

IDEAS WE CARE ABOUT

Manifesto on the Design of Human Experience

By **Don Jones**



Our manifesto on the design of human experience is an evolving exploration, as much as it is a statement about what we have learned and what is important to us. On one level it articulates our beliefs about sustaining behavioral change through exceptional learning, design and human experience. On another level it speaks to what we have come to understand about what it really takes to make lasting and profound strategic and cultural shifts within our client organizations. At still another and more fundamental level, it is about what makes us human.

The following design elements are the 'strange attractors' that create profound and meaningful shifts in both the process of our work and the outcomes we achieve together with our clients and partners. These ideas drive our design and business innovation and collectively they form the heart of our raison d'être.

Where do we start in the design of learning experience?

Most people start from learning outcomes. We start from an emotional connection to the learning outcome; not only what the benefit is to the organization of this change, but also why the participants would care about this. We have to reach and challenge them intellectually, but also fully engage them emotionally. The story emerges in pulsing, living form, from the heart of the problem; it doesn't descend coolly from the head.

Don Jones

Founder & President

Culture as Outcome

Cultural alignment is always a key learning outcome. Nothing can happen by rules, policies or laws alone; there has to be will. Culture aligns will. Period.



Design Lays the Cultural Tracks

Most organizations create decent strategy. Then they turn to the troops and effectively say, “Here it is, let’s go!” Great design of human experience lays the cultural tracks upon which the strategy can effectively roll out. Without it the strategy, good or mediocre, will be mired in implementation problems that bright people will not make the effort to solve.



The Power of One

Humans don't have experiences as a group; they may however, individually experience events in a group. The difference is profound. Humans process their experiences internally, individually and on many levels, even when they are influenced by being in a group. Design needs to provide unique experiences for each individual - whether it is the design of a space or an experiential event. The details have to be deep enough for individuals to feel emotionally and intellectually that this experience has been designed for them alone. This is not only possible, it is required; whether for an afternoon in-classroom experience for six people, or a virtual immersive world for 1000 people around the world.



Resonate

Humans, even when they experience something new, need to ground that experience against something old. To have a new insight it must be both fresh and old at the same time. It must provide a new way of seeing, but feel right intuitively from experience. It needs to both startle and resonate at once.



Everything is Changing

No it's not. Yes, there are many changes happening on many levels in our world. But many things have not changed. We need love, some sense of control, acceptance, security and meaning in our lives. These fundamentals are enduring and drive every one of our daily personal and professional actions and choices. Design has to use the strongest foundation to build upon. We need to recognize change for what it is and what it says, but the design needs to build on rock-solid foundations that have not changed in a millennium.



Doing 'A' While Hoping for 'B'

Most design of human experience achieves 'A,' while hoping for 'B.' The experience often misses the way humans really work. Humans are messy. They sense, feel, think, do, act and react to their environment in ways that are nuanced and individually determined. But if you look closely enough, you can find patterns that can help your design move from an interesting idea to a powerful solution for many. Designs have to fit and work in the context of an individual's real life and work; their real life doesn't have to fit into a design.



Design Expresses Culture

Design of human experiences expresses the culture of the enterprise; in many ways, more so than the content. Content expresses the stated intent and the logic of the organization, while the macro design elements express its unstated culture. Participants clearly get the latter message, whether intended or not and behave accordingly. The problem with much design is that the cultural messages being sent are either unintended or misaligned with the outcomes the company wants to achieve.



Creative is Found Deep with Rigour

Great creativity emerges from the confluence of deep rivers of thought: the honest examination of the landscape, issue or idea, the broad and deep experience of the designer and team, and the contours and context merge the two in the birth of an idea. The illusion is that it is from the blank page that creative design flows. In fact, it flows from deep (sometimes invisible) processes that support it. Artists, actors and designers deeply mine and rigorously examine the landscape, whether that landscape is human behaviour, a business culture, a competitive advantage, a product innovation or a leadership vision.



Meaning Drives Everything

Abraham Maslow has underpinned our understanding of psychological behaviours for many years with his Hierarchy of Needs. It is ubiquitous with our modern design; so fundamental and deeply hidden in our culture that we don't fully see its manifestation in our design experiences. It is there and the model is often misunderstood as a hierarchy, but we don't believe that was his intent, despite the unfortunate title of a very good and nuanced work. Humans have chosen to forgo the fundamental 'higher' elements in the hierarchy in the absence of meaning. If people don't have a feeling that the world makes sense, then hopes die and their desire and ability to reach for basic needs or advanced growth disappears. The design of human experience provides the context for the making of meaning for individuals. It is in making their own meaning that humans then choose to leverage the tools presented to them; or not. Without a connection on some level to meaning, even the best tool, idea, process or strategy will not be enough to unleash the energy required to change.

