Interdisciplinary engagement with inclusive design − The Challenge Workshops model

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ABSTRACT

The DBA Inclusive Design Challenge and the Challenge Workshops organised by the lead author has exposed numerous design teams to the benefit of working with extreme users − this paper will analyse the challenges and benefits of this approach to inclusive design and suggest how the lessons learned from competition can be transferred into design practice.

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1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2000, the DBA Inclusive Design Challenge has exposed numerous design teams to the benefits of working with critical users as a route to product and service innovation.

The nine DBA Inclusive Design Challenges held to date have resulted in 47 beacon projects of inclusive design across the design disciplines and involved an estimated 400 professional designers (HHRC, 2009).

The Challenge and variations based on its template have been trialled in different cultural, corporate and academic contexts, nationally and internationally, allowing an understanding of the core elements necessary for effective inclusive design knowledge transfer.

2. Evolution of the DBA Inclusive Design Challenge

The DBA Inclusive Design Challenge is an annual competition for the professional design community organised by the Royal College of Art (RCA) Helen Hamlyn Centre (HHC) in collaboration with the Design Business Association (DBA), the UK's largest trade association for design firms. It was inspired by the model of the Product Challenges organised under the DesignAge programme at the RCA, the forerunner of the Helen Hamlyn Centre.

It began as a response to the publication in 2000 of 'Fully Equipped', the report of the Audit Commission (2000) on poor levels of design endemic to disability aids and services related to them. For the Helen Hamlyn Centre, it embodied two challenges −

internally to the Centre's role as inclusive design educators and externally in relation to the professional design community.

There was a need to understand what designers required in terms of information about inclusive design and how this could be delivered to suit their learning styles, the restraints of the context in which they worked as well as to address the issue of their negative perceptions of inclusive design.

In business terms, designers needed to understand how to respond to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) that was having an increasing impact on those working in the service, visual communications, interaction and spatial design disciplines. However, there was an insufficient number of realised case studies across design disciplines which could be used as exemplars. By organising an inclusive design competition, it was possible to kill two birds with one stone.

The DBA Inclusive Design Challenge is not a competition in the usual sense of the word but more a five-month long mentored inclusive design tutorial with a competition attached, the time period chosen to reflect the average span of a commercial design project.

The Challenge aimed to shift designers' negative perceptions of disability as a set of creative handcuffs that significantly restricted their ability to design as they wished, to one which could take them out of their comfort zones into a terrain full of innovative possibilities that they would otherwise not have considered. In addition, it aimed to help designers understand the importance of the business case for inclusive design and steer them away from the aesthetic no-man's land and niche markets of 'design for disability.' Thus, the brief was positioned within a mainstream design agenda, so that they understood the need to combine aesthetics and inbuilt functionality and frame their design responses within multiple rather than single user scenarios.

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2.1. The framework

The framework for the DBA Inclusive Design Challenge has remained relatively unchanged since 2000. Then a challenge in the form of an open brief was disseminated to DBA member firms who were invited to an evening launch of the event at the RCA. A briefing on inclusive design was given and they were encouraged to submit a short response outlining their main area of interest or focus. The shortlist of five to six firms was decided on that basis as well as on their existing portfolio as a design firm.

In the first seven years of the Challenge, the shortlisted teams were visited by Cassim who discussed the scope and focus of the project with the teams and gave each a resource pack containing the names of experts in the subject area as well pertinent websites and publications. Since 2007, in response to post-Challenge feedback by the design teams, a joint workshop has been organized where they are briefed collectively by experts on the subject of the brief and individually by Cassim on their project approach.

This is followed by a project-specific user forum at the RCA, facilitated by Cassim in which each team has the chance to brainstorm with critical users (i.e. people with severe disabilities) over a two-hour period. Where the projects relate to product design, it is also used as an opportunity for critical evaluation of existing products (Cassim and Dong, 2005). The teams are encouraged to contact selected users from the group at a later stage in the design process for further evaluation of their design concepts or prototypes. A final visit from Cassim takes place before the teams submit their completed projects for judging in the form of a six-minute presentation in any media.

