

Virtuosos of the Experience Domain

Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders, IDSA
President, SonicRim
The Ohio State University

Introduction

There is a lot of talk lately about “Experience Design”. Companies sell experience design, but don’t define what it is. On-line discussion groups debate who the virtuosos of the experience domain should be. Design educators wonder if they should be teaching it. And they wonder how they should be teaching it.

In this paper I will address the following questions:

- What is experience?
- What is experience design?
- Who is creative?
- How do you design for experiencing?
- Who are the real virtuosos of the Experience Domain?
- Does this perspective change design education? How?

What is experience?

Experience is a subjective event, felt only by the person who has the experience. Experience is ephemeral, i.e., lasting only for the moment. Experiences that have already been lived and felt I will call *memories*. Experiences not yet lived or felt, but imagined, I will call *dreams*.

Experiencing is the point where memory and imagination meet. Figure 1 shows the full set of experiences (i.e., memories, the current moment and dreams) in the experience domain.

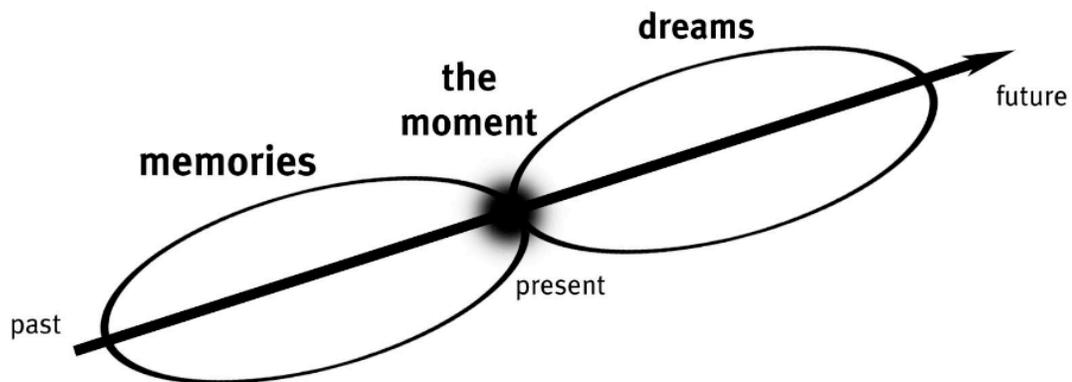


FIGURE 1 The experience domain

Sanders, E.B.-N. (2001) Virtuosos of the experience domain. In *Proceedings of the 2001 IDSA Education Conference*.

The moment is inextricably woven into past memories. We interpret what is happening around us with reference to our past experiences. The moment is also tightly coupled to the dreams of our imagination. We interpret what is going on around us in anticipation of our hopes and fears for the future.

The images of experience described below have helped me to see it more clearly.

“Our future is cantilevered from the past...our present experience gains dimension and resonance when we can discern in it traces of the people, places, and sensations that left their mark on us and incline us to be the individuals we presently are”. (Wendlinger, 1995).

“A flimsy curtain separates memory from imagination” (Loftus and Calvin, 2001). Loftus is referring to the work she has done in regarding memory reconstruction in the areas of eye-witness testimony and cases of alleged child abuse. But the metaphor also illuminates the ephemerality of the moment.

What is experience design?

There is no such thing as experience design. You can't design experience because experiencing is in people. You can *design for experiencing*, however. You can design the scaffolding or infrastructure that people can use to create their own experiences.

Who is creative?

Everyone is creative. (Bohm, 1998). Most people, however, are not in the habit of using or expressing their creativity. Their creativity is likely to be latent. In fact, ordinary people have gotten a reputation (amongst designers and marketers, for example) of not being creative at all. This attitude comes, in part, from the language of product development. We call people “consumers”, “users”, and “customers.” But people only play these roles for small, often insignificant and not so positive portions of their lives. When we label them, it relegates them to minor roles. If we start referring to them as people, maybe we will begin to think of them as people.

There is a wellspring of creativity that all people have when it comes to experiences meaningful to them. And with the advent of new forms of communication and information technology, people today are becoming more demanding “consumers”. They are beginning to use their influence to get what they want, when they want it and how they want it. They are in the position now to become participants, even idea generators, in the design development process. And they know it.

How do you design for experiencing?

