Cultivating ethics with professional designers

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CULTIVATING ETHICS WITH PROFESSIONAL DESIGNERS

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen an increased interest in designers’ ethical responsibility. However, knowledge concerning how ethical practice could be cultivated in real-life settings is still lacking. In order to explore this issue, we formed a team with practitioners at a digital design studio. During 10 months, the team co-designed activities and materials intended to sensitize design practitioners at the studio to ethics. Our findings highlight the importance of presenting ethics in an appealing manner in order to engage designers, and this paper illustrates how we explored this in our project. Moreover, we discuss co-design as a collaborative space for engaging design practitioners in the exploration and development of ethics that go beyond “tick-box exercises”.

INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to design research by providing methodological inspiration and practitioner-led examples of how to sensitize design practitioners to ethics through co-design. “Now is our moment to change the practice of design to improve the ethics of design” urges Shilton (2018) joining a body of scholars (e.g. Friedman et al., 2002; Vallor, 2018; Buolamwini, 2016) and practitioners (e.g. Kalbag & Balkan, 2017; Monteiro, 2019; Zou, 2021) calling for a more ethical design practice.

Bringing products and services into the world implies ethical responsibility (Eggink et al., 2022) and there is a growing conversation about the negative effects of technology design, addressing issues such as discrimination (Costanza-Chock, 2020), deception and manipulation (Brignull, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2020) and harassment (Ashktorab & Vitak, 2016; Naughton, 2018). Moreover, ethics is often “buried” in regulatory frameworks and administrative processes (Luján Escalante et al., 2022) and therefore often considered to stifle creativity (Eggink et al., 2022).

There is an abundance of “theoretically driven approaches” attempting to increase ethical design (Chivukula et al., 2019) but results and propositions from academia seem underused in practice (Norman, 2010; Colusso et al., 2017; Shilton, 2018). Several recent studies aim to bridge this research-practice gap by taking a practice-based perspective (Chivukula et al., 2019; Chivukula et al., 2020; Lindberg et al., 2020; Lindberg et al., 2021) through involving practitioners in research and exploring their life-worlds and practices related to ethics. Still, knowledge concerning how advocates for ethical design would cultivate ethics in real-life practice is lacking.

Aiming to reduce the aforementioned research/practice-gap and contribute to design research, the authors of this paper formed a partnership with a digital design studio in Sweden. Our partnership was in the form of a “cultivation team” consisting of three design practitioners from the studio and one researcher (the first author of this paper). During 10 months, the members of the cultivation team co-designed an
inspirational talk, a survey and two Miro boards (www.miro.com), intended to sensitize design practitioners to ethics (Fig. 1). The team employed an open-ended, exploratory, learning-by-doing approach, and our focus was on the “fuzzy front-end” (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), meaning that the team was mainly focusing on raising awareness and interest in ethics, and on generating insights intended to inform further ethics cultivation at the studio. Cultivating a practice into developing and incorporating new ideals and repertoires takes time, and our project was the exploratory beginning of this journey.

**ETHICS IN DESIGN**

There is a tendency to think about ethics as only relevant in very narrow circumstances and related to regulatory frameworks and administrative processes (Luján Escalante et al., 2022). However, ethics is connected to everyday design work: the products and services we chose to design, who we design them for, and how we design them, affects individuals, communities and society, and should therefore also be considered from an ethical perspective.

Ethical considerations in design can refer to for example ethical concepts or principles related to what to design and the objects of design (Chan, 2018), methods and tools for ethical design (Vallor, 2018; Chivukula et al., 2019; Chivukula et al., 2021), unintended consequences of design (Parvin & Pollock, 2020), or the values of designers and design outcomes (Friedman et al., 2002; Shilton, 2013).

As researchers, we agree with a pragmatist approach to ethics, focusing on people’s practices rather than on theories, and on joint inquiry as a means to explore problems and develop solutions (Steen, 2011). Moreover, we draw from the concept of *ethos*, described by Frauenberger, Rauhala and Fitzpatrick (2016) as a “moral attitude that underlies a particular practice”. Ethos shapes actions, and actions shape the ethos in return (ibid.). This adheres to the view of ethics as a negotiation between individuals and groups, and being continuously in formation, which requires work: “debating, talking, listening, understanding, respecting and in many cases, troubling the status quo and being uncomfortable” (Walsh, 2007). This is something very different from the regulatory and admin approach to ethics, which is often manifested as codes of conduct, checklists, or consent forms.

