
Learning from Lonely Hearts: Using Advice Columns in User Centered Design Education

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Abstract

Public advice columns have provided information, satisfied reader curiosity, and ignited discussion since the late 1600s. The role of the advice columnist can be understood as a form of cultural intermediary who identifies and assesses individual problems of potential relevance to wider audiences. Online columnists are now joined in this analysis of the human condition by communities of contributors who offer supporting or alternative judgments and directives for action. We examine the potential of these online advice columns as a material resource for assisting novice designers in identifying and understanding authentic human problems from multiple perspectives. We present insights from a small pilot study where university students used this design method as a framing mechanism for proposing socio-technical interventions. We conclude with consideration of the value, optimal usage, and limitations of adopting this approach in generating design ideas and training novice designers.

Author Keywords

Advice Columns; Design Education; User Centered Design; Design Method

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2. [User Interfaces]: Theory and Methods, User-centered Design

Introduction

Advice columns satisfy the basic human desire and need for information, for validation, and indeed, for titillation. Personal matters including love, sex, and marital issues are probably most commonly associated with contemporary long-running advice columns, including the ever popular US based Dear Abby, Ask Amy, and Ann Landers. Online websites and social media platforms provide another rich venue for both niche and generalist branded columns alike, including Savage Love (sex), Ask Angy (undocumented youth), Captain Awkward (screenwriter as advisor), and Andrew WK (rock musician as advisor). The sense of community shared between readers of online columns in particular, is amplified through the surrounding discussion, allowing the public to add their divergent opinions not only on the problems at hand, but also on the utility and quality of the advice offered by the columnist and other commentators.

Together, these advice seekers, advisors, and their communities of readers have, and are, creating a rich online archive of documented human problems with a multiplicity of possible solutions. We believe that these advice columns can serve as authentic reference material for novice designers both to help quickly identify authentic human problems and to begin to 'know the user' [10]. Fitting within and around the methodological domain of scenarios, personas, and biographies, advice columns can be understood to provide a thin, but highly focused slice into the

interpreted life of a person, which can be used as input into the design process.

We investigated the potential of this approach as an instructional training method, teaching novice designers approaches to user-centered design. University students in a 'cultural computing' course were asked to select a letter/answer problem pair published in an online advice column and propose a socio-technical intervention to address some facet of the identified problem. We analyze the outcomes of our pedagogical approach and the reflections of the participants, and conclude with an examination of the potential and limitations of this approach in teaching user centered design.

Related Work

Advice Columns

Advice columns first appeared in the fledgling British press in the late 17th century, fulfilling the newspaper industries interest in both supplying factual knowledge and entertaining the public [8]. From an initial focus on relaying straightforward information, over the centuries, advice columns helped to broaden the range of personal and social topics deemed acceptable for public discussion, particularly during times of cultural transformation [6]. Indeed, they can be understood as functioning as *cultural intermediaries* [3], in that their constructed identity is as "gatekeepers on an idealised, but mediated, world of what is moral, what is acceptable, what is right" [9, p.97]. This gatekeeping role is reflected throughout the publication process including the editorial selection of letters, the argument and tone of the proffered advice, and the purposeful cultivation of an interactive community of anonymous participants as a form of "column family" [6, p.21]. The

Advice Column Prompt:

“Propose a socio-technical intervention intended to address an issue or problem identified in a letter published in an online advice column (links to example online columns)

Your intervention could serve to attempt to solve the issue; draw attention to the issue; critically exacerbate the issue; exploit the issue; or in some other way, creatively address the issue.”

Deliverables:

An illustrated blog post detailing:

- 1) The letter
- 2) Your rationale for selecting the letter and the facet of the identified issue you wish to address
- 3) Description of your proposed intervention including overall concept, design sketches, proposed implementation, and projected possible outcomes.

very act of selecting a particular letter to publicly address serves not only to validate the meaningfulness of the problem for the advice seeker, but also highlights the perceived cultural relevance of the issue for broader audiences. While the tremendous growth in social media platforms affords individuals additional opportunities for soliciting, receiving, and reading advice, we contend that the intermediary role of a known authorial voice, complete with institutional memory and responsibility, can offer an equal, (even at times more), valuable, reliable, and coherent advisory service. This leads us in our exploratory work to examine how both traditional and emerging forms of advice columns could prove useful as a ‘problem setting resource’ within user centered design education.

