

---

# The Critical Potential of Experience in Experience-Centered Design

## John McCarthy

Department of Applied Psychology  
University College Cork  
Cork, Ireland  
John.mccarthy@ucc.ie

## Peter Wright

Art and Design Research Centre  
Sheffield Hallam University  
Sheffield  
UK  
p.c.wright@shu.ac.uk

## Introduction

In recent years *experience* has become an important concept in Interaction Design and Human Computer Interaction. It has been aligned with an argument for an explicit focus on *HCI as critical technical practice* [5,7]. This is, in part, a function of people working in both these areas sensing and trying to articulate common ground between them, specifically what *experience* and *critical reflection* might have to offer to each other and what together they might have to offer to HCI. In even more recent years *critical theory* has begun to carve out a place for itself in HCI. One of the motivating themes of this workshop is the potential for synergy between *experience* and *critical theory* in HCI. In the context of a trajectory that assumes merit in synergy between *experience* and *Critical Theory*, we take a slightly contrarian position by asserting that some of the more important contributions that experience has made and should continue to make in HCI, including its particular contribution to HCI as critical practice, sit very uncomfortably with theory.

There is no doubt that *experience* is a very difficult concept to pin down. Dewey, Riceour and others, who devoted a great deal of effort to understanding experience, saw it as elusive and obdurate. Against this background, there is a clear argument for bringing

---

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).

CHI 2010, April 10–15, 2010, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

ACM 978-1-60558-930-5/10/04.

conceptual clarity to the use of *experience* and its use in HCI. There are some grounds for believing that Critical Theory could make a useful contribution in this regard. However it would be a mistake to imagine that any conceptual analysis would produce a single precise meaning of experience. Indeed it might be a mistake to even try to do so. For the roots of the critical potential of experience may well be in the tensions between the various uses to which it has been put in philosophical and everyday discourse and in practice. Making *the plurality of experience* a basic commitment does not diminish the need for careful, critical thought about it. On the contrary, Critical Theory may also prove a resource in questioning the variety of uses of experience in HCI, for example: the extent to which an appeal to experience in conceptualizing and practicing design may be nostalgic and conservatively protective of the status quo politically and commercially; the kinds of experiences of identity, community, agency and so on are promoted and inhibited in interaction design. Because we are confident that the workshop will attract submissions that address Critical Theory's contribution to these conceptual and political questions far better than we could, we prefer to draw attention to the critical potential of *experience*, to the work that *experience* in particular can do in critical HCI practice.

### **Experience as a focus of HCI**

The critical potential of *experience* becomes apparent when we view HCI as a social practice that involves understanding and designing for *life as lived and felt*. For clarity we call this practice *experience-centered design*. It entails a practical commitment to what matters to people in their everyday lives, which brings together in one place and time many of the issues that have become important in understanding use and user

experience – affective and emotional response, the meaning that people make of interaction, people's values, the aesthetics of interaction, personal and social commitments to sustainability or democracy.

As we have argued elsewhere all the threads of a person's transaction with a setting are *brought together in experience* [6]. That is to say that in whatever a person does in the here and now, how they feel about it, the response they receive and how they feel about that, their sense of how what is happening relates to what has happened in the past and in the future, we see people making meaning of what is "going on around and 'within' them, a process that mixes memory, desire, anticipation, relations with others, cultural patterns, bodily feelings, sights, smells, and sounds" [3, p.7-8]. Sounds messy and very hard to pin down, doesn't it. But that is the vital, everyday reality that *experience* brings together. And we argue that bringing all of the concerns of life as lived and felt together is also the single most important critical contribution of *experience* to HCI.

It is in this bringing together – holism if you like – that *experience* has its power to critique theories that differentiate and research methods that separate and reduce. The vitality is lost when the threads of experience are picked apart for analysis or experimentation. It is also through an appreciation of the importance of this bringing together that *experience* stakes a claim to offer to HCI something unique, different from theory and method, that is worth championing even at the risk of being unhelpful in the project of exploring synergies between experience and critical theory. Taking a particularly strong position, Dewey put it as follows:

“An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance” [4, p.144].

It seems to us that experience brings something vital and significant to HCI that would be at risk of being lost in premature engagement with theory. Although it may be philosophically limiting to define HCI as experience, and to try to make that experience both object and method in experience-centered design, it may still be the right thing to do to advance the subject and its practices. By making people’s experience with technology our object and by making experience the foundation for our method – first-hand, involved, collection of evidence about what happens to people in interaction with technology and how they respond, experiences which we could imagine ourselves having – we propose a position for designers and researchers that is constructed from their morally imaginative encounter with other.

### **Experience-centered design as social practice**

When we design or try to understand people’s use of technology we engage in a practice that is oriented toward creating something better than existed before and in the process enriching people’s lived experience. The design of technology in HCI – whether we talk of it as user-centered, experience-centered, or participatory – has at its heart a commitment to somehow improving the situation of those who are likely to use the technology. User-centered design talked about augmenting people’s intellectual capacities and we talk about enriching people’s experience. Parenthetically, when the focus of design activity is shifted to experience, with the holism that that entails, a gentle

critical point is made in practice. However let us focus on the broader point for the moment, which is that research and design in HCI is geared toward improving people’s situations. This is clearly not the kind of ‘improvement’ that can be achieved and measured by scientific means and metrics. It is not simply about making something faster or more powerful. Rather it is about making things that have an impact in and on people’s lives and making judgments and decisions about the impact they are likely to have. Making these judgments involves imagination and moral reasoning.

As a social practice experience-centered design requires imagination to make meaning and make something. It requires imagination to appreciate what life must be like for another person and to design to enrich their experience. In order to make responsible decisions about interventions in other’s lives, it is important to know something about their lives and to be able to engage with the kind of experience they may have with the to-be-designed system or artifact.