Adhering to the pragmatist and participatory approach to ethics, the cultivation team members wanted to explore how we might support the increasing of ethically responsible design at the studio, based on the studio employees’ own understandings of what that might mean, and based on their ideas and ways of working (in contrast to employing any pre-defined ethical framework or academic standpoint).

**CULTIVATING PRACTICE**

In order to explore how advocates for ethical design would cultivate ethics in real-life practice, we have drawn from the concept of “cultivating communities of practice” (Wenger et al., 2002). Essentially, a community of practice (CoP) is a social structure – e.g. a group of design practitioners – that facilitates social learning and thinking together about real-life problems or hot topics (Pyrko et al., 2019). This means that CoPs provide contexts for professionals to help each other.

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learn. Over time, community members develop shared values as well as shared repertoires of e.g. methods and skills (Li et al., 2009). A CoP usually consists of a core of people who lead the CoP, as well as domain experts, novices, and everything in between (Wenger et al., 2002). A domain, in the CoP terminology, is a domain of knowledge, i.e. a topic of interest that creates a common ground and a sense of common identity. This is one of the three elements of a CoP (ibid.). The next is community, which refers to the people who create the social fabric of learning and development. Third, there is the shared practice that the people are developing in order to excel in their domain. CoPs live in “landscapes of practices”, and people often belong to multiple ones (Fig. 2) (Wenger-Strayner et al., 2014).

Figure 2: A workplace can be a CoP and can contain several CoPs, related to other CoPs. People usually belong to multiple ones.

Cultivation, in this context, means to influence and support communities so that they can prosper and achieve their full potential. Wenger et al. (2002) compare this to the cultivation of plants: “[…] you can do much to encourage healthy plants: till the soil, ensure they have enough nutrients, supply water, secure the right amount of sun exposure, and protect them from pests and weeds.” In our project, cultivation meant to co-design activities and materials adapted to the CoP at hand (the design studio) intended to sensitize design practitioners to ethics and increase ethical practices.

CO-DESIGNING ETHICS CULTIVATION

The notion of cultivation as described above, as well as the notion of joint inquiry, also described above, are in accord with co-design, emphasizing the importance of involving the people concerned and learning and becoming together. Since our research and project aim was to explore how to enable ethics cultivation, co-design was deemed a suitable approach. First, since co-designing can function as collaborative “sites of exploration, experimentation and transformation” (Salmi & Mattelmäki, 2021) as they invite stakeholders to participate in a design process as information providers, creative minds, and/or evaluators of new ideas (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Mattelmäki & Visser, 2011). Second, since co-designing is how many design practitioners are already used to working as they collaborate in teams with each other, users, and other stakeholders, building solutions together, thus making this approach familiar and comfortable to them. Third, since involving the people concerned to develop solutions can make the solutions better, and has democratic purposes – designing with people instead of for them. Fourth, since involving the people concerned might help develop realistic expectations (Bjerknes & Bratteteig, 1995).

OUR PROJECT AND DATA

Our project supported different goals for the different members of the cultivation team. The design studio part sought to build knowledge of how to sensitize design practitioners at the studio to ethics, and to also increase ethical practices to some extent. The researcher part of the team aimed to contribute to design research by considering this project as a “research program” (Binder & Redstrom, 2006) – employing a set of “explorations” in order to pursue our research interest.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The first author of this paper is a design researcher with past professional experience from design industry. Her former colleague Jenny (pseudonym) is now a customer experience/user experience manager and designer at a design studio. Jenny’s stance is that design studios (her workplace included) need to take increased ethical responsibility for what they unleash into the world, and that this perspective needs a push in order to spread. This provided an opening for us researchers to study the cultivation of ethics in design practice, together with practitioners in a real-life setting. This setting was a design studio with its main sites in Sweden. The studio is a consultancy that designs and innovates digital products and services. The majority of the 80 employees go under the umbrella term of “creatives” and are designers (e.g. UX, industrial, and product designers) or engineers (e.g. software, mechanical, and electronic engineers). In early conversations exploring the preconditions for our project, the researchers were told that “ethics” is not a commonly used term at the studio, but that they have discussed ethical aspects of their work, such as sustainable sourcing of materials, and that they have decided to decline assignments from clients they deem unethical, such as tobacco companies.

