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Interview with Samuel Tschepe on “Quo Vadis Design Thinking?”

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Samuel Tschepe is leading the HPI Certification Program for Design Thinking Coaches at the HPI Academy in Potsdam. He has a background in education and lifelong learning and has worked in different roles at the HPI (D-School) and HPI Academy since 2012. Over the years, he has gained 365 + days of DT coaching experience from diverse (international) contexts.

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BISE: Design Thinking has arrived in public discourse and has even developed into a certain hype in the last few years. It is now more or less established in many companies, but one almost gets the impression that the initial enthusiasm has now turned into skepticism or even open rejection. There has also been a lot of criticism of Design Thinking recently. What would you say is the status of Design Thinking at the end of the year 2022? Quo Vadis Design Thinking?

Tschepe: That’s a good question – a brief look into the past might help to answer it. About a good two decades ago, Design Thinking started to gain more and more appeal in various contexts. Since then, Design Thinking has established itself as a recognized and useful bundle of mindsets, principles, practices, and techniques. The thing is, however, that Design Thinking does not have a clear “date of birth”. It has various theoretical origins and there have been very different forms of its application in practice – especially in the commercial context. Thus, there is not the one and only definition of what Design Thinking actually is, which is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because in multiple forms and shapes Design Thinking has managed to successfully contribute valuable impulses and approaches to public discourse and especially the business world, such as more human-centeredness, more experimentation, more teamwork, and so on. That is, after all, a positive development. On the other hand, the curse: due to the diverse application of Design Thinking, the approach has in places been diluted to innovation theater and has become kind of buzzword for many things. In these cases, growing skepticism and even rejection is totally understandable, due to the poor implementation of Design Thinking.

For example, if we take a look along the classic Design Thinking triad of “Place, Process and People” – how do we see that implemented in practice? Many companies take the easy path, they only change what’s visible, but won’t go deeper. For example, they adapt their rooms: a little more flexible, shiny, furniture on wheels, a time timer and the classic football or ping-pong table, start-up style. And the processes? A bit of user-contact here and a bit of prototyping there, relabeling existing processes to make them sound more innovative. Done. Done? So far, that’s no wizardry! But now, going deeper and really changing structures and processes as well as sincerely working on the third element, which is more people involvement and development, that’s where the crux lies. And this often does not really happen in many places. It’s a classic “garbage in, garbage out” conundrum – how can we expect great results without proper effort and implementation? On a larger scale, I believe this is a testimony of our fast-paced world, in which shallowness has become a widespread phenomenon. Everyone is seeking for a short-cut, the magic tool that brings them quickly to the next “big thing” – but if it were that easy, we wouldn’t have the problems we have today.

This leads us to your initial question: what’s next for Design Thinking? In a sense, moving forward means returning to the roots of Design Thinking and taking it more seriously as what it can be: a meaningful, human-centered approach towards problem-solving. This combined with a significant purpose, e.g., derived from the social and global challenges we are facing, still holds a lot of untapped potential. Thus, given the current state of our world, Design Thinking is needed more than ever!

BISE: That was a quite comprehensive answer which raises some further questions for me. First of all, one topic that you briefly mentioned is the application of Design Thinking in a commercial context. You are currently also in a role where you lead the Certification Program for Design Thinking Coaches at the HPI Academy – an institute that markets training and certification programs for professionals. In addition, in the last few years there have been a lot of providers on the market who do something similar and commercialize Design Thinking in various formats, so to speak. My question is: What is your perspective on this increasing commercialization?

Tschepe: I see that as very critical. Here we observe kind of two problematic sides of the same coin that reinforce one another. First, there is the misleading expectation of people to learn powerful skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration within a day or two and solve problems within the blink of an eye. And second, there is a market aiming for growth and revenue in which

providers feel encouraged to respond to such requests. Who is to blame? Well, I leave that answer to economist experts. However, what we as providers can and should do, is to critically reflect on our role and what we offer. At the very least, what’s the message that we want to bring across?

What most institutions, coaches etc. have already been able to transport into the business world is the creation of more awareness for the user, which has been kind of a paradigm shift from “making people want things” to “making things people want”. That is a step in the right direction, I would say. However, we should ask ourselves whether we can still afford to design for primarily economic and growth reasons, given the complex existential problems we have today. In my eyes, we should actually move on to the next step, that is to “making things people need” or actually even further to “solving relevant problems for people and humanity”. Promoting that shift should be on our agenda, and everyone can do that in different ways, on a small or bigger scale.

