



## Putting Empathy Back in Design: The Purple Dress Project

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Keywords: design, empathy, draping, pedagogy

The first step in the design thinking process, according to the Stanford School of Design, is “empathize.” In a document provided by Stanford d.school describing their design-thinking methods, they say “empathy is the foundation of a human-centered design process” (Bootcamp Bootleg, 2013). Fashion design television shows such as Fashion Star and Project Runway are attempting to put empathy back into the center of the design process, albeit sometimes a weak attempt. On the episode of Fashion Star that aired on March 22, 2013, designers were asked to design a look for plus-sized women (Dudynsky, 2013). This was an excellent opportunity for designers to empathize with a customer category often disregarded. If the designers did observe, engage with, or immerse themselves in the plus-sized culture, the show made no attempt to relay that information to the viewer.

Project Runway does a slightly better job of focusing on empathy in their design process. In the season eleven, five out of the twelve episodes overtly included empathy in the design challenge. For example, in episode six, designers were asked to design fashionable clothing for senior citizens. The designers were shown interacting with senior citizens and interviewing them about their lifestyles (Project Runway, 2013). Still, the majority of the episodes completely skip the first step of the design process, assuming the designers know the customers and relate to their needs. This is a risky assumption, for “the problems you are trying to solve are rarely your own—they are those of particular users; in order to design for your users, you must build empathy for who they are and what is important to them” (Bootcamp Bootleg, 2013).

According to Stanford d.school, in order to empathize, a designer must “view users...in the context of their lives, interact with and interview users...and experience your user experiences” (Bootcamp Bootleg, 2013). In order for students in an upper-level Experimental Design: Draping course to experience empathy, they partnered with The Purple Dress Project, a project developed to raise awareness about Crohn’s Disease. A representative of The Purple Dress Project spoke to students about living with Crohn’s Disease, the common symptoms, and told stories about real people overcoming the obstacles that are associated with living with a chronic disease. Students saw what it was like to live with Crohn’s Disease flare-ups, they were given opportunities to interact with a Crohn’s patient several times throughout the project, and they were shown videos of Crohn’s patients living with the unique challenges of a chronic disease.

Design students were then asked to design a dress for both a real and hypothetical customer who had dealt with Crohn’s disease. After empathizing with the Crohn’s Disease representative, they were then ready to research and ideate, and finally sketch a few design ideas. The “customer representative” gave them guidelines for design, such as fit variability relating to the needs involved with pre and post-surgical body changes, and style variability, so that she

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could wear it for a variety of functions and occasions. The “customer” returned to the classroom multiple times to continue the designer/customer relationship, provide feedback, and allow the students to maintain empathy for their customer.

Students in the draping course do a knit dress project every year. This was a logical extension of that project, giving them design freedom, draping experience, and consumer profiling experience. The grading rubric for the project was altered slightly to conform to the new fit and style variability elements, but still included evaluation of their design and draping creativity, the technical difficulty of the chosen draped dress, and the technical execution of the actual drape and final dress.

This type of project gives students a realistic, custom design experience that is also niche-consumer oriented and customer-needs driven. They will always have parameters when designing for the mass-market or for private customers, so the limitations involved are well-suited to their learning needs. The purple fabric was supplied for them, using student course fees, to keep colors, fibers, and fabrications equal, so the design and satisfying the consumer style needs are the discerning factors.

This presentation will discuss the need to emphasize empathy in the design process, provide a detailed outline of the course assignment, discuss the collaboration between the course professor and the representative from The Purple Dress Project, provide a guide for re-creating design curriculum that puts empathy at the forefront, and the presenters will invite viewers to collaborate with The Purple Dress Project as an easy way to implement empathy in their classrooms immediately. In addition, the presenters will showcase the kind of publicity projects like this received from the local community.

### **Bibliography**

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