THE CULTIVATION TEAM

Jenny (the design practitioner initiating this project, introduced above) and the first author of this paper established a tiny team of two to start things off. Jenny then invited two of her colleagues to join, since she wanted additional perspectives from the studio as well as more “hands” to participate in the ideating, planning, implementation and analysis throughout the project. The four of us formed a “cultivation team” consisting of three design studio employees and the first author of this paper (Table 1). The project had management
support, but no pre-defined deliverables were expected. The team was given freedom to explore as we saw fit, aligning with the studio’s core values of empowering and trusting employees.

Table 1: Cultivation team members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title/role</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer experience/user experience (CX/UX) designer and manager</td>
<td>Jenny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UX researcher</td>
<td>Ruby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications and marketing manager</td>
<td>Zelda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design researcher</td>
<td>First author</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the researcher’s point of view, the joint team was a way to gain insight of everyday life and values at the studio, an important prerequisite for successful co-design. The joint team was also important since Covid-19 pandemic restrictions made it impossible to visit the design studio. From the design studio’s point of view, the collaboration provided an opportunity to join arms with design researchers and to build knowledge of ethics and ethics cultivation at the studio.

The team co-designed activities and materials intended to sensitize the studio creatives outside of the team to ethics. The studio creatives outside of the team provided their understandings, preferences and ideas for ethics cultivation through the activities/materials created by the cultivation team. In that sense, they were also co-designing ethics cultivation, but on another level (Fig. 3). Informed consent was obtained from all participants; each activity was accessed by the participants through a webpage explaining purpose, data collection, etc.

![Cultivation team diagram](Image)

Figure 3: Participants

THE CULTIVATION TEAM’S CO-DESIGN PROCESS

In the beginning of our collaboration, Jenny and the first author of this paper were a “core team”, designing and facilitating workshops and meetings and drafting ideas for the rest of the team to evaluate and build on. As the four of us got to know each other better over time, the division between core team and the rest dissolved. Ideas flowed freely among all team members during our co-design sessions, as well as in-between, building upon one another. Even though the research goal was to explore how to sensitize design practitioners to ethics, it was important to the authors of this paper that the collaboration should be mutually beneficial, and that the studio employees should not feel like research objects that were being studied by academics. An important measure taken for this was to make joint decisions in the team, the aim being that everything we did should provide value to everyone involved. Since Jenny and the first author have previously worked together at a design studio, their shared experiences, terminology and skills blurred the lines between researcher and practitioners, at least to some extent. Furthermore, our team did not have explicit roles assigned; we regarded each team member as an expert in their own right.

DATA GENERATION AND COLLECTION

We used video for meetings (Zoom and Teams), chat in-between meetings (Slack), and an online whiteboard (Miro) and document (Google Docs) for exploring ideas and for documentation. The team had 1-2 hour work sessions 1-2 times/week during part 1 and 2 (Fig. 1) and also worked in-between meetings (with e.g. survey design). Co-design sessions were usually structured around a question, for example “How might we cultivate ethics in design at the design studio?”. In those sessions, the main method for team idea generation was brain-storming in the form of individual idea generation (Table 2), presenting to the team, and then evaluating and deciding together, building on each other’s ideas.

Table 2: Example data from team brainstorm session on “How might we cultivate ethics in design at the design studio?”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric</th>
<th>Example from data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of collaboration and cultivation</td>
<td>To cultivate ethical design practices To build knowledge and capacities within [design studio name] To get interesting materials for [design studio blog]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some existing idea formats</td>
<td>Workshop sessions for developing ideas Future sessions e.g. speculative scenarios, role play, visualisations, stories etc to explore possible futures of design ethics in practice Inspirational and educational exercises, introducing ideas such as situated knowledge, care ethics, perspectives on fairness etc. Perhaps also methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideation area</td>
<td>Ask clients what their main interests are and use these as topics. Anonymity caters to more honest feedback. Power sessions, 20-30 minutes. Most work done on own time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to co-design sessions, we also had meetings to assess how the activities and materials that we had created had panned out (Fig.1). For example, after the inspirational talk, the cultivation team met and discussed feedback and reactions from employees who had attended the talk.

The collaboration was initiated in May 2021 and finished in March 2022. Not counting the holiday months, it spanned ten months. Data was collected throughout the project.

The cultivation team’s co-design of the inspirational talk was documented through meeting notes and Keynote slides. The cultivations team’s co-design of the survey and Miro boards was documented through our team chat, meeting notes, Miro sketches/mock-ups and our shared planning document (a continuously updated collection of brainstorms, decisions, schedules, documentation, links to sketches and mock-ups, and important ideas and discussions). The studio creatives’ contributions were documented through their participation in the survey and boards.

