# PERSONALIZING OUR APPROACH TO DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

Our Industrial Design program is predominantly male.  As women, we compared our performance and methods to those of our male classmates'. In our eyes, we lacked something that we could not pinpoint.  We thought this was just a personal problem to "get over."

During the research for a recent project, we had the opportunity to work in an environment conducive to developing our own design approach.  This proved to be the turning point in our self-concept as designers.  We found that our so-called "problem" was not a problem, but an innate difference that needed to be treated as that: a difference.

We had been conditioned to look for successful people and emulate their specific method of achieving success.  As our program is predominantly male, that is who we assumed we should emulate.  We realized that our pattern of success did not need to exactly follow our male counterparts', but rather we should develop our own approach.  This approach included:

- greater emphasis on team cohesion
- group problem-solving discussions
- focusing on end-user needs earlier in the process
- empathy driven research

While our approach is unique to us, this is not necessarily about us being female.  We had these experiences while working on an all-female team, but learning to develop a personal design approach can be helpful to design students.  Our findings are valuable because approaching design in your own way is not a problem to be solved but rather a difference to be discovered and capitalized upon.

*Keywords: Design approach, discovery, personalization, creativity in design education, learning spaces*

## 1   INTRODUCTION

We understand that this may not be a typical academic paper, however we are confident that our experiences and findings will enhance the way design educators teach as well as the experiences of our fellow students of design.  We believe that all designers should have the opportunity to be successful.  This success comes from personal victories as well as public acknowledgment of their design work.  The goal of this paper is not to discredit current teaching methodology, but instead encourage designers--both students and design educators--to find and define their method of achieving success.  Please keep that in mind as we share our experiences.

## 2   PERSONALISING OUR APPROACH

The Industrial Design program that we participate in is predominantly male.  In previous years the program has had a lot more male students than female students.  Even all of the professors of our program are male.  Our specific class has 5 females and 12 males, which interestingly, is the largest number of females to be accepted into a class to date.  The program that we are a part of is also highly competitive as few people who apply are accepted each year.  Most classes are structured in a way that grading is on a ranking system where students are compared against each other.  This ranking system naturally sets peers against each other and can often create unfavourable results in the dynamic of the class.  This includes the rapport between professors and students.

Due to this competitive nature, we felt a need early-on to compare our performance and methods to our classmates. As time passed within the program, we (the five females in the class) began to feel that our performance and methods lacked something that we could not pinpoint. Even though we were receiving acceptable ranks, we were often dissatisfied with our work and our end projects. The representation of our work (where we were ranked) was not accurately connected to our accumulative performance in our minds. We began to notice that we often attempted to mimic the design methods and ideology of our male counterparts. We were spending more time and energy focusing on getting a 'good ranking' rather than focusing on developing a design method that worked for each of us individually. This left us feeling frustrated not only with our end designs, but also with the process used to get there. We felt that as females, we just had a personal problem to "get over" in order to better fit the mould that we saw our professors responding well to. This is a common pressure within the American culture. Historically, women have received success and recognition by complying with the traditional male standards in the workplace. None of us realized that our personal development as designers was being hindered by our perception that in order to achieve success we needed to act *exactly* like our male counterparts.

During the research for a project in our third year, we discovered an opportunity to design specifically for women as an all-female design team. This gave us the freedom to work in an environment conducive to our natural thinking, communication, and design methods. We began to work differently than we had in the past. Our quality of work improved and we were more efficient in our methods. We became much more satisfied with our designs and our process. This project truly proved to be the turning point in our self-concept as designers. We found that the so-called "problem" we thought we had was not a problem, but an innate difference that could be treated as that: a difference.

## 3  DEVELOPING OUR APPROACH

In this new situation, we discovered that success is individual, and methods for achieving success should be developed as an individual. Through our experience and research we have learned that individual patterns of success are not meant to be emulated exactly, but rather used as guidance to create our own path. This allowed us to develop our own approach to design, and in turn, our own approach to success.

Below are some behaviours and experiences that were instrumental in the development of our approach.

### 3.1  Greater Emphasis on Team Cohesion

As a team, we quickly developed a dynamic that allowed us to rely on each other's strengths. We were all equal partners and acted as a support system. Each of us was technically working on our own specific product, but the more we worked together each product became a conglomerate of all of our ideas and suggestions. Studies have shown that males use communication to establish and increase their social status. Females, on the other hand, use communication to create relationships and establish equality with their peers [1]. This was certainly true for our team and the work that we were producing. Before jumping into work, we would always check-in with each other, making sure everything was going well on a personal level. This was a different experience when compared to working with our male counterparts because the overall feel of the team was much less competitive and much more cohesive. This did not mean we agreed on everything, but it allowed disagreements to be discussed without contention or hierarchy. Though we were working in a completely different manner, our quality of work was comparable to our male counterparts.

