When Rabbits Lead to Ideas: Inspiring Design by Retelling Stories through Metaphors

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Abstract: This paper proposes a method that utilizes expressive narratives to inspire design, especially in the conceptualization process leading to design ideas. In this method, expressive narratives need to be deconstructed by designers through the identification of metaphors. These metaphors are then examined to discover the concepts they embody. While interpreting the metaphors the designers try to find alternative representations referring to the same concepts by creating generative metaphors, which open up new ways of looking at the situation by defining new connections. Eventually, the proposed method assists designers particularly in the development of coherent scenarios, abstraction and re-contextualization of objects, and generation of new meanings in their conceptualization process.

Keywords: design methods; metaphors; idea generation; narrative; retelling

1 Introduction

One of the widely acknowledged definitions of design is that it is about problem solving. This is based on Herbert Simon’s work where he claims that science is primarily concerned with how things are, while design is concerned with how they ought to be. Building on this, Schön (1983) characterizes design as “knowing in action”, describing the design process as an intuitive bringing of experience to problems, which nevertheless are themselves treated as unique (Willis, 2007). As cited by Fischer (2014), further descriptions of design as “argumentative conspiracy” (Rittel, 1984), “dialectical” (Goldschmidt, 1991), “discursive” (Goel, 1995), “dialogue” (Schön, 1983), “conversation” (Jones, 1992, Glanville, 1999; Pask, 1976), and “hermeneutic circle” (Snodgrass & Coyne, 1997) signify that design has something to do with language and a dynamic form of sense making through narration.

Among these definitions, Snodgrass and Coyne (1992) propose that for a better understanding of design, the problem-solving metaphor needs to be replaced with the hermeneutic circle metaphor because “this involves a close examination of the part interpretation plays in the design process; how preconceptions function in the processes of selection and evaluation; how preconceptions lead to pre-figurations of the design product; and how tacit experience and skills enter into the situation.” This approach is based on Gadamer’s (1975) conceptualization of the hermeneutic circle as an iterative process through which a new understanding of a whole can be developed by means of exploring the detail of existence and that “understanding occurs in interpreting”. According to Gadamer (1975), understanding mediates linguistically through conversations with others in which reality is explored and an agreement is reached representing a new understanding.
The centrality of conversation to the hermeneutic circle is developed by Donald Schön (1983), who also characterizes design as a hermeneutic circle that is developed by means of a conversation with the situation. In the design process, the designer projects the meaning of the whole and works out the implications of this projection by referring it back to the parts. Thus, the design is continually re-determined by an anticipatory movement of the pre-understanding. The designer has an anticipation of the whole, which guides her understanding of the particularities (Snodgrass & Coyne, 1997). Schön (1983) speaks of design as "reflection-in-action", which is "a reflective conversation with the situation". Similar to the pre-understanding in hermeneutical terms, the designer begins the design task by shaping the situation in accordance with an initial appreciation. The situation then "talks back" and the designer responds to the situation's back talk by reflecting-in-action on the construction of the problem (Schön, 1983). The process then develops in a circle (Willis, 2007), as in the hermeneutic circle (Snodgrass & Coyne, 1997).

Jahnke (2012) builds upon the hermeneutic circle metaphor (Gadamer, 1976), and revises it towards a deeper understanding of design by introducing Ricoeur’s (2008) term of the "hermeneutic spiral". With a critique on Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic spiral consists of "a centering movement of reflection and a decentering movement of communication with others via manifested and poetically rich interpretations" (Jahnke, 2012). Ricoeur (2008) suggests that at the end of these hermeneutic interpretive processes new meanings can be created, and according to Jahnke (2012), this is the key to where hermeneutics and design intersect.

A brief overview on the various definitions of design reveals that the gist they all have in common is that design is about proposing something new. This process of proposing something new can be inspired by various sources such as objects, images (Cai et al., 2010), narratives (Goldschmidt, 1998), previous designs (Eckert & Stacey, 2000) and other phenomena. Among these, literature and narratives can be mentioned as one of the important but less investigated sources of inspiration to design. Previous research on this subject shows that narratives and other kinds of texts trigger a productive process of imagination, and the interpretative process enables an active involvement of the designer (Goldschmidt, 1998; Bolak Hisarligil, 2012).

In this paper, I investigate design as a hermeneutic-interpretive process by sharing a method in the intersection of narrative and design. To gain insight on this issue, I examine the narrative as a source of inspiration for design relying on the approaches that design is a "hermeneutic spiral" (Jahnke, 2012) and a "reflective conversation with the situation" (Schön, 1983). My focus in this particular context is industrial design students’ work with narratives to generate early design concepts. I propose that conceptualization in the early design process can be improved through embedding expressive narratives if the designer literally "retells a story". The designer in this sense can take the role of a "narrator-designer" who takes a story (an experience, a feeling, a fiction, a description, etc.) as told by the actors, and "retells" this story from a designerly (Cross, 2001) perspective. This particular "retelling" requires skills and abilities for proposing changes to the world or adding to social constructions of realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, the retelling of the actual story consists of designer’s own pre-conceptions related to the components of the story, her interpretation of the story, and the final product that comes out of the design process. Such an approach can provide designers with an awareness of the connection between their pre-conceptions and interpretations in relation with other possible subjectivities, which improve their imaginative reasoning processes and skills of contextualization of early design ideas.