The survey platform logged the number of participants (15), while Miro did not. The survey and Miro boards are attached in appendix A.

In addition, research notes reflecting on the process were continuously taken by the first author of this paper, noting rich and significant quotes and moments “worthy of attention” (Saldana, 2015) such as what the studio team members had reported as important, and topics or situations that had provoked strong reactions.

THE INSPIRATIONAL TALK

The team’s first activity for engaging the creatives at the studio was to provide an inspirational talk. The studio has 1-hour sessions 1-2 times per month for skill development and inspiration, and the team decided to use one of these sessions for a talk on ethics in design. Jenny reached out to some colleagues through the company chat asking for related points of interest to them, receiving suggestions such as “gender, race, identity, and big data”.

The talk (approximately 1 hour) took its point of departure in the first author’s previous research on ethics in design practice, connected to issues suggested by Jenny’s colleagues, presented examples of harm caused by design, discussed some reasons for ethically harmful design, and suggested a number of ethics-focused methods and tools.

The talk ended with a workshop invitation for further ethics explorations. However, no-one signed up. The team decided to pause the project in order to allow some time for reflection. Summer holidays were also approaching – autumn could provide a fresh start.

SURVEY AND MIRO BOARDS

After the summer break, the team reflected on the unexpected lack of interest. We had to “reframe” the situation (Schön, 1994). Ruby suggested that workshops might be too much of a commitment, and that smaller asynchronous events might make it possible for more people to engage. This “bite sizing” idea was also based on the notion that ethics is a large topic, and that smaller chunks could make it clearer and also lower the threshold to participation. The team decided to proceed with Ruby’s idea, which would be a way to “think big, start small, learn fast” (Mui, 2019).

“It needs to be entertaining to reel them in” Ruby stated, highlighting that for the creatives at the studio to even notice our ethics bites, they needed to stand out. Moreover, despite having management support, our project had to be done alongside the regular studio work, meaning that the bites had to be quick to interact with. We also deemed that anonymity would cater to more honest responses and did therefore not collect data about the participants. The team decided to create “ethics bites” (short activities on ethics) that should be:

- Raising awareness of ethics in design
- Attention-grabbing through interesting topics and engaging formats, visual style, and language
- Entertaining
- Quick and easy to interact with
- Anonymous
- Asynchronous
- Creating knowledge about ethics and ethics cultivation (in the team and at the studio in general)
- Inviting creatives at the studio to share their understandings, preferences and ideas for ethics cultivation, thus creating knowledge in the team useful for further cultivation

We wanted to try different formats (e.g. survey, Miro boards, speculative scenarios, individual reflection, “open” reflection) and topics (e.g. ethics as responsibilities or ethics connected to the design process) to learn what would work, adhering to our learning-by-doing approach. We also thought that a variety of formats would be more fun for the participants.

The team started thinking about the project as a campaign and that we needed to brand ethics in order to make it attractive, and to connect the different bites. Ruby (UX researcher) and Zelda (marketing and communications manager) formulated a campaign name, “Beyond Good & Evil”, as a way to talk about ethics without mentioning “ethics”, because (as expressed by Ruby) “ethics is often viewed as boring”. Jenny (CX/UX designer and manager) involved a visual
designer colleague to provide graphic assets. Ruby provided the copy. The style was intended to be attention-grabbing, relatable, and fun, and connected to the studio rather than to the university (Fig. 4).

Originally, six bites were planned to be launched once a week over nine weeks, ending with a student competition-hackathon-grand finale. The weekly drops were intended to stimulate curiosity, avoid overwhelming potential participants, and provide opportunities for the team to change the next bite as we learned what had worked and not. For introducing the campaign and bites, Jenny set up a studio chat channel for our project and prepared slides for the weekly studio Monday meetings. These meetings address e.g. new clients and gather all employees. Each Monday meeting, the “ethics bite of the week” would be presented, and Jenny would send an invitation in the chat channel, inviting everyone to participate.

