Editorial

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Introduction to the Ethics in Design Special Section

Stephanie Moore
Organization, Information and Learning Sciences
University of New Mexico

Ahmed Lachheb
Department of Curriculum and Teaching
University of Kansas

Correspondence:
c/o OTESSA Journal
Ottawa, Canada
Email: journal [at] otessa.org

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Introduction

We are pleased to publish four design cases in this special section focusing on ethics in design. These design cases were part of the inaugural OTESSA conference, Ethics in Design Showcase (https://otessa.org/ethicsindesign/) in 2024—a special conference strand where we gathered design examples and design cases that illuminate how designers are incorporating different ethical considerations into either their design processes or designed artifacts (tangible, spatial, digital, or otherwise).

Premise of the Ethics in Design Special Section

The Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (https://www.cooperhewitt.org/) regularly curates exhibits across all different design disciplines and industries. Many of their curations feature various ways that designers, developers, and manufacturers incorporate different ethical considerations into their work. For example, they hosted the exhibit "Why Design Now?" that centered on how "doing good" can be translated into tangible artifacts, physical spaces, processes, and other design activities and artifacts. That exhibit included examples such as the Cabbage Chair (https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2010/05/06/why-design-now-cabbage-chair/), where the designer incorporated comfort, aesthetics, and environmental considerations into the design and manufacturing process. Another exhibit focused on the principle of dignity in healthcare design, and as part of that, they published a book on how hospital design can foster (or interfere with) dignity for patients (https://www.cooperhewitt.org/publications/the-architecture-of-health-hospital-design-and-the-construction-of-dignity/). As yet another example, the museum itself developed *Design at Home*, an activity book aimed at increasing "educational equity in communities with less access to digital tools and platforms" (McNally, 2020, para. 1). The design of the book drew explicitly on principles of universal design, aiming to reach multi-generational audiences, and explicitly constrained the design process and artifacts to require no Internet connection or special materials and be usable by and applicable to different age groups. The museum's collections are an inspirational starting point for how we can think about ethics in the instructional design and technology discipline, and start to share our designs with each other as a form of knowledge building.

Design is a powerful human tradition that can help us translate critical ethical, social, political, and cultural considerations into parameters and constraints that inform our design processes and artifacts. Design is also a visionary activity through which we can begin to imagine and construct alternate or desired futures. Simon (1969) defined design as being concerned with how things ought to be and said the designer is one who devises a course of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. Page (1966) wrote that design was an imaginative jump from present facts to future possibilities. Asimow (1962) defined design as a purposeful activity directed toward the goal of fulfilling human needs. And Weisbord et al. (1992) described design as a way of resolving basic human conflicts to iterate towards a desirable human future. Inherent in design is a sense of imagination and creative possibilities.

Although ethics are typically framed in cognitive terms (knowing and understanding different philosophical approaches) or affective terms (e.g., caring feelings), it is actually considered part of the little-studied conative domain that focuses on will, volition, intention, and choice. Design similarly reflects will, volition, intention, and choice, and is even considered a synonym for conation (Thesaurus.plus, 2016). Design is the act of exerting our will, where we may bring our knowledge (cognitive) and our feelings (affective) to bear on problems and needs, but with the

primary intent of translating knowing and feeling into action or "doing." Gray summarized the relationship between design and ethics nicely when he stated "design is an ethical act" (2023, para. 3). As such, design is value-laden, and the artifacts of that process are inscribed and etched with the values, beliefs, and dispositions that designers explicitly and implicitly embed (Gray & Boling, 2016). Ethics as design reflects an intentionality of incorporating non-technical and non-pedagogical considerations more explicitly to lean on technologies through the acts of learning design, technology selection, and technology implementation. Moore and colleagues (2024) used the analogy of wrought iron to describe the way technology is shaped by artistry or effort, depicting the work that we as designers and learning professionals do as we fold ethical and other considerations into our work with various technologies.

Through the inaugural OTESSA conference, Ethics in Design Showcase, and this special section, we have sought to illuminate important design work—both through examples of artifacts and processes as well as a discussion on how a designer or a team of individuals incorporated or confronted ethical considerations and dimensions. This involved a frank discussion on what challenges designers encountered and an account of how they navigated conflicting constraints and demands. While every design situation features ethical dimensions, in some contexts these may play a more critical role in team dynamics, the process, and/or the products or artifacts resulting from the work. Sometimes designers are explicit and intentional in addressing considerations. Other times, ethical issues arise in the course of a project or design and cause a designer to adjust or reframe.

What Does This Special Section Include?

This special section features four design cases that show different designs or design situations where ethical dimensions were brought to the foreground.

