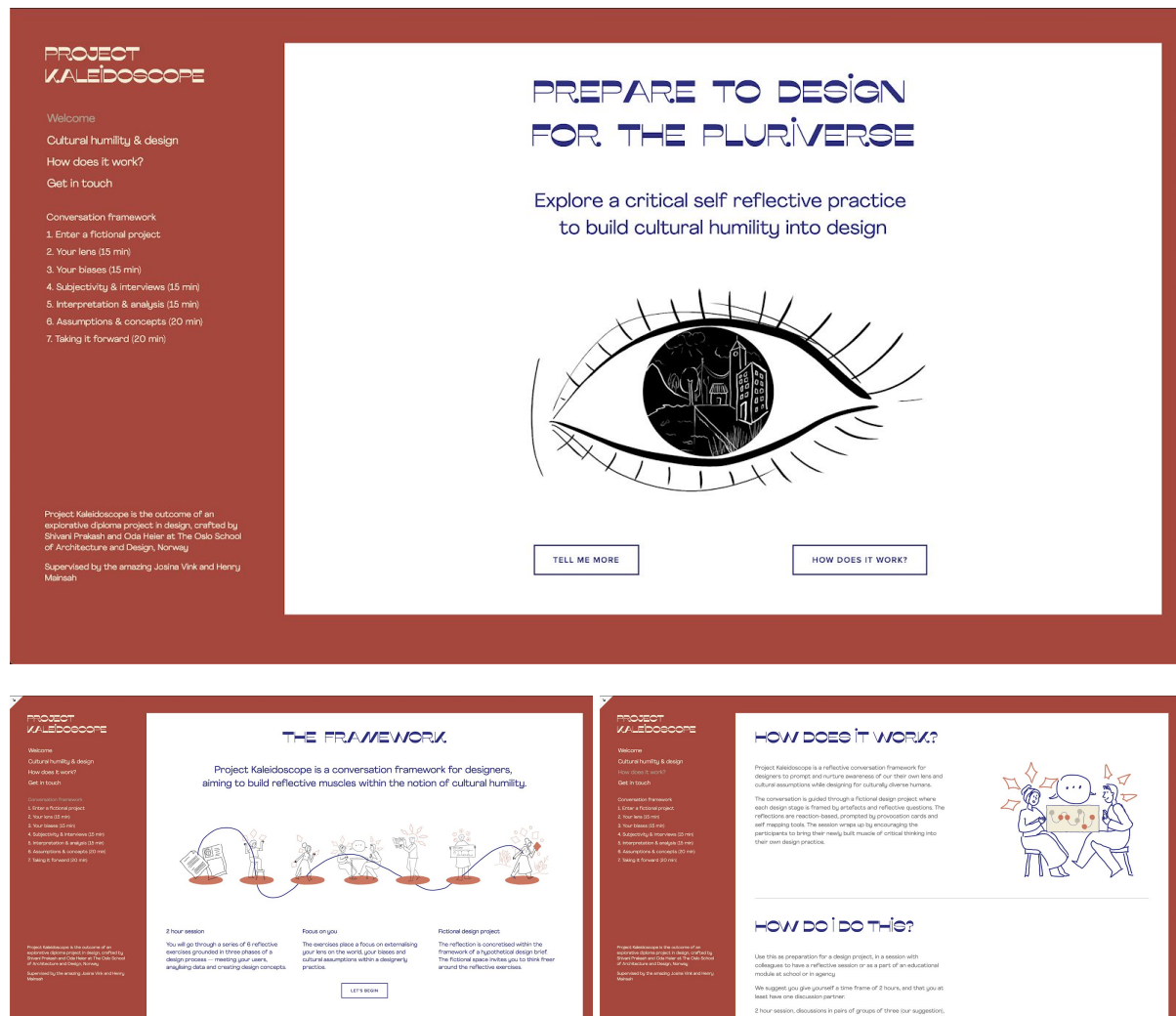


Figure 4: Screenshots of the prototype of the design intervention.

Findings

The study presents preliminary findings under two themes. The first unpacks challenges which hold service designers back from embracing a culturally humble practice. The second theme presents findings from the conversation tracker, unpacking how to build cultural humility in service design practices.

1. Understanding challenges holding service designers back

- a. Not integrated into practice: Designers show a need of shifting their tools and working more inclusively revealing a general awareness, but it is not an integrated part of practice.

“I’m not saying that designers “haphazardly neglect” to work more inclusively, but surely this is a situation all of us could easily find ourselves in.” — Designer 10

- b. A taboo conversation: During our conversations with designers, we found ourselves lacking the courage and vocabulary to ask open questions. Designers highlighted a feeling of being restricted from talking about cultural differences openly. This indicated grounds of a taboo conversation.

“It’s painful to raise this topic since people become defensive. It’s painful that they are not curious or willing to receive the other perspective” — Designer 7

- c. The notion of cultural humility: Found during secondary research, cultural humility corresponds with how some respondents described how design can be practiced with users from different cultural backgrounds from theirs.

“[To understand the user] we need to start with ourselves and understand where we are positioned in the world” — Designer 12

2. Understanding how to build cultural humility in service design practices:

- a. The value of using a fictional design project to concretise reflections: The iterative journey indicated that designers faced difficulty in applying cultural humility to

their own practice. A fictional design project helped keep reflections relevant and make the bridge between abstract and practical discussions.

- b. Emergent effect of dialogue between two designers: The prototyped conversations revealed that having two designers reflect together encourages conversational sparring, sharing of tips and tricks and a higher level of engagement.
- c. Creating space for tensions and disagreements: By externalising the agenda of the intervention, we can step up the reflection space with the value of transparency. With the use of provocation cards, we can open the room for addressing conflict.

Significance

This study aims to help service designers build their critically self-reflective muscle by bringing the focus back to their identity. While academic design practices, such as participatory design, speculative design and critical design, theoretically encourage a self-reflective practice, this design intervention offers a concrete design discussion. We aim for the design intervention to be used in classroom settings to prepare future service designers to be culturally humble; practicing service designers to use it to improve their own practice; creating a systemic impact on how design is practised. We hope future research is conducted and adapts some of these strategies to be applicable beyond service design.

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