However, it had been time-consuming to create the ethics bites, and our team wanted to deliver something that was up to studio standards. “Hard to package & deliver something that excites people when we’re already on stuff 100%”, Ruby wrote in our team chat, highlighting the struggle. It was now almost November, and the end of year was closing in fast. We decided to do three bites and then assess and discuss how to move forward:

1. *How I think about ethics in my work:* A survey exploring creatives’ understanding of “ethics”, what they deemed important for increasing ethical design, and what ethical responsibility might mean.
2. *How we (should) work with ethics:* A Miro board capturing ideas on existing materials and practices, as well as for new materials and practices, deemed useful for increasing ethics in design (Fig. 4).
3. *Darkness – When in the design process does s**t hit the fan?* A Miro board for mapping out real or potential ethical “breakdowns” in studio design projects, and for conceiving ways to mend or avoid the breakdowns (Fig. 4).

**ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES**

Following standard practice in participatory design (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2016), analysis was conducted during as well as after.

*During:* The cultivation team met after each “bite” to reflect and assess, in accord with our exploratory approach. We met online for 1-2 hours, discussing: What insights did we get? Should we change the next activity or material? Decisions were documented in our planning document.

*Figure 4:* Examples of the ethics campaign, activities and materials; a poster, a Slack invite, and the two Miro boards.
After: The cultivation team met twice (Fig. 1, part 3) by the end of our project, to reflect on the collaborative process and on the outcomes from the talk, survey and boards. The meetings were approximately 1 hour long and conducted through video conference. We discussed initial expectations, reflected on the collaboration and project outcomes, and came up with ideas for future ethics cultivation efforts. For analyzing the project and writing this paper, all documentation was also systematically read and discussed by the authors of this paper, conducting an inductive qualitative analysis: close reading of texts, looking for answers to our research question (“evaluation objective”), coding, creating categories, and refining and revising codes and categories (Thomas, 2006). Moreover, a draft of this paper was shared with the studio part of the team, and their feedback was collected.

FINDINGS

Our findings are structured into two parts. The first part focuses on the outcomes from the survey and Miro boards that were co-designed by the cultivation team. The second part presents reflections on the process, highlighting insights and conclusions from the cultivation team based on the team’s two final meetings.

OUTCOMES – CREATIVES’ CONTRIBUTIONS

The ideas and suggestions generated and collected through our survey and boards touched upon concrete practices, such as tools and methods, as well as more intangible aspects, such as “culture” and “mindsets”. These insights are useful for future cultivation efforts as they reveal creative’s ideas and perceptions. For example, practitioners’ understanding of “ethics” is useful for framing and communicating cultivation activities, and the insight that “battle of egos” can cause ethical issues to fall under the radar implies that cultivators need to also consider how team culture affects ethical conduct.

Moreover, our findings show the kinds of insights that this project was able to produce. Our survey and boards were designed to be quick to interact with, which also generated “quick ideas”. Returning to the cultivation metaphor: they are “seeds” that need tending to in order to develop and grow.

The definition of ethics: “Ethics” was described as means to navigate between good and bad. It was also described as preventing unintended harmful consequences, respecting human values, and doing good for people and the world at large. Moreover, as an attitude or a mindset: to have good intentions, and to take responsibility for what and how to design.

Education is key: Ethics education/training was ranked the most important activity for increasing ethics in design. Moreover, participants suggested that education should connect ethics to workplace practices in order to make the topic graspmable. That education can come in many forms was also evident: informal knowledge sharing as well as learning-by-doing were noted in addition to more traditional formats such as lectures.

Ethical mindset: Ethical responsibility was considered a mindset that should permeate the design process. Talking about “what is expected from me” was an important way of achieving this mindset, and examples of taking ethical responsibility were to e.g. choose ethical clients, and to consider ethical impacts of projects (“Don’t only answer to the design brief”). Taking ethical responsibility was connected to raising one’s voice, for instance: “Be critical and raise concerns”, and “If not me, who?”, emphasizing that ethical design requires individual bravery and integrity.

Tools and methods for ethics: Using tools for ethical design was another theme, an example being to agree on “the ethical lens” in the beginning of a design project and using that lens as a metric. Another suggestion was to do the opposite: to define in the beginning of a project “things that are unethical that you specifically want to fight against in your work”. Checklists, codes of ethics, and employee onboarding were suggested documents that are familiar at the studio and that could incorporate ethical aspects of and for design. Creating “ethics starter packs” related to common activities, such as UX research, was also suggested, as was ethics-focused client reviews. Another idea was to introduce brainstorming on bad things that might happen. Ethical practice/worst practice might help creatives envision what to aim for as well as what to avoid. Declaring the studio’s ethical stance was also mentioned, this might affect ways of working and thinking, and attract different (more ethical?) clients and partners. Establishing “culture retrospectives” to investigate what employees were happy/unhappy about with the culture was also a suggestion, connecting well-being and happiness at work to “ethics”. Additionally, a suggestion was made to establish a discussion panel that could specifically address the “ethical touchpoints that appear in our daily work”.

