

Gianna Caputo

Title: Engaging Communities Through Design Thinking

Background

This semester, I am currently acting as a community media and design consultant for students in the Poetic Justice Club at the George Junior Republic School through a course at Cornell University titled Media, Design and Community Engagement. Through my observations of and engagements with this group of highly talented students, I noticed applications to design thinking. I aim to propose a framework for utilizing design thinking with community engagement efforts, to maximize group sustainability and emphasize the role of the user in the design process. Design thinking relies on abilities to be intuitive, see patterns, and provide ideas that are emotional in meaning while remaining functional (Brown 2009). We can apply concepts used in product design, software development, and engineering, to sustain community groups and emphasize the user in the design process. My work uses frameworks designed for a tangible end product in more abstract, human centered engagement processes.

Methods

Students in the Poetic Justice Club write poetry that becomes a printed booklet at the end of the year. Our goal is to provide knowledge and expertise, to transform their work into various mediums. The mediums are chosen by the students, as are poem topics and formats. Our ultimate goal is to maintain this group of adolescents as the center of this process. In *Change by Design*, Tim Brown proposes four main concepts for successful design thinking. They are: identifying constraints, interacting with the human consumer, designing, and strategizing. I think that these components are the foundation for a successful framework in sustaining community groups and maintaining user involvement.

In identifying constraints, we must take into account the sustainability of the community organization. I propose using a media model with several variables to do so. Consider the degrees to which the organization is being modeled. I currently use three dimensions often used in team-based design: abstraction, resolution, and ease of change (Edelman, Leifer, Steinert & Weske 2010). *Figure 1* is an example of how this may be illustrated for the Poetic Justice Club, in terms of viscosity. Interacting with constituents involves letting them lead. We aim to involve them in each step by determining what they want to accomplish, and how they want to accomplish it. Scheduled meetings provide us with time to work with/for students, rather than simply alongside them. In order for this process to be shared, we must have a shared vision. By defining participation loosely (Gogia, Holton, McKenzie 2017), students are allowed to lead the process based on individual need. The final phases, design and strategy, will be addressed differently for each organization. In this case, I call the design stage “facilitation”, due to our identified need to showcase student work and emphasize the importance of group sustainability. Strategy for Poetic Justice involves how we will showcase, illustrate importance, and maintain group integrity for the next set of leaders. To see how these concepts interact see *Figure 2*.

Media Models For Identifying Constraints in Community Spaces

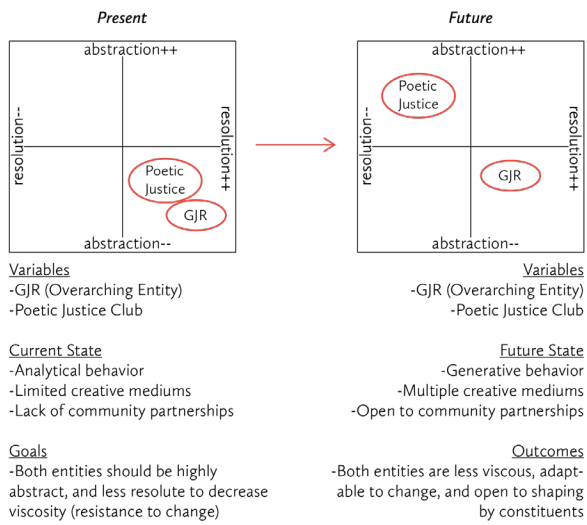


Figure 1.

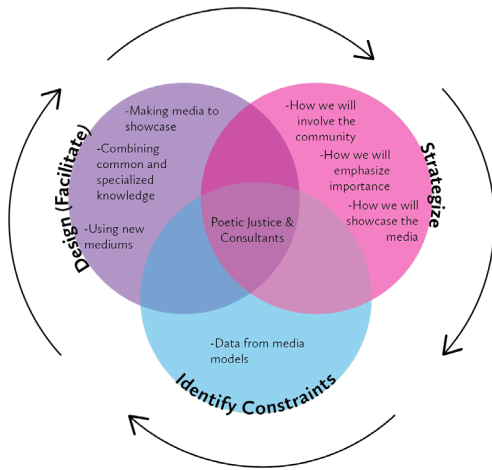


Figure 2.

Results

Monthly meetings are ongoing, and we have seen successful participation on the part of the students to share work and utilize feedback. Since the club was student suggested, and poems/formats are student chosen, the club itself already exhibits some characteristics of design thinking concepts. However, research is ongoing. At this time, we are acting as community consultants, with a focus on researching the benefits of using these concepts in community engagement and organization sustainability.

Conclusion

By examining design thinking principles, I have proposed a foundational framework for engaging communities and involving users in the process. Concepts such as intuition, pattern seeking, and empathy can be applied to community organizations through the models I have presented above.

References

Brown, T. (2009). *Change By Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*. New York, Harper Collins.

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Gogia, L., Holton, V., McKenzie, T. (2017). Collaborative Curiosity: A Connected Learning Course on Community Engaged Research. *Public: A Journal of Imagining America*, 4(2).