To do so, we have to take people and their problems more into account and understand them on a deeper level. This goes way beyond asking a user a few questions, it means taking sincere interest in the human experience and building empathy towards perspectives other than our own to inspire and guide our design work. Then, if we take this seriously, it also means we always have to consider the context in which we act, the system around us. We always design within a system, within networks – this is an important factor if we want to have a chance to successfully deal with complexity. Thus, we have a big responsibility as designers.

BISE: That’s an exciting point! As you said: using Design Thinking as a tool to address complex challenges of humanity with a very human focus. I would like to make that a bit more tangible. Humanity is facing a number of big multi-complex problems today and in the future. In which areas or sectors do you think Design Thinking can and will make a relevant contribution in the coming years?

Tschepe: Well, overall, Design Thinking has the potential to make a significant contribution to dealing with complex problems in a wide range of sectors and industries. I don’t know if I can pinpoint it to one. If I had to, perhaps education and healthcare? In general, I think a key factor is to potentially contribute to more participation and involvement in today’s complex matters. Let’s face it, there is a lot of change happening at the moment, in a pace that is too fast for many to keep up with. Everything is becoming more fast-paced and more complex as a result of many phenomena – globalization, digitization, you name it. People are overwhelmed, whether they admit it or not. No wonder that politicians with simplified narratives have

become more and more popular again, which is dangerous because there is no simple answer to complexity.

Now, of course, Design Thinking is not the one and only answer to this. However, it has the potential to be a door-opener for people to get involved and relate to complex topics instead of being overwhelmed by them. In Design Thinking we deliberately take time to engage in and grasp complex topics, which means looking at them from different angles and trying to understand various perspectives. We do that mainly by using primary research methods which allow for building empathy. As a result of this, if done properly and not the shallow way, one starts to understand better and even cares. Suddenly there’s meaning, which can be a very powerful and motivating driver.

In addition to that, when speaking of involvement, I should also mention the topic of diversity here. In Design Thinking, we need to think of it as crucial both regarding to what we look at when dealing with complex topics as well as regarding to who does the looking. We always talk about “diverse teams”, and yes, those are essential. Unfortunately, we often limit diversity to such extent as merely putting together teams with different academic backgrounds and coming from different cultures, and that’s it. But this is a broader issue and should be handled as such to really bring about the effect it can have. The same holds true for what we focus on when engaging in a topic – how much do we really challenge our biases and properly look into things that might contradict what we already know and are familiar with? Another “back to the roots” moment – applying true diversity.

BISE: Indeed. I have one more question though concerning the involvement. Do you think that people actually want this participation and active involvement at all? What are your experiences with involving people who are rather reluctant when you approach them with Design Thinking?

Tschepe: Yes... that’s an interesting point. First of all, it surely shouldn’t be about forcing people to get involved, but rather empowering them to. Then, there is always the question what they can personally gain from it, I think. Which leads us to a second aspect that’s often missing in the discussion: people also need to be enabled to participate. Ultimately, only the combination of empowerment and enablement will bring us forward. Imagine this possible scenario: someone gets started, figures out how to help other people, how to solve a meaningful problem. This sparks their intrinsic motivation; it gives them a purpose. And now they additionally learn the skills needed to take action. This can be huge, as it leads to applied self-efficacy! In my experience, when we successfully provide a space where this can happen, people also get involved.

Above all, the exciting thing is that we can consider Design Thinking as a multilayered learning framework itself, which means that when doing Design Thinking it’s kind of an act of learning at the same time. Along the lines of similar concepts that have been in place for quite a while, individuals and teams are learning as they continuously adapt their worldviews throughout the experimental journey and deal with versatile challenges along the way. In doing so, they are both acquiring new skills as well as training the competence to learn how to learn, which refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge and skills effectively and efficiently. Needless to say how important that is, as developing this competence can help individuals to adapt to new situations and continue to grow and develop throughout their lives.

Along the discussion of “Future Skills” and alike, the crucial aspect here is that learning in Design Thinking happens on different levels: rationally, emotionally, and socially. Way too often, today’s educational setups focus merely on the rational sphere. However, learning on multiple levels is important because it helps us to become well-rounded individuals who are able to effectively engage with the world around us. Rational learning helps us to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while emotional learning helps us to understand and manage our own emotions and be emphatic. Social learning helps us to understand and navigate the social world, including understanding cultural differences and interacting with others in appropriate ways. So, all of these forms of learning are interconnected and play a vital role in helping people to thrive, thus we need to apply all of them. And that’s what’s happening in Design Thinking. In conclusion, bringing Design Thinking into the equation means emphasizing our human talents and abilities.