Folding in ethics into the design process: Before a project, responses suggested to identify ethical goals/aims (in addition to other goals/aims that a project typically has) that can be tracked and evaluated. One participant highlighted that during a project, the work culture affects what could be discussed and not. This can undoubtedly be a problem for all sensitive topics, ethics not excluded. Losing sight of ethical dimensions due to e.g. stuff coming in from the side or “battle of egos” (described also as “no, my idea is better”) was another problem. At the end of projects, retrospectives are often held in order to reflect and learn. A question/suggestion noted related to this was: “Do these include ethics? Or just client satisfaction?”.
PROCESS – GROUNDING THE CULTIVATION

The team had two meetings for “zooming out”, wrapping up and looking ahead (Fig 1, part 3). The team assessed the project with a focus on the process, and discussed what could have been done differently as well as ideas for moving forward. The insights below cover the main conclusions drawn by the team.

Defining purpose and aligning expectations: Our approach to this project had been learning-by-doing. Still, at our closing meetings, Zelda and Jenny felt that the number of participants had been too low and the results had been too shallow. Ruby, on the other hand, was rather happy with the number of participants as well as the outcomes. This expectation misalignment revealed that we should have discussed expectations and follow-up more, despite the open-ended approach.

Preparing the work: Chatting more informally – e.g. “20 minute coffees” – to different people in the organization could have helped spread awareness of and excitement for our project, expanded the network of individuals interested in the ethics of design, and provided the team with more opportunities to learn about e.g. experiences and examples to build the ethics bites on.

Connect with allies: Moving forward, the ethics cultivation team could connect with more people in the organization, e.g. team leads, who could influence their colleagues and get more people on board.

You don’t have to be an expert: Zelda’s impression was that many colleagues had wanted to participate in the ethics bites, but also wanted to be really thorough when doing so. They are used to taking on the expert role, and might not have realised that even unpolished ideas would be appreciated in our project. We drew the conclusion that moving forward it would important to emphasize that all participation is appreciated, even non-expert and incomplete ideas.

Ethics is a group effort: We had created the bites for individual and anonymous participation. Even though this idea, at least on paper, would require less time and effort than e.g. workshops, workshops might still have been more attractive due to the social aspect. Perhaps mixing anonymous and open bites would have been better too. This project also made it clear to us that many colleagues had wanted to participate in the ethics bites, but also wanted to be really thorough when doing so. They are use.

Pace and size matter: The team had thought that launching ethics bites once a week over a period of time would allow employees who did not have the time one week to be able to participate the next. Smaller bites might also feel like less work. However, in hindsight, the team thought that fewer, bigger bites might have stood out more, catching people’s attention, and felt more like a fun “happening”. Bigger bites would, however, require more resources.

Attention and energy are scarce resources: “We’ve undergone a lot of change”, said Zelda, realizing in hindsight that the pandemic had affected everyone’s energy levels, that the studio had been through a merger that had taken a lot of work and stirred emotions, and that other company activities had competed with the ethics bites over participants’ attention. For future cultivation, a more thorough scanning of competing events could provide better timing. There might never come a perfect time (the studio is always busy) but a better scanning might at least provide better preconditions.

Connect it to a familiar topic: Jenny suggested that connecting ethics to sustainability – perhaps even framing ethics as “digital sustainability” – might make it more familiar and thus more compelling to her colleagues at the studio. A related idea was to connect ethics to business. The studio exists in the realm of business, as they are consultants, and employees are evaluated on billable time since this is how the studio makes money. Therefore, “ethics related to brand equity” (as Zelda put it) might stimulate engagement in ethics. In short, talking about ethics as e.g. “good for business” could resonate with practitioners, managers, and clients, making time spent on ethical deliberations make sense as well as being easier to bill.