The first step in learning to design for experiencing is to take a new attitude about the people who buy and use the products and services you are designing. This attitude is to respect their opinions and to respect their innate creativity. This won't be hard for those of you new to

design, because it matches your intuition. But it may be much harder for those who are experienced design professionals.

The new attitude comes from a field known as participatory design. The participatory attitude is based on the principle that those involved in the use and/or production of a product need to be directly involved in its design.

How do we involve non-designers in the design development process? We start by learning about their memories, their current experiences and their dreams for the future. There are many different ways to do this including:

- We can listen to what people say and make inferences about what they think.
- We can watch what people do and use.
- We can discover what people know.
- We can elicit an understanding of what people feel.
- We can evoke people to dream. And when they have come to the dreaming point, we can give them participatory design tools with which they can create and express their own ideas.

Each route to experience reveals a different story or picture. Listening to what people say tells us what they are able to express in words (i.e., *explicit* knowledge). But it only gives us what they want us to hear. Watching what people do and seeing what they use provides us with *observable* information (or observed experience). But knowing what people say/think, do and use is not enough (Sanders, 1992).

Discovering what people know helps us to communicate with them. Understanding what they feel gives us the ability to empathize with them. This way of knowing provides *tacit knowledge*, i.e., knowledge that can't readily be expressed in words (Polanyi, 1983). Evoking people's dreams will show us how their future could change for the better. It can reveal *latent needs*, i.e., needs not recognizable until the future. When we bring ordinary people through a guided discovery process and put them in touch with their feelings and dreams, we have established in them the conditions for creative thought and expression.

These different ways of accessing people's experiences have evolved over time. Traditional design research methods were focused primarily on observational research (i.e., looking at what people do and use). Traditional market research methods, on the other hand, have been focused more on what people say and think (through focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires). The new tools are focused on what people *make*, i.e., what they create from the toolkits we provide for them to use in expressing their thoughts, feelings, dreams and new ideas. *Make* methods enable creative expression by giving people ambiguous visual stimuli to work with. Being ambiguous, these stimuli can be interpreted in different ways, and can activate different memories and feelings in different people. The visual nature liberates people's creativity from the boundaries of what they can state in words. Together, the ambiguity and the visual nature of these tools allow people room for creativity, both in expressing their current experiences and feelings and in generating new ideas.

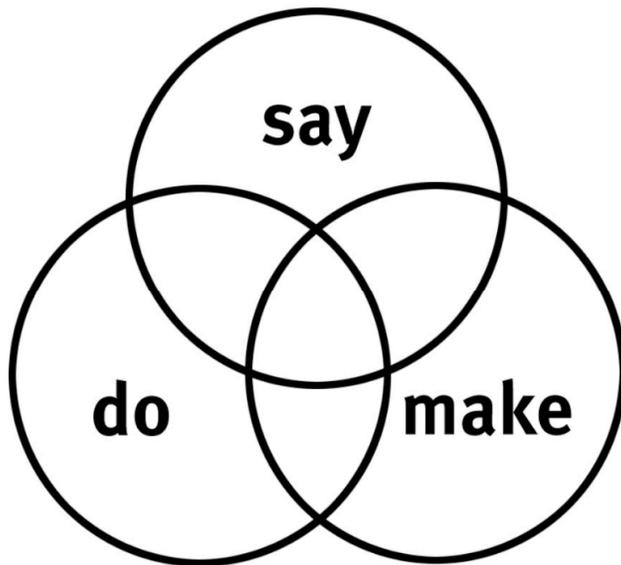


FIGURE 2 What people say, do and make: A design research framework

When all three perspectives (what people do, what they say, and what they make) are explored simultaneously, we are able to understand the experience domains of the ordinary people we are serving. When we bring them through guided discovery and give them the participatory *make* tools, we have set the stage for them to express their own creative ideas.

But how do we decide which methods to use and in what order to use the methods? Figure 3 shows how the three categories of methods are useful at different places along the experience domain.

For example, the *what people do* methods cover the current situation only. The *what people say* methods extend backward to the recent past and forward into the immediate future. The *what people make* methods, on the other hand, extend even farther to the past (i.e., into memories) and the future (i.e., into dreams).