Victor Frankle's profound life and his book *Man's Search for Meaning* is one of the most powerful works along this path of thinking.



Work is the Play of Children (and Play can be the Work of Adults)

Children need to be immersed in play in order to learn how the world works: how things are connected to each other, the impact that they have on the world and that the world has on them. Adults do not find flow in their work until they engage with the world with the same focused abandon that they did when they were children. As a child, you are supported and can afford to give yourself fully over to an activity that you define as play. As an adult, you are supporting yourself, your family and the community you are involved in – yet you can only leverage your potential when you give yourself over in the same way as the child, to the challenge at hand. Great learning experiences need to pull humans into an immersive and nuanced world and a set of challenges that allows participants to lose themselves, even for a few moments, so that they can surprise themselves with what they find.



Work is Noble

Work is noble. No matter what the job, supporting ourselves, our families and contributing to our community are noble acts. Great design needs to remind people of this inherent truth and remind them of the contributions they are making.



Human Attention

It is popular to believe that people aren't paying attention. The truth is that they are, much more closely than might be apparent. They see past your message and examine the messenger. They synthesize context at a much more profound level than they are given credit for. Understanding this is the largest and most profound opportunity in the design of human experience.



Each Person has a Gift to Contribute

Each person has a gift to contribute. This is our belief. Great design starts with this belief and then creates the experience for people to either remember or discover this about themselves.



Defining the Right Problem

The greatest opportunity for design impact is in the initial meeting(s) with clients and in the initial thinking about the problem. Solving problems is usually is not the hard part. Defining the right problem to solve - that is where insights emerge and great design starts.

(See our Insight Labs to see practice of our principles in action).



The Boundaries of the Problem Solving Space

Our role in design is not simply to understand the boundaries of the problem-solving space; it is to question why those are the boundaries at all.



For Design to be a Strategic Partner

If we want to achieve results that align with the mission and culture of the enterprise, that drop to the bottom line, and go beyond silo-based thinking, we as a design partner have to drop our own silo limitations from the design process as well. Design can't simply be about training; it has to be aligned to the business strategy, goals and culture, and to creating sustainable behaviour change.



Chaos to Order

Inherent in design is a journey. It is always an individual journey, even when a group is involved. The individual needs to feel a movement from Chaos to Order. To begin with, they need to feel somewhat at disequilibrium and they need to then move to a state of equilibrium. Most design doesn't work because it doesn't recognize the need to start in disequilibrium. Too much uncertainty and you have chaos, and too little and you have passivity and entropy. Understanding how to strike the right balance is fundamental to great design and it is both an art and a science.



Isolation to Community

Humans are always on the journey of moving from isolation to community. Humans want to move past mere connection and toward more secure levels of relationship in a group or social structure. Great design needs to recognize that this is one of the key reasons that people find the deep motivation required for learning, for growth, for skill development and for understanding. This movement helps them not only to do their jobs, but it helps them move to greater levels of community and ultimately toward meaning.



Detail Matters

Nuance. Shade. Tone. Gradation. Volume. Detail. Humans are deeply moved by moments. An individual's reaction to an experience is influenced by the countless details that have been carefully crafted within it. Details matter.



Context Trumps Content

Two examples:

In a world of increasing complexity

- Who you are speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you are saying.
- Say yes, but shake your head and look angry; which message do you think people will believe? Humans say that the content matters, and of course it does matter. However, the extent of that is precisely determined by our judgment of the context of that content. Designing content is never enough; the nuance of context delivers the power behind the message and needs to be carefully crafted.

(See our Thought Paper Context Trumps Content.)



It is Possible...

It is possible to create massive cultural shifts, to sustainably change behaviors, to align around values, well-defined brands, clear strategies and a leader's vision. It is not only possible – it is precisely what our audiences hope to be able to find in their work. Great design simply gets the junk out of the way, between a clear direction and natural aspiration. It also puts in just-in-time systems and tools to measure, remind and support those aligned aspirations through the hills and valleys of implementation.



Four ‘Walls’ of the Classroom

Whether those ‘walls’ are virtual or real, great design refines what is possible within them. It has to start with the foundational design tools, driving human motivations and leveraging natural human aspirations.



Time and Group Size Matters

Timing is a powerful factor in design. The same program will have dramatically different effects based on the design of the schedule. A fully immersive, asynchronous, virtual, pervasive experience stretched across four weeks can be amazing for one company in one context; for another company and context a three-hour, globally synchronous experience can lead to the same amazing benefits. Time is an incredibly important design element.