Integrate ethics into design studio practice: The team deemed that instead of introducing ethics on top of what people are already doing at the studio, it might be more efficient and smoother to use what is already familiar as points of departure for ethics. For example, Zelda suggested introducing ethics as a topic when onboarding new employees (onboarding is a practice already in use). Another idea was to use personal development plans (a common practice at the studio, containing e.g. skills to improve). By adding ethics education in such a plan, time spent on learning about ethics would be “allowed”. Providing dedicated time for ethics cultivation (hours per week) was a related suggestion. The studio could also offer design ethics training, making it easily accessible to employees and framing it as encouraged by the studio. Adding an ethical stance in communication (e.g. in slides used to present the studio at clients etc) was another idea. Discussing design examples from an ethics perspective was another suggestion – just as designs are already discussed for inspiration and learning in regards to e.g. interaction design. Adding methods for ethical design (e.g. “the evil persona”) in the internal studio toolbox was another idea. Lastly, creating a “hub” for ethics at the studio (e.g. a resource repository) might provide a helpful starting point and package the topic as something that the studio encourages employees to engage in.
CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have provided an account of how a joint team of design practitioners and a researcher attempted to sensitize designers to ethics. We followed the initiative of a design practitioner, formed a cultivation team, and co-designed an inspirational talk as well as an ethics campaign with a name, graphic design, and tone of voice intended to package ethics attractively and connect a number of activities also co-designed by the team: a survey and two Miro boards. From this project, we have presented the process, outcomes, and potential ways forward.

CO-DESIGN AS A METHOD FOR ETHICS CULTIVATION

The aim of this project was to sensitize design practitioners to ethics, and to do this with designers in real-life practice. We suggest that our project, employing co-design as a method for ethics cultivation, can serve as an exemplar for future ethics cultivators, for the following four reasons.

First, co-design is familiar to most designers, and familiar approaches are comfortable. Dealing with ethics is complex, and ethics is also a rather novel dimension to consider for many design practitioners. Moreover, ethics can often be deemed as “not-my-domain” (Luján Escalante et al., 2022). These issues can make engagement in ethics feel both daunting and uncomfortable, and lead to reluctance to engage. In addition, in many professional and social settings, there is the fear of being “exposed” or “getting it wrong” (McEntee, 2021). Using a familiar approach that many practitioners also like, might mitigate uncomfortable feelings and reluctance to engage, at least to some extent.

Second, co-design allows design practitioners to talk about ethics in terms decided by them and of aspects and problems that they relate to, instead of having to adapt to terms, aspects, and problems prescribed by others – which might be hard to relate to or even understand. We argue that for design practitioners to engage in ethics, ethics needs to relate to issues that practitioners understand and consider to be important, and co-design is a way of making visible and naming these issues. Co-design can also disclose assumptions, attitudes and language used in a CoP when dealing with ethics-related matters. This is useful for framing ethics in design in attractive ways. How we name and frame things affects our understanding and our actions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). For example, talking about “human enhancement” as either “fuel” or “steroids” affects how positive people are towards it; “fuel” makes it sound better, while “steroids” can make it seem less appealing (Dinh et al., 2020). In an early co-design session in the cultivation team, we realized that studio practitioners deemed ethics to be “boring” and that this could be a blocker to engage. This insight led the team to explore approaches and designs intended to counteract this perception. For instance, we avoided the term “ethics” in the campaign name, used eye-catching and fun graphic design, and employed participatory and exploratory formats to stimulate sharing of ideas and suggestions.

Third, co-designing ethics in design can be a kick-start for cultivating a CoP around the topic, since co-design creates space to start engaging. Moreover, introducing, providing and promoting co-design spaces for engaging in ethical design creates awareness. If the awareness is raised in a suitable manner (framed correctly) this might lead to interest and engagement and a more long-term commitment to keep exploring and learning. CoPs that focus on the domain of ethics in design would be able to develop situated understandings and approaches over time, adapting to the issues that arise.

Fourth, co-design can promote active and creative engagement, suggested to be foundational for handling ethics in practice as it involves personal experience and emotions and not only logic, which is important for meaning-making and the creation of ways forward (Luján Escalante et al., 2022; Steen, 2011). Moreover, co-design fits with the designerly approach of exploring problems and solutions simultaneously (Cross, 2006). This means that co-design approaches can provide an epistemologically sound space for the co-design of ethics, that also fits well with how design practitioners normally work.

However, one size does not fit all. Cultivators need to attempt to judge/decide which approach(es) that will suit their context best, for instance what aspects of ethics that the different “audiences” will understand and find engaging, and which pace, size, format, graphic design etc that will appeal to them. The members of the cultivation team, and their position and power in the organization, also needs to be considered.