The judging is followed by an Awards Event and exhibition held at the RCA featuring a high-profile keynote speaker where the design teams present and exhibit their final ideas to their design industry peers as well as to representatives of the business, public and voluntary sectors. An annual publication.

Challenge (formerly *Innovate*) edited by Cassim (2000—2008) documents the projects in detail.

2.2. The user dimension

The selection of users has always been strategic. An average of five users with different disabilities is selected to ensure that the final design idea is not weighted to a single disability to the detriment of other points of view.

Sometimes individual users with extreme disabilities ('wild card users') are selected since they embody radical questions for creative brainstorming on the subject at hand that are unlikely to be asked. "How do you put on a band aid when you have no arms?" was the question that Tom Yendell of the UK Mouth and Foot Painting Artist's Association, implicitly posed to the team from Pearson Matthews that won the 2005 Challenge.

Clevername™ (Fig. 1) their revolutionary reinterpretation of the standard sticking plaster resolved this issue and the prototype they developed constituted Yendell's first experience of being able to apply one on his own.

For the DBA Inclusive Design Challenge, there has been a tendency to focus on younger users with severe disabilities, i.e. critical users. The reasons are:
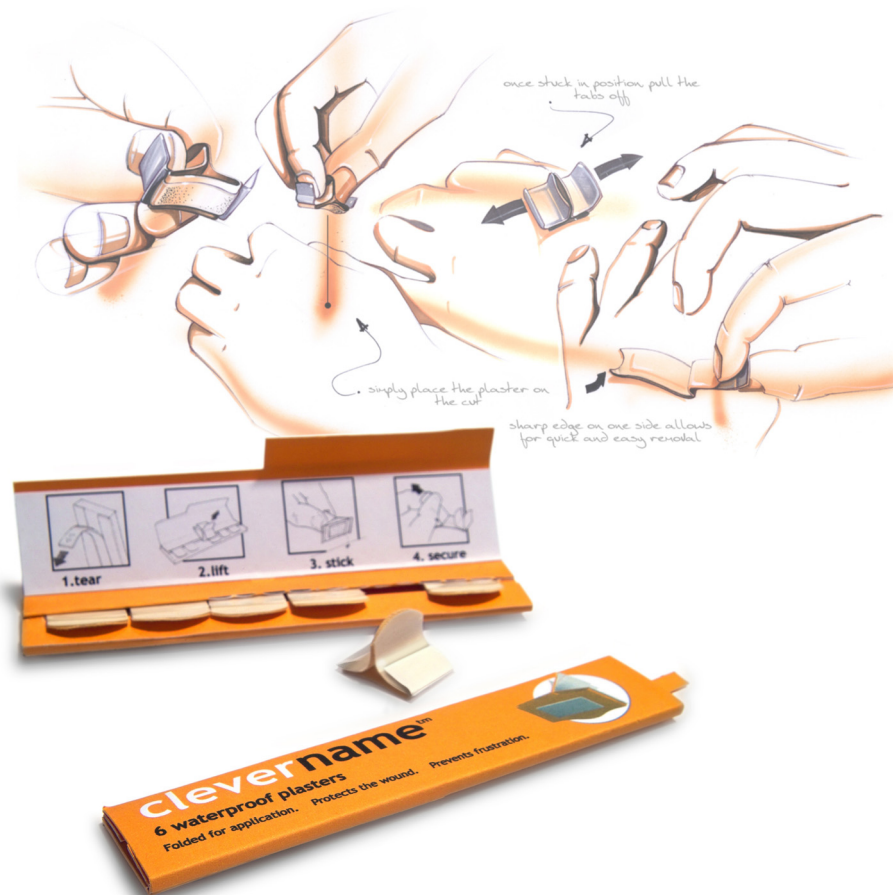

Fig. 1. Clevername™ by Pearson Matthews.