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Essay: Reflections on learnings and challenges of applying systemic design as a junior designer

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We live in a dynamic, complex world. The role of designers has become increasingly diverse. We now work on a wide variety of projects and topics spanning sustainability, energy transitions, policy, and public services. However, many designers lack the necessary mindsets, tools, and resources to effectively address the complexity of the challenges we face. Through my own experiences over the past four years as a student and then a junior Designer, I have recognised the increasing pressure and need for systemic thinking and design and have been striving to learn, apply, and advocate for it. This paper articulates these needs, reflections on my personal learning journey and the challenges encountered along the way. I conclude with suggestions for a critical question: How can junior designers deeply and sincerely equip themselves to tackle today's complex and dynamic problems?

Background & Context

This essay reflects my experience as a junior service designer currently living in Germany. I have a background in graphic design from India. Although I never worked as a graphic designer, my visualisation skills proved beneficial when it came to visualising and comprehending complex systems, identifying interconnections, and aligning stakeholders.

I first felt the need to go beyond traditional design methods while working with an NGO, where I was exploring ways to make a village safer for women. I first recognised the limitations of traditional design methods. This experience sparked my curiosity about the role of design and of a designer in tackling complex problems, and I share my experiences of this journey in this paper.

Methodology

I use a beginner version of the autoethnography method. By revisiting my personal reflections from the past four years and making sense of my notes, I have attempted to articulate and analyse my experiences as a student and then a junior service designer.

Reflections on experiences

In this section, I reflect on various experiences throughout the past four years. First, I discuss an experience that helped me understand the importance and need for systemic thinking and design. Then, I describe three types of resources that I have encountered along the way to further my knowledge on this topic. Finally, I discuss three challenges I have faced when applying these learnings to my work.

Importance of systemic design

As mentioned previously, I first realised the need for systemic design while working with an NGO where we explored ways to make a village safer for women. Our team, composed of five 19-year-old students studying graphic design, embarked on extensive research to understand the underlying reasons behind the village's lack of safety. We conducted audits of the physical infrastructure, interviewed individuals of various age groups, conducted desk research, and consulted subject matter experts. However, as we delved deeper into our research, we quickly became overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information. Every piece of information seemed to reveal new complexities and connections, such as the link between alcohol abuse and domestic violence, which we felt compelled to explore further. Despite our best efforts, we found ourselves at a loss regarding how to proceed, how to synthesise the gathered information and how to truly gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem at hand. This experience left

us feeling confused and overwhelmed, unaware that this state of confusion was actually a natural and integral part of the process when dealing with complex problems.

It is important to highlight that our background primarily focused on studying graphic design until that point. To initiate our project, we relied on IDEO's Design Kit, which provided valuable guidance on creating a project plan and conducting interviews. However, when it came to making sense of the extensive information we had gathered, we didn't find any methods or guidance. We tried to fit what we had found according to the design kit methods but it felt as though we were oversimplifying the complexity of the topic, and attempting to do so felt almost guilty given the significance of the issue at hand.

This whole experience led us to drop the project for a couple of years because we didn't feel confident and were unsure of how to navigate through the challenges we faced. However, during this hiatus, I came across systemic design. I instantly resonated with it, and I then understood why we encountered the challenges in the first place. This piqued my curiosity, and I embarked on a learning journey, seeking out various resources to delve deeper into "systemic design".

Finding resources

In the past four years, I have tried to learn about systemic design by reading and engaging with many articles, books, and theses that have been published on the systems oriented design website[1] and attending conferences and symposia such as Relating Systems Thinking and Design. I do not dive deep into all these resources. Instead, I give three examples of resources, starting from the oldest (early exploration) to recent, to illustrate a gist of how they have impacted my learning.

Article on the iceberg model: During my early exploration, I came across many articles that strengthened my understanding of systemic design. Before grasping the underlying theory or the background of the field, I started looking for practical tools that I could immediately and easily use. The iceberg model[2] was a tool that I kept coming across.

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[1] https://systemsorienteddesign.net/
[2] https://untools.co/iceberg-model

Initially, I was excited to use it and I did use it quite often. But after some time, I realised that I was simplifying the root causes, trying to fit everything into the framework of the tool. This experience left me questioning the credibility of some of the tools I was coming across. I also realised that I would need to take a step back and understand the theory before jumping into using any tools. I chose to highlight this experience because it exemplifies how I discovered tools and templates and later realized that they were not doing justice to the principles of systemic design.