### 3.2  Problem Solving Discussions as a Group

When compared to the all-male teams, our team more frequently discussed projects as a group. This behaviour is supported by research that shows that females tend to problem solve as a group, whereas men problem solve individually [2]. This is also validated by research about gender differences in conversation style [3]. We noticed that the males in our class worked predominantly as individuals, rarely talking to each other at all. On the other hand, all five of the females in our class sat together in a self-designated corner and had a discussion lasting the entire class period, and often longer.

At these weekly meetings, we would sit and discuss events in the past week that were not necessarily related to design. We would share ideas, new insights, and our progress for both our design work and in our personal lives. We would also share the design problems we had come across. Many times we

were not seeking to solve them, but to share them with our team to reach a greater understanding. Research shows that females tend to view problem solving as a way to deepen or strengthen relationships whereas males view it as a way to demonstrate their competence or strength of resolve [4]. This was evident in our team compared to the male teams. While the males tried to solve all problems brought to the table, we were more apt to share our problems, discuss them, and then decide which ones actually needed to be solved and which ones were irrelevant. By talking things out, we were able to clear our minds and feel refreshed to continue again. This may be because females have a greater ability to focus on more than one problem at a time [5]. There were times when there would be ten different ideas being discussed, and it was only by discussing the ideas that eventually they would clarify and sort themselves out.

This propensity to problem solve as a group, and our ability to multi-task were important discoveries in understanding our previous dissatisfaction during our first couple of years in the Industrial Design program. While our male classmates were able to focus solely on their project, we would only be able to focus for a short time before all the other things on our minds would cloud our design process. During this project we realized that as females, we were more successful at problem solving when we did so as a group. This was a key aspect of our successes during this project. While we are currently working individually on various design projects, we still find it useful to regroup, talk over our thoughts, and get feedback on our projects. It has become a part of our personal approaches to design, and we have been more successful after discovering it.

### 3.3 Focusing on End User Needs Earlier in the Process

According to Smart Design's Femme Den, a highly successful design firm focusing on female consumers, women buy or influence up to 85% of purchases in the United States [6]. We are a part of that demographic and therefore are in a unique position to understand the consumer side of design. It is because of our unique position as females, that we saw the need to build a strong emphasis on end user needs. We have found that the best way to do this is to develop a persona early in the design process. Knowing that females typically have an easier time getting to know and understand people [7], our all-female team was able to quickly develop and gain a relationship with our chosen persona. Because of a strong relationship with our persona, we were able to gather more useful information than our male counterparts could, and therefore design a product better tailored to our end user. While our persona was created early in the process that did not stop us from refining it as we gained new insights. This helped immensely in the design process because we were able to essentially ask questions of our end user, and have them answered because the persona was so complete.

### 3.4 Empathy Driven Research

As an all-female design team focused on designing for a female end-user, we had the opportunity to experience first-hand a project where empathy drove our research. While researching, we found that we could relate on many levels to the things women needed and wanted in the end product. We understood where they were coming from and began looking for pain points that all parties needed solved. We were no longer designing for a persona, but rather a friend. That changed the way we did things and we gained a more urgent desire to create functional and beautiful products. By bringing ourselves into the design process--really understanding the worries, concerns, hopes, and desires of our end user--we found new successes and more satisfaction with the end products we designed. We believed more in our products, and as a result believed more in our unique design process.

## 4   CONCLUSION

We want to be clear: we are not proposing that males and females never work together. We are also not arguing that gender-diverse teams are inherently bad. Our intent is to emphasize that by being in an environment where we felt comfortable and more fully connected to our teammates; our approach to design was enhanced. We also noticed that we were more focused on design, rather than on our ranking. For us, this was working on an all-female team. We had innate similarities with our female teammates, allowing us to understand each other more fully, which then had an effect on our process. This team enabled us to more fully rely on each others strengths, learn in a more natural way from each other, and in the end, produce better and more satisfying work than we had in previous projects. This all-female team allowed us to feel confident enough discover who we are as designers instead of constantly trying to fit a specific mould. We came to understand that designing differently from our

male counterparts was not a problem. It was just a difference that, by understanding, we were able to capitalize upon.

We would like to challenge design educators to not only allow your students to discover their own approach, but to encourage it. Do not assume that one specific method is right for all students. If at all possible, place more emphasis on design methods and approach, rather than an official ranking. And finally, we would like to challenge our fellow students to embrace the opportunities that lead you to discover your specific approach to design and allow you to achieve your individual success. If you feel that you have a so-called "problem", remember that innate differences can often lead to great opportunities.

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