User Centered Design Methods

Understanding and knowing the user are key motivating concerns for HCI researchers, practitioners, and educators. This endeavor incorporates theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and practical considerations that have been richly explored by the community over the last two decades [1]. We situate our proposed approach somewhere within the middle ground of design methodology, hovering between real-world empirically derived data and creative idea generation. While we see opportunity for the approach to be used in and of itself (see below), we also suggest that it could be used as a supporting method for related fieldwork informed approaches including *personas* and *scenarios*. For example, advice columns could function as enriched forms of “thin slice scenarios” in highly situated contexts. These scenarios (or groups of related scenarios) come with built in stakeholder assessments, aesthetic judgments, and preferred directions for future

action, providing the designer with a rich set of narrative perspectives to consider.

By itself, we believe that our approach is useful and accessible for novice designers in that it allows relatively quick identification of real world *problem spaces* [4] which can be challenging, while also opening a creative *intervention* space that is not necessarily, or particularly, technologically oriented [2]. The approach can be understood as a discount method [5] for novice designers that introduces some *designerly* techniques and ways of doing things [4] at relatively low cost.

Pilot Study

We piloted our approach in a semester long interdisciplinary university graduate course. The nine students in this ‘critical computing’ praxis based class came from architecture, art, computer science, and engineering backgrounds. As novice designers, they were introduced to both traditional and specialized user centered design methods including cultural probes, experience prototyping, and user enactments. The students completed the advice column open-ended prompt (see side panel) as a regular graded week long assignment. After the semester was over, seven of the students subsequently agreed to participate in an IRB approved study, which involved giving permission for their assignment deliverables to be studied, and completing a short survey questionnaire about their experience. The students were not compensated and did not receive extra credit for their participation. The responses of those students are considered and discussed below.

Q: "...All of the interviews went extremely well, and I felt great about my chances. The team even implemented a bunch of my ideas after speaking with me and looking over my test..."

A: "... Speaking of bad signs, this part of your letter is alarming: "The team even implemented a bunch of my ideas after speaking with me and looking over my test." That's your work. They're using your work without paying you for it. That's not okay..."[7]



Figure 1. In response to the Q&A above, p7 created a mockup of a speculative system for keeping track of the ownership of ideas. © P7

Results and findings

The students selected letters from a variety of online sources including *Dear Prudence*, *Dear Amy*, and *Ask A Manager*. They selected particular letters for several stated reasons including 1) the issue was related to something they had personally experienced; 2) the issue was something someone they knew had experienced; 3) the issue was something they would likely encounter in the future; 4) the issue related to their dissertation; and 5) the issue was interesting to them. The first three reasons point to the role of empathy in directing participant interest towards issues of personal significance. One student followed their examination of a series of letters and responses related to bullying by stating *"I asked myself if I was a victim, would I want to, or have the strength to follow any of the listed solutions? I believe not. Even more unfortunate is that I cannot propose a clear cut, flawless solution for this issue"*. All participants described the process of identifying a letter with a relevant problem as straightforward, with two students indicating they specifically searched for a letter about a particular issue, e.g. workplace ethics.

The participants used a variety of methods in determining the actual problem or issue they wanted to address. Some worked directly off the problem stated in a particular letter (e.g. a problem with people appropriating photos online). However, other second- and third-order strategies in identifying problems were also noted. Several students combined issues encountered across different column letters to generate a general problem. For example, in their survey response, p3 described how they *"didn't find any one letter particularly descriptive of a common problem. Instead I found several letters which had similar*

problems or problems in related topics". Using a related but different strategy, p7 identified "buried" issues in multiple letter/answer pairs to identify a common underlying conundrum involving complex issues around the ownership of personal ideas within corporate environments. Interestingly, most of the participants indicated that their response to the assignment was not influenced by the advice given to the letter writer, because they found the advice to be "rather vague and generalized" [p6], "not useful" [p3], or "generic" [p1].

Given the open-ended nature of the assignment deliverable, a wide variety of proposed interventions were produced including Facebook plugins, social media tracking platforms, self-help instructions, workplace protocols, and mobile apps (see Figure 2). As an example, Figure 1 depicts a mocked up screenshot created as part of a proposed design that takes *"the corporate ownership of ideas to the extreme"*. Using a what-if speculative design approach, the proposed application answers the question – *"Imagine needing to run every single idea in your head through a system to judge whether the idea is the intellectual property of any place you've ever worked?"* [p7]. Overall, the design practices used by the students could be classified as incorporating elements of product design, speculative design, and service design, and were created with a variety of end-users in mind, from the specific letter-writer, to a more generalized population.