2 Making Sense of Stories and Metaphors: Exploring the Concept of "Retelling" in Design

Narrative is coterminous with story: a story is a symbolized account of actions of human beings that has a temporal dimension. The story has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It is held together by recognizable patterns of events called plots. Central to the plot structure are human predicaments and attempted resolutions (Sarbin, 1986). This is how narratives provide a platform where people make sense of their thoughts and actions (Mead, 1967; MacIntyre, 1981). According to Sarbin (1986, p. 9), the narrative is an organizing principle for human action,

"The narrative is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; (...) The narrative allows for the inclusion of the actors’ reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening”.

Among different types of narratives, expressive narrative forms are quite stimulating but also challenging for students. According to Reiss (1976), an expressive narrative is a “creative composition”, where the author uses the aesthetic dimension of language. Poems and plays, for example, are good examples for expressive texts since they are highly expressing the author’s attitude in a form-focused way (Munday, 2001). One of the significant qualities of expressive
narratives is that they embody multi-layered meanings and interpretations through the use and generation of metaphors. As described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5), the metaphor is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” by carrying the original realm of meaning into new realms of usage. Although the concept of metaphor originates from language and literature, metaphors are central to the task of accounting for our perspectives on the world: how we think about things, make sense of reality, and set the problems we later try to solve.

From the perspective of design, and product semantics in particular (Krippendorff & Butter, 1984; Krippendorff, 2006), metaphors are considered as signs to make sense of products. As cited by Cila et al. (2014), metaphors are commonly used as a means to stimulate designers’ creativity in the design process because they help facilitate unconventional thinking by building relationships between distinct domains (Snodgrass and Coyne 1992), identify design problems and frame the problematic design situation by seeing it from a novel standpoint and adopting a working principle associated with that position (Schön, 1979). In this sense, metaphor refers both to a certain kind of product - a perspective or frame, a way of looking at things - and to a certain kind of process - a process by which new perspectives on the world come into existence. These kinds of metaphors are defined as generative metaphors (Schön, 1979). In the process of constructing generative metaphors, we bring to a situation different and conflicting ways of seeing. We can tell a story of our experience of the situation and can do this before we have constructed a new, coordinated description of the situation. Considered as a strategy for representing the situation, our story permits us to convey much of the richness of the situation without being constrained by either of the category-schemes with which we begin. Subsequently, we may construct new models of the situation from the stories they have told (Schön, 1979).

The concept of retelling in design broached in this paper emerges from the intersection of the process where designers generate metaphors by taking certain attributes from one entity and transferring them to a product they are designing (Cila, 2014) and the practice of "constructing new models of the situation from the stories" (Schön, 1979). For developing an understanding of design through retelling, Krippendorff’s (2006) social theory of the meaning of artifacts in language is helpful: this theory deals with how artifacts come to live in the narratives that their stakeholders tell each other and enact, in effect making the artifacts available for or prevented from use. In this context, generative metaphors enable us to notice how artifacts live in our narratives through being told and retold by various subjectivities constructing alternative realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

I facilitated a series of workshops on and off for about four years in the department of product design trying to figure out how generating metaphors and retelling stories through design can be utilized in the design process. Senior undergraduate design students voluntarily participated at these workshops from time to time. We read chapters from the novel Alice’s Adventures under Ground (Carroll, 1886) and interpreted them by discovering and deconstructing metaphors.

As most expressive narratives are, Carroll's (1886) novel is rich in multi-layered meanings and metaphors. When I asked the students to retell the story through design, the deconstruction of these metaphors eventually led to the construction of generative metaphors. Through these workshops I aimed to gain some insight on my hypothesis regarding the need for and usefulness of the step I eventually described as retelling through design in order to inspire the design process through the generation of metaphors.

Each workshop consisted of two sessions: in the first session, the participants retold Lewis Carroll’s story by defining and interpreting metaphorical contents, such as, "a white rabbit is confrontation", "a sneezing baby is confusion", "a caterpillar on the mushroom is conscience", "a door is acceptance of socio-cultural status", "a hookah is wisdom", "a mushroom is control", "a telescope is the changing point of view while growing up", and "a fading candle light is fear of growing and disappearing" (Figure 1).
In the second session, they retold their own story by constructing a generative metaphor, i.e. “confrontation is a looking glass”, “confusion is a bicycle under water”, “conscience is a pair of shackles”, “time is a never-ending ice cream”, “entrapment is a stairway”, “being stuck is a lack of sky”, and “life is a lawless carnival” (Figure 2).