Harrison & Paskevicius | A Design Case for Open Education Practice: A Framework and Model for Engagement in Open, Online Spaces

Michelle Harrison and Michael Paskevicius' design case describes the development of the *Rethink Learning Design* untextbook—an open educational resource (OER) that challenges traditional textbook structures and embraces open pedagogy. Framed as a critical design, this project was initiated by a team of four educators with the goal of creating a digital space that prioritized interactivity, agency, accessibility, structure, and voice. This team was dissatisfied with existing platforms' limitations in fostering non-linear learning and multi-vocality. To that end, they collaborated with a web developer to design a software tool to meet their framed pedagogical needs. Their developed tool allows for non-linear content organization, encourages multiple entry points, and allows for various open licensing options, facilitating a more inclusive and participatory learning experience. It also features educators' contributions, organized into chapters that address various aspects of open and critical learning design. A key feature of this tool is the embedded reflective practice framework, which encourages users to engage critically with the content and consider multiple perspectives. Despite their success, Harrison and Paskevicius acknowledge ongoing design challenges, such as managing user annotations and feedback, and balancing learner agency with a navigable structure. With the candid discussion of these challenges, their article offers a valuable design precedent for developing OER that promote critical engagement and challenge traditional pedagogical approaches.

Roberts & Harrison | Open Learning Design in Context: Expanding the Continuum

Verena Roberts and Michelle Harrison share a conceptual design that addresses how participants in an instructional course design project balance the ethical tensions they encountered through individual open learning beliefs and values, pedagogy, process, and products. They base their idea on a simple premise: with the growing interest and focus on open educational practices to support OER, the opportunity for analyzing open learning design has prevailed. They discuss how these underlying tensions influence the design decisions, describing them as a continuum of openness. Roberts and Harrison describe the multi-faceted designs that could afford more open, equitable, accessible, and responsive learning environments for all learners.

Dilkes & Casserly | Moving Towards Design Justice Through Multivocal Design in Health Education

Danielle Dilkes and Courtney Casserly share in their design case an examination of how traditional curricular design and content creation can reinforce oppressive knowledge hierarchies in educational and clinical settings. The context of their design is understanding and addressing epistemic bias in medical education and practice. They propose a reimagining of how knowledge content is created through a process called multivocal design, which draws on both design justice and knowledge justice frameworks. This approach to design integrates and legitimizes different types of knowledge and experience, thus establishing epistemic authority across a broader definition of expertise. Dilkes and Casserly propose that this approach to curricular and content design has applications across education.

Sutherland | Redesigning Computing for Openness: The Ethics of Consuming Devices

Brian Sutherland shares a design case that documents a critical design of repeated purchase and consumption of consumer electronics. He argues that design education ethics can usefully be applied to consumer electronics, an easily relatable and fast-cycling industry of interest to students. By raising the critical question of “Why does the logic of computing involve repeated purchase and consumption of 'molded plastic epics’ (Gabrys, 2011)?” Sutherland taps into a well-known design precedent: a simple solar calculator that stands out for its durability. He argues that the answer is related to sustainability design: early calculators, like more recent Citizen Eco-Drive watches, use a solar ambient energy harvesting strategy that doesn’t store electricity in batteries. Consequently, they are very long-lasting with low maintenance. As there are very few energy-harvesting electronic devices in the market that reflect emerging green narratives of degrowth, reuse, and upcycling, the author discusses the history of these rare devices. He reconsiders their energy experience design strategies toward modern consumer electronics, demonstrating new prototypes that feature broad affordability, openness, and a more ethical consumption ethos.

Concluding Thoughts

The four design cases featured in this special section remind us that ethics in design—including learning design as a domain/professional field of design—is neither abstract nor optional. It is lived, situated, and deeply entangled in the choices designers make every day, on every design project. Whether in the context of open education, curricular transformation, healthcare, or sustainable technology, each design case demonstrates how ethical values and intentions

become materially inscribed into design artifacts, processes, and practices. Collectively, they illustrate that design is not just a technical or aesthetic endeavor but a profoundly ethical act that requires embracing the complexity that the design model could address, being courageous, imaginative, and responsible.

As we look forward to the future of the learning design field, in the age of AI/GenAI, the challenge is clear. We must continue to cultivate communities of practice that foreground ethical reflections and intentions, embrace plural ways of knowing, and design not just for efficiency or innovation, but for dignity, inclusion, and care. In doing so, we honor Simon's (1969) call to imagine how things ought to be, and we affirm Gray's (2023) assertion that "design is an ethical act." This special section is an invitation to reframe our design processes as ethical projects and to commit, together, to building futures where our designs embody not only ingenuity but integrity.

We hope you find inspiration in these four design cases. The way the authors/designers grappled with multiple ethical dimensions in their design work points to two important facts: (1) ethics in (learning) design matters, and (2) designers can play an important role in ensuring ethical design. By foregrounding these dimensions, we move beyond talk into practice, building a collective precedent for what ethically attuned design can—and must—look like.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Stephanie Moore https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5545-1894
Ahmed Lachheb https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4046-6385

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