BISE: You’re currently in a role where you’re not only conducting Design Thinking workshops and projects, but you’re actually training coaches to enable others to work with Design Thinking. Speaking from that perspective: What is the key competency that you try to impart to your coaches to enable exactly this kind of multilayered learning?

Tschepe: Given the complexity of it all, a major capability is flexibility, because it enables them to adapt to different contexts and situations. For example, a coach who is flexible may be able to tailor their coaching style to better support the learning needs of an individual, while also being able to adjust their approach to suit the needs of the team as a whole. Ultimately, a coach who is able to adapt their methods and approaches to different situations is more likely to be able to help people thrive and learn effectively.

What’s important here is that flexibility consists of several ingredients. Often, coaches only train their know-how of methods and tools and assume this alone leads them to act flexibly. However, while that certainly is relevant, it’s not enough. It is also important for coaches to be able to be present in every moment and act and react spontaneously because the needs and dynamics of the project and team can change quickly and unexpectedly. For example, a coach may need to adjust their approach on the fly if a team encounters a roadblock or if a member of the team is struggling with a particular task.

This continuous balancing of planning ahead, anticipating as well as being present in every moment, observing and reacting is essential to eventually become an empathetic coach who can help individuals and teams to thrive.

BISE: Absolutely. Let’s remain in the area of teaching Design Thinking. Nowadays, Design Thinking has found its way into the curricula of many universities, which means that for many people a first contact – especially in fields such as information systems – often takes place at the university. Therefore, the question: How could the information systems community in particular, or anyone who teaches Design Thinking at a university, contribute to ensuring that this concept is taught in a future-oriented and meaningful way?

Tschepe: That’s a pretty big question, let me share two major thoughts that relate to what we discussed earlier. Firstly, there is the need to recognize the value of hands-on, experiential learning when helping students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the modern world. Learning needs to become more of an engaging experience again, teachers may need to shift their focus from traditional lectures and assignments to more interactive, experiential activities that allow students to apply their learning in real-world contexts. This also includes a greater emphasis on collaboration and teamwork as well as being more proactive in creating inclusive classrooms and in addressing issues of diversity, equality, and inclusion. In short, issues that are crucial in the real world.

Secondly, this leads to a radical change of the role of being a teacher. The traditional model of teaching, in which the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and the students are passive learners, is not the most effective way to facilitate learning anymore. Instead, teachers should take on a more facilitating or coaching role, in which they help students to develop the skills and strategies they need to learn independently. This can involve helping students to identify their own learning goals and develop strategies for achieving them, as well as providing feedback and guidance to help them stay on track.

To promote that shift, we also need to rethink who can potentially act as such facilitators, as we do not necessarily need people with the same qualification anymore. Just to tap into this, as it is very exciting: what if we allowed for students to become facilitators themselves? What if we opened up for more peer learning? In a world in which an artificial intelligence can put together a decent essay within seconds and knows the answer to standardized questions before the average teacher does, what’s the point of clinging to a model of teaching that clearly is outdated?

In summary, Design Thinking as a human-centered approach brings the focus back to the learning individual. Thus, we also need to change the way we teach toward a more natural, humane way, accessing all the potential we humans have.

BISE: The facilitator role that you describe has been shaped to some extent in the Design Thinking world by the idea that you have to interact very physically with everyone in one location, because place plays such an important role. The pandemic in the last few years has forced us all to avoid face-to-face interactions and move more and more into the digital space. Face-to-face formats have had to be virtualized in some way. Especially in the light of the teaching approaches you just described, how do you see Design Thinking evolving here? Will it increasingly just be digital? Does that even make sense?

Tschepe: Indeed, that’s been quite a push to try out new things, also for me personally. What I can say so far is that, as with many things, the right balance is key. In the spirit of Design Thinking, we always need to carefully consider: What do we want to achieve? What are the goals, needs and circumstances? Are we dealing with project-based information work, sharing things together and discussing them and alike? This might work well remotely. Or is it a crucial moment for team-building, such as in the beginning of a project? Here you might want to bring people together face-to-face. Certainly, there is no clear rule. But I’d say thinking along the three dimensions I mentioned earlier, rational, emotional and social learning, might be a good indicator. In my experience, the tendency so far is that rational learning works well online, but emotional and social learning works better face-to-face. So when designing Design Thinking experiences, we need to carefully keep that in mind. Simply because it’s perhaps logistically much easier, we shouldn’t always go for the online solution, or this might lead to contributing to a more “one-dimensional” and consequently shallower version of Design Thinking. However, the practicality reason is also a valid one in terms of accessibility, as it is a great way to connect people who otherwise could not come together. As you see, it’s not a black or white kind of answer.

