



‘Discovering the reason that underlies unreason’: Developing designers’ intuition to guide decision-making in the design process

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Abstract

Intuitive decision-making is often referred to as a key characteristic of human-centred design (HCD): Brown (2009) advises designers to ‘sometimes just choose the right partner, clear the dance floor, and trust our intuition’; IDEO (2009) similarly describes HCD as an ‘inherently intuitive process’ and encourages designers to ‘always feel like you have the space to explore a hunch’. However, while designers often reference ‘gut feelings’ and ‘a-ha moments’ in their practice, few are able to confidently identify when intuitive decision-making has taken place, or effectively navigate the seemingly paradoxical interplay between their conscious, ‘rational’ reasoning and more intuitive decision-making processes.

Recent research from cognitive psychology affirms that intuition can play a crucial role in helping individuals to make effective decisions – under certain conditions. Through a postgraduate, practice-based research project, I explore how designers might access, identify and describe intuition as part of their design practice, using reflective practice and creative research tools. In addition to this, and faced with realities of researching in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, my work also ended up being an exploration of how *humans*, not just designers, navigate

intuitive decision-making in a period of uncertainty and crisis. My own reflections on how I used intuition to guide decision-making across the project also forms a central part of this work.

There is often a perceived tension between analytical and intuitive approaches to decision-making. This study is a first step towards providing human-centred designers with the confidence to embrace both rational thinking and intuition as valid and vital 'tools' for decision-making. Through exploring emerging research in other disciplines (such as nursing and business leadership), this study has the potential to have a significant impact on the outcomes of design in the future.

Keywords: intuition, designer education, decision-making, reflective practice

Note

The phrase 'Discovering the reason that underlies unreason' was originally used by Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1987) in an early paper on the important interplay between rational and intuitive responses to decision-making within a management context.

References

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