Chapter 9
Design Thinking as a Paradigm to Support the Ethical Revival in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The recent surge of unethical behaviour throughout all levels of higher education institutions across the world leaves little doubt of the problematic nature of ethics in higher education. The current state of ethics in universities must be seen as a call to action and must be considered a catalyst for an ethical revival in higher education leadership and administration. In the present chapter, against the background understanding of design thinking, ethics, and leadership in higher education, an argument is made for the usefulness of design thinking in moving towards the much-needed ethical revival of higher education. The fundamental premise of the present chapter is that design thinking with its emphasis on empathy is a useful paradigm for supporting the growth of an ethical mindset throughout the higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Provoked into reflection by having written the chapter in this volume entitled Ethics in higher education leadership: themes and current trends, the author mulled further over the complexities of leadership, and even more so, the complexities of ethics in higher education. Ethics according to the Cambridge dictionary have a lot to do with 'what is right and wrong'; system of accepted rules about behaviour, based on what is considered right and wrong (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ethic). The concept of ethics is grounded in social responsibility – doing right or wrong by others. It is about how our own behaviours will affect others. It seems logical then, that empathy – the ability to see something from the perspective others, could be a powerful tool for assisting the process of ethical decision making. This train of thought leads to a consideration of the usefulness of design thinking as a paradigm for

leadership and ethical decision making. Design thinking is a process with which the author (a teaching academic and UX designer) has familiarity with, and affinity for.

The fundamental tenet underpinning the present chapter is that design thinking has much to offer to leadership in higher education. When adopted as guiding philosophy in higher education leadership, design thinking is a valuable tool in facilitating a human-centred process for decision making and for stimulating innovative thinking in leadership and ethics. A brief review of literature reveals that others agree with the value of design thinking to leadership, and design thinking is emerging as highly desirable dimension of leadership and management.

The chapter begins with developing an understanding of design thinking. A brief discussion of the nature ethics precedes a discussion of ethics in universities, and ethics in leadership. Focus on empathy and its place in ethics and morality brings the chapter to discussion of design thinking and its usefulness in supporting the systematic change needed for ethical revival of higher education.

WHAT IS DESIGN THINKING?

To understand design thinking and its relevance to ethical decision making, it is important to first clarify the concept of design and design thinking as it is used in the present chapter. The following conceptualisation of design and design thinking is argued in a previous publication (Torrisi-Steele, in press) by the author and is paraphrased here:

Frequently, in common use, the term *design* is used to refer to visual appearance, aesthetics and or function of an object or to mean "to conceive and plan out in mind" or "to devise for a specific function or plan" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/design). Design thinking is most closely related to the latter understanding of design. Design thinking is a human centred approach to problem solving. The process of design thinking connects inspiration, ideation and implementation (Brown & Katz,2009). "Empathy, creativity and rationality to analyse and fit solutions to particular contexts" (Wrigley & Straker, 2015) is at the core of design thinking. There are variations in conceptualization of design thinking. For the purposes of the present chapter, design thinking is a process for as reflexive practice, problem solving activity - a way of reasoning/making sense of things, and creation of meaning (Gasparini, 2015).

Design thinking itself is not a new concept. It has been in use for over thirty years and used to refer to the cognitive process that designers use to design objects rather than to the design of the object itself (Wrigley & Straker, 2015). However, the term became truly established when in 1987 when Rowe published his book entitled "*Design Thinking*". Design thinking has, in more recent times, come into widespread use across a multitude of contexts and disciplines, and can be considered a paradigm or guiding philosophy for problem solving. Design thinking is seen as a particularly apt paradigm for the 21st century, in which complex problems and the need for innovation dominate. Richard Buchanan (1992), calls these deeply complex problems "wicked problems". Buchanan (1992) defines wicked problems as indeterminate and therefore highly complex. Wicked problems are the 'ultimate' open-ended problem space: there is no definitive formulation, there are no 'stopping rules' or 'exhaustive list of admissible operations. There is more than one explanation of a wicked problem and every wicked problem is unique (Buchanan, 1992, p. 14). In the seminal article "Wicked problems in design thinking", Buchannan (1992) ties design thinking to wicked problems. Wicked problems are by nature ambiguous or ill-defined. As a problem solving paradigm, designing thinking is also characterized by ambiguity, meaning that there is more than one possible explanation for a phenomenon (Luka, 2014).

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