Regarding the question of a hybrid work setup, I think we should not use online and offline presence simultaneously, but rather sequentially when working together. That means we completely meet in-person when it makes sense to meet in-person, and we exchange things online if that is more suitable. Besides the online/offline discussion however, technology will definitely co-facilitate learning processes more and more in the future. For example, it can support creating more customized learning experiences that are tailored to the needs and learning style of each individual student. It can also provide students with access to a wide range of learning resources along their journey, and much more. That’s still an area in which we also need to further learn and experiment. A lot.

BISE: Speaking of further learning, how do you assess the aspect of research with or especially research about Design Thinking in addition to the aspect of knowledge transfer through universities? Where can research contribute to a better understanding of Design Thinking?

Tschepe: There are many exciting areas in which further research will need to be done: cross-cultural comparisons, evaluating the effectiveness of Design Thinking, the integration of Design Thinking with other approaches, Design Thinking applied in XYZ, the role of emotion in Design Thinking, just to name a few.

For me personally, the beauty and power of Design Thinking is that it draws from so many fields, that it incorporates learning both from theory and practice and puts them into action. I think it is important that we keep that spirit also regarding further research, which means to try to merge insights from various fields into applicable action strategies. Design Thinking could contribute by serving as a glue to putting together relevant research findings in order to actively tackle the larger challenges of our time.

BISE: The fact that the different perspectives from research and practice can cross-fertilize is a very exciting thought in my eyes! I recently came across a quote from the *Journal of Information Technology* (McKay et al. 2012), in which it is recognized as valuable that IS researchers approach the knowledge and different facets of design and Design Thinking in order to achieve a more human-centered perspective and get away from the technology or construction-centered perspective in the design science context. So there is one perspective that says: we would like to use scientific methods but without scientific pretensions to solve problems for people, and another one that says: we are interested in getting to know this perspective

to basically get closer to the people again. This is a very interesting field in my eyes. So here’s another question: The HPI Academy is associated with the Hasso Plattner Institute and is therefore in close collaboration with a university institution – how do you combine these two perspectives? To what extent do professional tracks like your program for Design Thinking coaches cooperate with the university or university education?

Tschepe: I actually believe that we have only just really arrived at the process of understanding this and also setting up more links and cooperation between university and professional programs. We are currently in a very exciting development, there’s a lot happening and I’m curious to see where we’re going in the next year or two. As you may know, it’s not always easy to keep up putting into practice what you preach on every level. We are on the right track – but at the same time we still have a lot of work ahead of us, because especially at places like universities as well as in research there are always many different people, approaches, ways of thinking and working to do justice to. In my view, this university is a place with huge potential that we must and will tap into even more.

BISE: Very exciting! I think we have now addressed a really broad range of topics in relation to Design Thinking. If we were to sit down together again in 10 years to talk about the future of Design Thinking – what do you think would be the topics we would talk about then? Where has Design Thinking gone by then and what are the prospects, so to speak, that await us in 10 years?

Tschepe: I’d like to answer with a mix of what I expect and what I would wish for, if I may. First, as technology continues to advance, I wish Design Thinking to be a constant reminder of the human component in all of it. Second, on an even bigger scale, I think that during the Corona pandemic, there was a certain momentum where one could have thought: yes, we are in a crisis, but this is now the moment for some things to really change for the better. But well... It is high time to proactively address our current complex societal challenges, such as climate change, inequality, and social justice! I wish that in 10 years there will be examples of successful change for the better. Examples that don’t just concern a single product or a single initiative that has been successful, but such that show that change has taken place on a systemic level. That new ways of working together, new ways of learning on different levels have become a matter of course – and I don’t care if it’s called Design Thinking or not!

To sum up, I would like to see many of the elements of Design Thinking rooting in different systems and have a positive impact – which is optimistic for a time horizon of 10 years. But you can’t get there without optimism either – rock’n’roll!

BISE: Okay, I think that’s the perfect closing! Thank you for this exciting conversation!

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