3 Discussion: Retelling through Generative Metaphors for Design

The most significant part of these workshops was the construction of generative metaphors for and through design: the students tried to make sense of the metaphors in the narratives, and to design relevant objects or concepts in their stories at the same time. Utilizing the concept of retelling in this intersection thus stimulated a deeper literary understanding of the narrative and the generation of a novel design concept. As in Jahnke’s (2012) approach to design as hermeneutical spiral, and in Ricoeur’s (2008) words, new meanings emerged at the end of this spiral, from “a centering movement of reflection and a decentering movement of communication with others via manifested and poetically rich interpretations”. An additional contribution of retelling narratives for design and through design was the manifestation of generative metaphors and how they supported both processes of interpretation and design.
Through the relation of narrative and design, the spiral along "deconstructing metaphors-retelling-constructing generative metaphors" contributes to design students’ imagination processes in aspects such as developing a coherent scenario and related concepts, re-contextualizing objects, and constructing generative metaphors.

My suggestion is that this method can be applied in four main steps:

- A thorough and reflective reading of the narrative.
- Looking for metaphors and metaphorical contents.
- Deconstructing metaphors and further elaborating on possible concepts or meanings they refer to. One efficient and productive way of analyzing metaphorical contents is drawing mind maps through which the connections between interpretations become visible and traceable.
- Retelling a related story by starting with the concepts from the previous step and creating a new context, actors, environment and objects. This is the step where generative metaphors are constructed and abstractions from the previous step start to become new scenarios and alternative materialities. Techniques that are useful at this step can simply be writing down stories, drawing storyboards or making short animated movies, building mock-ups and even preparing theatrical performances. Among all of these techniques, writing down the story is essential because it is where the generative metaphors emerge, although the other techniques can also make meaningful contribution depending on the context.
- Improving design concepts towards final products.

4 Conclusion

Designers may benefit from attending the generative metaphors that underlies the different and conflicting stories about any kind of design situation. One is apt to be puzzled, disturbed, and stimulated to reflection by the telling of several different stories about the same situation, when each story is internally coherent and compelling in its own terms but different from, and perhaps incompatible with, all the others. Such a multiplicity of conflicting stories about the situation makes it dramatically apparent that we are dealing not with reality but with various ways of making sense of a reality (Schön, 1979). This point of view refers to the idea of multiple realities, as in William James’ analysis on our sense of reality (Schutz, 1962). As Schutz (1962) explains in detail, the origin of all reality, according to James, is subjective, that means, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real standing in relation with our emotional and active life,

"But there are several, probably an infinite number of various orders of realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence. James calls them “sub-universes” and mentions as examples the world of sense or physical things, (...). The popular mind conceives of all these sub-worlds more or less disconnectedly, and when dealing with one of them forgets for the time being its relations to the rest. But every object we think of is at last referred to one of these sub worlds (p. 207)."

Based on the approach that realities are socially constructed through human interaction - habituation - (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and symbolic interactions, which embed the interpretation of language as one of the symbols in daily interactions (Mead, 1967), the creation of meaning with every interpretation and interaction is a unique process. The context of multiple realities affirms that meaning is not a quality inherent in certain experiences emerging with our stream of consciousness but the result of an interpretation - or a retelling as described in this paper - of a past experience looked at from the present. Now with a reflective attitude (Schutz, 1962). This reflective attitude is accomplished through the hermeneutical spiral model in design. Turning our attention to the stories themselves is a way of exploring how the language and construction of narratives organize and give meaning to an experience (Bruner, 1986; White, 1980; Turner, 1974). To create meaning, design requires introspection; starts with pre-conceptions and subjective experience; and, leads to further generations of meaning. Relying on the definition that design is about proposing something new, the hermeneutical spiral model of design supports the continuous creation of meanings and thus related subjective realities.

In this paper, I investigated how narratives inspire design. My scope was the concept generation phase in the early design process, and my focus was a particular type of narrative form, i.e. expressive narratives. Expressive narratives are rich in metaphors and metonymies providing the reader with a wider perspective while making sense of them. Moreover, undergraduate design students enjoy working with them by discovering multi-layered meanings, deconstructing metaphors, and becoming aware of subjective realities. The problem I defined here was that students were experiencing difficulties when transferring their interpretations from the expressive narrative context to design context and needed a particular auxiliary step, which seemed to be missing at present. As a result, the concept of
retelling emerged along with a hermeneutical spiral of design through retelling. Once the expressive narrative is retold for a re-contextualization in design, the construction of generative metaphors starts, which eventually leads to developing coherent scenarios and related concepts, as well as abstracting and re-contextualizing objects. In this sense, the construction of generative metaphors is both a part and an outcome of the process.

The retelling step is actually where conceptualization of design ideas starts because it is where the narrative and design merge. With the help of this step, the required shift from narrative context to design context is accomplished and the initial conceptualization of design ideas is finalized. This particular method is especially useful when students deal with expressive narratives because it heavily relies on the interpretation of metaphors. However, the study can be extended to explore other types of narratives, such as descriptive texts, diary studies or user narratives so that similar missing steps can be detected and particular ways of embedding these narratives to design process can be developed.

References


About the Author

Özge Merzalı Çelikoğlu (PhD), is Assistant Professor in the Department of Industrial Product Design at Istanbul Technical University. Her research is primarily concerned with meaning and interpretation in design, in particular with how ethnography and narratives inform design within the broader context of language and discourse.