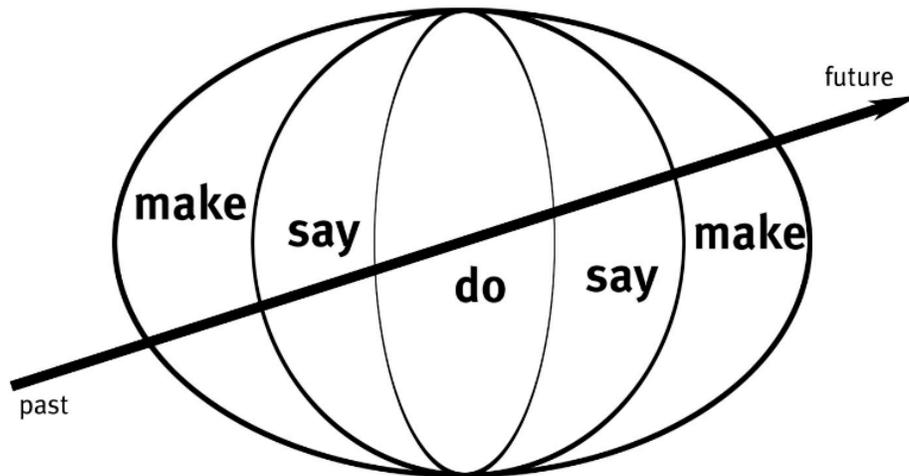


FIGURE 3 What people say, do and make across the experience domain

This framework can be very useful when deciding how to plan relevant design research approaches. For example, we might start in the middle with *what people do* in their current situation using contextual observations. Then we might move to *what people say* methods in the form of a diary as well as one-on-one interviews. Finally, we could engage the participants in *what people make* sessions using a wide variety of participatory tools. In this type of plan, each research phase can be informed by the previous phase. The use of a wide variety of research methods and tools results in a very rich array of data. In addition, the *make* tools provide visual artifacts, such as collages, maps and Velcro models (Sanders, 2000) that are inspirational to the design process.

Who are the real virtuosos of the Experience Domain?

The people who buy and use the products and services that we design are the real virtuosos of the Experience Domain. They are the ones who will create their own experiences. Their potential collective creativity is enormous. If we invite them into the fuzzy front end of the design development process with us, we will learn to far better satisfy their needs.

Does this perspective change design education? How?

The participatory attitude and the new tools for design research are beginning to change the shape of the design profession and design education. They demonstrate that ordinary people can successfully contribute to the design development process at its very beginning. A number of schools have integrated participatory design thinking into their design curriculum, including:

- The Ohio State University
- Carnegie Melon University

Sanders, E.B.-N. (2001) Virtuosos of the experience domain. In *Proceedings of the 2001 IDSA Education Conference*.

- Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands
- Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Design for experiencing alters the understanding of creativity in design. We see that the collective creativity of a group of people can be more powerful and relevant than individual creativity. We see new roles for designers, i.e., to learn how to access and to understand the dreams of everyday people and to create the scaffolds or infrastructures on which these people can express their creativity. Design scaffolding operates at two different levels. First, we can use participatory toolkits to elicit creative thinking and expression from everyday people during the early phases of the design development process. Second, we can design products and services as scaffolds that support creative experiencing by everyday people.

References and related readings

Bohm, D. (1998) *On Creativity*. Routledge, London.

Jensen, R. (1999) *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination will Transform your Business*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Koestler, A. (1964) *The Act of Creation*. Hutchinson & Co, London.

Loftus, E.F. and Calvin, W.H. "Memory's Future". (2001) *Psychology Today*, March-April, 34(2),

Neisser, U. (1982) *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts*. W.H. Freeman and Company, San Francisco.

Polyani, M. (1983) *The Tacit Dimension*. Peter Smith, Gloucester, MA.

Ray, P.H. and Anderson, S.R. (2000) *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*. Harmony Books, New York.

Rifkin, J. (2000) *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life is a Paid-for Experience*. Tarcher/Putnam, New York.

Root-Bernstein, R. And Root-Bernstein, M. (1999) *Sparks of Genius: The 13 Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People*. Houghton-Mifflin, New York.

Sanders, E.B.-N. (2000) "Generative Tools for CoDesigning" in *Collaborative Design*, Scrivener, Ball and Woodcock (Eds.) Springer-Verlag, London.

Wendlinger, B. (1995) *The Memory Triggering Book*. Proust Press, Oakland CA.

Sanders, E.B.-N. (2001) Virtuosos of the experience domain. In *Proceedings of the 2001 IDSA Education Conference*.