Systems oriented design (SOD): One resource that I frequently refer to is the SOD website, particularly for dissertations. One instance where it proved useful was during a project I was working on with a public organisation, where Manuela Aguirre's PhD thesis, "Transforming Public Organisations into Co-designing Cultures," provided a lot of clarity on how I could approach my project. I printed it out and continuously referenced it throughout the project. Whenever I come across a thesis related to or closely aligned with my project's topic, my motivation to delve into systemic design, comprehend its principles, and apply them increases. So far, it has been my most valuable source of learning.

Design Journeys through Complex Systems: I discovered this book by Peter Jones and Kirstel Van Ael during the most recent stage of my exploration. I was immediately drawn to the book because it provided templates, gave directions on how to use those templates, along with providing examples of their application. Occasionally, I was able to establish a connection between a specific tool or template and its application for a specific project. I also attempted to modify certain templates to fit the specific context of some of the projects. However, most of the time, I find myself confused and uncertain about how to effectively utilise these tools or whether I am applying them in the correct" manner. The book has been helpful in introducing me to the world of systemic design holistically, but I am still in the process of fully grasping its potential and practical implementation.

Challenges of using systemic design

After four years of exploring systemic design, informing and educating myself, and using its tools and methodologies in practice, I still face multiple challenges.

Limited experience and subject matter expertise: Advocating for systemic design tools within organisations can be challenging when there is a dearth of information clearly articulating their need and importance. Without a solid understanding of the subject matter and limited practical experience, my confidence in utilising and advocating for tools and approaches is hindered. This limitation makes it difficult to effectively communicate the value and benefits of systemic design to colleagues or stakeholders who are accustomed to their own established processes and tools.

Using the tools effectively: Understanding tools and correctly applying the right tools for specific contexts remains an ongoing challenge.

Making insights actionable: These tools often help me explore and understand the system, but I lack the capability to make these insights actionable or tangible.

The illusion of solving complexity: Lastly, this journey has sparked new questions for me regarding the increasing popularity of systemic design and the concept of complexity. As I delved into various resources and gained experience using systemic design tools, I noticed that they could provide a sense of comfort and create the illusion that by simply using the right tools, we can solve complex problems. It made me wonder if systems thinking and design are experiencing their IDEO moment. And if so, how can we humble ourselves?

Reflections on approaches

Systemic design learning could be more accessible and actionable, particularly for junior designers and individuals eager to explore and apply it in their work. Here are some ideas worth considering.

Mentorship programmes: Establishing a 1:1 mentorship program where experienced and qualified designers can guide and support newcomers to the field. This mentorship can provide insights, guidance, and personalised assistance tailored to the specific needs of each individual.

Collaborative spaces: Creating dedicated spaces where people can come together to experiment with different tools and templates, free from the pressure of having to fully grasp their usage. These spaces can serve as platforms for exploring passion topics using a diverse range of tools, encouraging hands-on learning and experimentation.

Theory and academic resources: Designating spaces or platforms that facilitate the exploration and understanding of theoretical concepts and academic literature related to systemic design. These spaces can serve as repositories of knowledge, enabling individuals to delve deeper into the foundational principles and frameworks underpinning systemic design.

Facilitating complex conversations: Creating safe and inclusive environments that encourage open and honest discussions about complex and uncomfortable topics. These spaces can foster critical dialogue, allowing individuals to challenge existing perspectives, explore diverse viewpoints, and address systemic issues within design and beyond.

Sharing strengths and limitations: Establish a dedicated space where individuals can openly share and articulate the strengths and limitations of current design tools based on their experiences. This space would encourage critical reflection and discussion.

Conclusion

I would like to initiate a discussion within the wider systemic design community to explore these points and engage with members, particularly junior designers, to understand their challenges and experiences. Together, we can work towards bridging the gap and equipping ourselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to tackle complex challenges effectively.

The reflections and challenges discussed in this paper shed light on the journey of a junior designer navigating the field of systemic design. As the world becomes more complex, the need for designers to adopt systemic design becomes increasingly apparent. However, there are several challenges that hinder the effective application of systemic design. To address these challenges, several approaches can be considered. Mentorship programs can provide guidance and personalised assistance to junior designers, while collaborative spaces can foster hands-on learning and

experimentation. Designating spaces for exploring theoretical concepts and academic resources can deepen the understanding of systemic design principles. Facilitating complex conversations and creating spaces to share the strengths and limitations of current design tools encourage critical reflection and discussion. In conclusion, by engaging in open discussions and sharing experiences within the wider community, junior designers can bridge the gap and equip themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to tackle today's complex challenges.