Group size matters and is an important design element. Whether small debriefing or mass energy, individual learning or massive cultural shift, size is an important context-setting design element, not just a logistical question.



When does the penny drop?

We do not understand how humans learn. Not really. Great design needs to recognize that at this moment in human evolution, the best learning theory gives us only an approximation of how humans actually take in sensory data, encode it and create the consistent ability to choose at a specific future point in time to use it productively. Neurosurgeons we interviewed are humbled by the complexity of the human brain; as designers we have a deep sense of respect for this complexity. We will only move the yardstick forward by openly acknowledging the current significant gaps in our own understanding. We can't underestimate the task at hand in having humans make consistently different choices. We cannot let this acknowledged gap prevent us from taking productive and effective action. But great learning design has to provide some room for the mystery inside the process of learning; if not, the experience and content will crowd out the very learning it is trying to achieve.



In-Classroom Facilitation and Design

In-classroom learning is facilitated by talented, motivated people. Design should support the best intentions of a skilled facilitator – rather than get in their way. Facilitation is an art. It is to be understood in the moment, with the participants standing right there. The design of the experience needs to fit this powerful, dynamic relationship and to provide the best options for optimizing that relationship.



Consistency and Spontaneity

Individuals always create their own story within a design. The design needs to recognize this reality, and celebrate it, rather than ignore it. Facilitators and technology-enabled Digital Mentor (DM) feedback must have the ability to translate the individual's experience of that design. Those are two different things, sometimes radically different. The design needs richness and consistency. The process of debriefing and feedback requires knowledge of both the intent of the design and some appreciation for the unique story that forms in a participant's mind about the experience. Consistency and spontaneity are both required for optimal human experience. This is as true in the design of virtual immersion worlds as it is in the creation of classroom experiential events.



Form Follows Function. And Function Equally Follows Form

For years the idea of design was that form follows function. While this is true, it is only a half-truth. The other half is that function equally follows form. We shape the spaces we work in – but once we use those spaces they shape us! The design of human experiences is no different. Once we design an experience for humans, it shapes the behaviours of those within it.



Hints and Clarity

Any design that is perfectly clear is inherently dishonest. Life is not like that and on some level humans understand this. Some things serve an audience better behind a curtain, slightly blurry. This is not to hide the clarity, but to reveal the mystery.



Connecting to Your Audience

When you are training, educating, or communicating ideas, you are not only transferring ideas; you are connecting at a soul-to-soul level with other humans. Your audience, both virtual and in-person, will on some level ask two questions: "Who are you?" and "Why are you doing this?" Great design must create, in every nuance of the context (timing, emphasis, words, images, character, direction, tone and engagement), the opportunity for each individual to clearly and quickly arrive at positive answers to those questions for themselves. Only then will you have the opportunity for your idea to even be considered.



Story

Every human experience is a story. Everything has, and is, a story. One of the most important talents a designer brings to bear on a project--perhaps the most important--is to understand the simple story of the sometimes very complex experience they are creating. That means understanding how the variables within that story intimately connect to each other and to those who will experience them. Do they flow? Are they alive? Do they dance? Is the story simple enough for humans to interact with it and create their own story within it? Is the story rich enough to be both intellectually challenging, as well as emotionally engaging?



Complexity

We are hired for complex, challenging projects. It is what we do and we love (most of) it! There comes a point in every creation where the weight of the variables seem overwhelming and complex. This is the point of breaking the project or of breakthrough; and it is where the designer must answer one question successfully, “What is the simple story within this complexity and of this experience?” Finding the right answer means arriving at the sweet side of complexity. Avoiding the question or answering incorrectly means losing the design and becoming buried behind a shallow mask of complexity. We know from experience that it is much better to face and answer the question correctly the first time.



Simple is not Simplistic

The best designs are both simple and complex. They derive their unique character, creativity and complexity from the multiplicity of permutations and combinations of a very few, carefully chosen, simple rules.

Underlying the most successful ‘complex’ designs are a few simple and clear driving elements. Inside each simple driver you must find a rock-solid foundation of both heart and logic. Underlying unsuccessful designs, whether complex or simple, are either unclear drivers, or overly complex ones.

While it seems training and education is about what we ‘show and tell,’ the truth is much more compelling and intriguing. People need to be seen before they can really open themselves to seeing. They need to feel accepted as part of a group and identified as an individual within it. The design of powerful human experiences requires the environment to not just ‘show and tell’ ideas being presented, but to ensure that the participants feel they are regarded as unique and valued individuals. This can and should happen even when the audience is 10,000 virtual participants.

Learning is never about filling empty heads; it is about inspiring each individual human to grow.

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