The participants had a variety of responses to a survey question asking if they thought "this is/is not a useful way to identify socio-cultural issues". P1 stated *"Well it's sort of a de facto socio-cultural-issue-finder... I think this sort of thing, at least the sites I was looking at, are more narrow personal issues that might effect a*

Amalgamation Prompt

P3: "I was inspired by a series of very poor relationship management letters which were sent to the Washington Post. I could have picked any of them, but these three jumped out as problems that should have had an obvious solution."



Figure 2. In response, P3 proposed a Relationship Banking app to "reinforce good relationship behaviors and open sharing" within couples. ©P3.

in about Wealth Inequality to an advice column, but people do write in about what to do about having your car keyed". P3 also addressed the issue of the scope or constraints of the approach, noting "I think there will be a sample bias when looking at advice columnists for common socio-cultural issues. The kind of person who seeks that sort of external advice is a unique subset of the population".

Discussion

The advice column letters provided creative fodder for the novice designers who were able to use the online resources to directly identify or generate a problem that was compelling to them. As a design method, the approach provides evidence of diverse perspectives on a problem, while also supporting a reflective design process that encourages designers to pivot between first, second and third person perspectives.

The exercise provoked empathetic responses from most of the students who exhibited genuine emotional responses to the problems identified in the online advice resources. This empathetic experience is a powerful way to identify with and get to know potential users, and as noted in [10, p644], while it may not involve "extended, deep direct contact with the other", if used "in the spirit of enquiry and responsive understanding", this approach can provide a sufficient level of insight to help designers craft compelling user experiences in response.

In considering the limitations of the findings, we note that none of the participants in our study critically engaged with the assessments, judgments, or possible historical biases of the column advisors. In addition, we observed little consideration for the discursive input of

the broader column community as a valuable third person perspective in the problem framing or intervention development process. This suggests that moving forward, a more explicit description of the parameters of critical engagement with all stakeholders within the advice column method is required.

As noted by several of the participants, this approach has somewhat of a sampling bias, both in terms of the content addressed (mostly interpersonal) and the type of participants involved (letter writers and commentators seeking a public audience). This indeed can narrow the scope of the type of problems encountered, meaning that some of the bigger issues of societal significance (e.g. sustainability, social justice etc.) are not often addressed. This leads us to believe that the approach will work best as a type of technical exercise for novice designers, where they get to work on a relatively constrained problem which allows them to practice their design chops in a low-risk/low-impact way. In addition, we now highlight a number of key outcomes for consideration.

Advice column as data for further analysis

While the students were directed to use the advice columns as a motivating direct step to interventionist designs, there is clearly the potential to examine the material discovered as foundational data for other complementary methods. The problems, value judgments, and proposed solutions encountered can serve as authentic real-world data for generating narratives, personas, and scenarios with empirical credentials. The carefully honed brand, aesthetic, and tone of particular advice columns such as Savage Love and Dear Prudence also provide an opportunity for designers to construct characters and situations that

would likely 'fit' within the ideological and value laden boundaries of these particular online communities.

Advice column as a user oriented lens

Advice columns can also serve as a framing mechanism or focusing lens within which designers can assess their constructed end-user models and design concepts. The columns provide an opportunity for designers to closely examine the validity of their approach across a broad distribution of user types, scenarios, cultural contexts, and time periods. For example, the columns could be used to gain a clearer understanding of target end-users, as they provide archived historical evidence of evolving socio-cultural sensibilities, by demonstrating what issues were attended to, when, and how, by the gatekeeping cultural mediators of particular eras.

Advice column as a discount design method

The advice column method functions well as an efficient and rapid approach for generating design ideas and producing 'thin slice' snapshots of human problems and possible solutions. As noted earlier, the method can work particularly well as a constrained training tool for novice designer. The method can be paired with other discount methods, or used as a precursor for students interested in pursuing more in-depth and long-term qualitative studies.

Conclusion

Advice columns can be used as a design method for generating ideas, assessing design concepts, and training novice designers. The material produced by letter writers, advisors, and the interacting column community can be used to directly generate design concepts, or it can function as the foundational data or interrogative lens for other user centered methods. Our

findings contribute to the literature on teaching user centered design techniques to novices by introducing advice columns as an approach for quickly identifying social problems and gaining a 'thin slice' understanding of particular types of people and their experiences.

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