John Dewey, the pragmatist philosopher, had a practical, experiential approach to ethics that he discussed in terms of ‘moral imagination’. We think his approach throws some light on the practice of experience-centered design as it involves concern for what matters to other people. Dewey explored ethical decision-making and reasoning as people engaged in it rather than ‘in principle’ and he saw it as morally imaginative action. Alexander, explaining Dewey’s approach, described imagination as involving “the transformation or reconstruction of experience in a changing world which nevertheless admitted of general stable features” [1, p.371]. In a passage that evokes the practice of experience-centered design, Alexander

describes Dewey's approach to ethics as action involving moral imagination, where imagination is an exploration of the structures inherited from past experience that allowed the future as a horizon of possible actions, experience, and meanings to guide and interpret the present. He also explains that the fruits of imagination – and the moral dimension of action - are seen in the growth and continuity of meaning. For Dewey 'moral imagination' was concerned with the growth of meaning through action.

In the limited space available we will ground moral imagination in the practice of experience-centered design by listing some of the ways in which we see experience-centered designers engaging in morally imaginative ways with people who live with or might live with their technologies and with the transformation of experience in that context.

- The growing interest in empathic engagement between designers and users, where designers try to imagine themselves as users in order to understand their interests, worries, and desires. In practice this is fed by engagement between designers and users in ethnography, observation, conversation, etc.
- The development of a number of ways understanding the potential in a situation and discerning the possibilities for acting in a situation and their consequences. These include the use of character-based scenarios, personae, performance, drama, etc. all of which are practical attempts to imagine what life might be like for others in particular situations and how the putative technology might influence their lives in those situations. Dewey called this dramatic rehearsal.

- The use of narrative to explore relations between and integrate past, present and future experience.
- An orientation toward the dialogical context in which narrative is constructed, the intersubjectivity of telling and perhaps particularly of listening.

In terms of pursuing our proposition that *experience* has much to offer to critical design practice, it seems to us that many of the methods and practices listed above are geared toward appreciating the perspectives of the people we are making for and are more likely to do so than ethical principles or theoretical commitments per se. They recognize that people don't simply act rationally or intellectually. They also act out of emotion and feeling. A practical focus on experience creates opportunities to explore how people feel about situations and how they make sense of their experience intellectually and emotionally. In experience-centered design then, a key part of the job is to understand the other so as to understand the impacts of our interventions in their lives. Experience as both object and method yielding a practical, experiential ethics based on understanding the other's experience and trying to design for their experience.

Most of the practices listed above involve the kind of committed relationship between designer and user that is itself challenging methodologically, ethically and sometimes politically. The kind of boundary that permits a distanced or objective stance is foregone when designers start to have meaningful conversations with users about their experiences, feelings, values, what love, being ill, or being old means to them. Each of these practical encounters between designer and

user in experience-centered design carries with them a critical, reflexive and reflective imperative.

Although the critical potential of experience needs to be continually uncovered, it is not new in general or in HCI. We draw our argument to a conclusion with a very brief historical reading that sees the roots of experience-centered design in projects such as those carried out in Scandinavia in the 1970s. Though concerned with industry-wide computerization (e.g. printing and metalworking), these projects emphasized workers' experience in an effort to develop resources to help them act to improve their working lives and conditions. They brought together social democratic commitment to involving workers in the design of their computerized workplaces and pragmatic concern to develop and deploy experience-based design methods. Politically these projects explored the possibilities of democratizing the process of computerization by involving workers and trade unions directly in design. Practically, that exploration required worker participation in systems development and design methods that focused on workers' experience [2, p.219]. It required that researchers get involved with the workers, and develop a commitment to them, in order to understand and help change their work experience and conditions. This was the start of an approach to Participatory Design that owed a great deal to the moral, political, communitarian energies of Scandinavian social democracy. By putting workers experience at the heart of design, working out how to create representations of their likely experience with envisaged systems, these projects also provided an important, though often unacknowledged, impetus to what has become experience-centered design. By drawing attention to the resonances of these projects

with what experience-centered design in HCI design practice could be, we aim to:

- Remind ourselves of what can be forgotten when experience is reified as product, commodity, or feeling in a subject where for many the whole point of the exercise is making something.
- Suggest that experience is a necessary part of design that is oriented toward improving people's lives.
- Suggest a practical ethics of design that finds the critical potential of experience in practice, for example in the Scandinavian projects in the practical striving to incorporate workers' experience in design.

### **In conclusion**

Although we have made a point of highlighting the critical potential of experience in HCI practice and the degree of discomfort that exists between theory and experience, we are not arguing against a potential synergy between them. To be frank we are skeptical of a foundational approach to theory as revealing principles and strategies for design practice. Rather we see experience-centered design as a social practice that is contingent and ever changing. In this context theory may play a key role as critical reflection on practice, rendering theory re-visionary more than reflective or representational [8].

### **References**

- [1] Alexander, T.M. John Dewey and the Moral Imagination. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XXIX, 3 (1993), 369-400.
- [2] Bødker, S. Creating conditions for participation - Conflicts and resources in systems development. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 1, 3 (1996), 215-236.

[3] Bradley, B. *Psychology and Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

[4] Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education*, Free Press, New York, 1966.

[5] Dourish, P., Finlay, J., Sengers, P., and Wright, P. *Reflective HCI: Towards a Critical Technical Practice. Extended Abstracts of CHI 2004*.

[6] McCarthy, J. and Wright, P. *Technology as Experience*. MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2004.

[7] Sengers, P. McCarthy, J. and Dourish, P. *Reflective HCI: Articulating a Research Agenda for Critical Practice. Extended Abstracts of CHI 2006*

[8] Shusterman, R. *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland USA, 2000.