SUMMARY OF PRACTICE-LED IDEAS FOR CULTIVATING ETHICS IN DESIGN

Throughout our project, practitioners in and outside of the team suggested practices that they deemed useful for the cultivation of ethics in design, for example arranging ethics hackathons and ethics training, and setting goals for ethics in design projects. These ideas are already noted above, but to improve their accessibility, the first author has compiled them into a small idea bank, attached as appendix B.

The compilation process went as follows: After the project, ideas from team meetings, survey and boards were noted onto digital sticky notes. These notes were then organized into an affinity diagram, and clarifying rubrics were added: Raise awareness & create an
interest in ethics in design, Increase knowledge about ethics in design, and Implement standard practices for ethics in design.

The contents of the idea bank also tell us something about how design practitioners consider ethics cultivation: that it needs to be attractive. In this case, “attractive” means to make sense logically, evoke positive emotions, be concrete, and fit with practice.

ETHICS VS BUSINESS-AS-USUAL DESIGN

Our project generated insights regarding ethics cultivation in a design studio setting. However, as mentioned above, parts of the cultivation team had hoped for a higher number of participants, and more suggestions and ideas from the survey and Miro boards. While there may have been several reasons for the (arguably) low participation and engagement, we wish to draw attention to one specific reason, namely the following: the main driving force in design industry is profit rather than positive impact. Therefore, even though management did support our project, there was more to gain for our participants by doing “normal design work” and showing more billable hours than by participating in the ethics bites. Doing “normal design work” is most often what designers are supposed to be doing at work.

A way to address this issue and engage more employees moving forward was suggested by Zelda: talking about ethics related to “brand equity”. This frames ethics in design both as a business opportunity, such as leveraging ethically responsible design to differentiate from competitors, and a risk management strategy, such as using ethically responsible design to avoid potential lawsuits or negative press. In the larger design industry CoP, as well as at the design studio at hand, these reasons make sense. Connecting ethics to how it affects the business aligns with a “business-as-usual design” logic where profit comes first and ethical considerations are not always in the forefront (Wizinsky, 2022). However, since “business-as-usual design” logic has shown to sometimes lead to rather horrible consequences (discrimination, harassment etc, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper) there are reasons to question this paradigm. We suggest that co-design could be a useful method to do so.

CO-DESIGN AS A (BLANK) SPACE FOR CULTIVATING ETHICS IN DESIGN

Reflection and learning in design practice has been discussed in-depth as e.g. reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1994). Another approach, more tightly connected to the concept of communities of practice, is as “rehearsal spaces” where CoP members can “rehearse” (like an orchestra before a concert) without fear of losing face in front of clients, and without having to consider budgets, timelines and other day-to-day business requirements (McEntee, 2021).

We wish to build on this, and suggest that co-design, understood as a collaborative space (or “lab”, “jam”, “circle”, “inquiry” etc), is a viable way forward for increasing ethical design practices. Furthermore, and importantly, that this space needs to be “blanked out” from “business-as-usual design” rationalities such as budgets, timelines, billable hours etc in order to make room for imagination, brave attempts at challenging the current paradigm, and collaborative explorations of what might be instead. By intentionally setting aside (as much as possible of) business rationalities, cultivators can create co-design sessions that are “blank spaces” and not weighed down by everyday business considerations, thereby having the potential to better support more innovative explorations. Creating such spaces is of course easier said than done though, since the overall context of design industry is still “business-as-usual design”. To address this issue, and to further explore the potentials of co-design as a space for participatory ethics cultivation in design industry, we suggest inquiring into the relationship between “business-as-usual design” and ethics in design – how might they co-exist? How might we better combine making money with doing good for the world? Moreover: What are the negatives of only considering “business-as-usual design” reasons to care about ethics? Does “business-as-usual design” look the same in the global south as in the global north? And what are the additional rationales, besides ethically responsible design as a business opportunity or risk management strategy, that might convince design studios in industry, and in different cultures around the globe, to engage more in ethically responsible design?

Lastly, we recognize that the cultivation of new understandings, perspectives, and practices requires long-term engagement. Even though our study only spanned ten months, we believe it can serve as an exemplar of how design practitioners might cultivate ethics in a real-life practice setting. We hope that this can be useful for designers and design researchers interested in the ethics of design.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey and Miro boards, overview
Appendix B: Practice-led ideas for ethics cultivation
REFERENCES


