



Sensory Cards

Fostering Empathy
and Connection within
Community Groups

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and Connection within
Community Groups

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Glossary of Terms

COLLABORATION

The action of working with someone to produce something.

COMMUNITY

A group of people who interact with one another, share similar interests, and have a collective sense of unity.

CONVERSATION

The informal exchange of ideas between two or more people.

DEEP LISTENING

A way of hearing in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it.

DIALOGIC ARTIFACT

A product of human workmanship that carries the potential to foster conversations.

EMPATHY

The ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation.

PRESENCE

The state of being consciously in the present moment.

SELF-AWARENESS

The conscious knowledge of one's own personality, thoughts, beliefs and emotions.

STATE OF MIND

A person's mood and the effect that mood has on the person's thinking and behaviour.

Abstract

The ability to work and collaborate with different groups has become an essential skill in our highly connected and complex society. We face challenges today that cannot be fixed by a single individual and we need to learn how to collaborate on a much greater scale. People are starting to see the value in building communities based on strong relationships and connections, and yet working together is not always easy. This thesis project navigates from the broader context of community building to the local and personal space of relationships. It explores the potential of dialogic artifacts as a means for building empathy and connection within community groups. A series of reflective and exploratory projects were conducted in order to facilitate immersion into the topic and the access to tacit, intuitive knowledge. Psychologists and group facilitators were engaged through participatory design methods and brought important insights on how artifacts can support empathy in human interactions. This research led to the *Sensory Cards*, a set of visual and tactile cards with suggested guidelines designed to facilitate the communication—access, expression and understanding—of feelings and emotions in community groups.

KEYWORDS

design for empathy, community building, collaborative design, conversation and dialogic artifacts.

“Empathy can
create the bonds that
make life worth living.”

Krznaric, 2014

Preface

As the child of a psychologist I was encouraged from a very young age to dive deep into my thoughts, feelings and emotions, yet expressing myself to others was never an easy task. The gap between what we experience inside of us and what we are able to express to the outside world is very familiar to me and I clearly see how poor communication skills can create barriers of understanding between people.

In my search for ways to express myself, I discovered the power of stories and images to communicate unprocessed ideas and undefined emotions. Through stories, characters and drawings I found a vehicle to let my own feelings and emotions arise. I noticed that my visualizations helped me not only to express myself, but also to connect me with others in different ways. They acted as dialogic artifacts, as tools for conversations and exchange of ideas.

In a world where empathy and collaboration are much needed, we must be able to reach and understand each other at a deeper level. My research is focused on the communication of feelings and emotions as a way to facilitate connections and increase empathy between individuals. My struggles to communicate and my own personal interest in collaboration have motivated much of this work. The research I have conducted has pulled on self-reflection, intuition and lived experience. I learn as I go, and in the process of finding my own path, I explore many.

1. Introduction

This thesis project explores the potential of dialogic artifacts as a means for building empathy and connection within community groups. It has been done with an emphasis toward improving communication and pulled on insight provided by group facilitators, psychologists, friends and colleagues seeking to foster strong collaborations.

The ability to work and collaborate with different groups has become an essential skill in our highly complex and connected society. Globally, we face challenges that cannot be fixed by single individuals and we need to learn to collaborate on a much greater scale. People see the value in building communities based on strong relationships and connections. However, working together is not always easy. This research navigates from the broader contexts of collaboration and community building to the local and personal space of relationships.

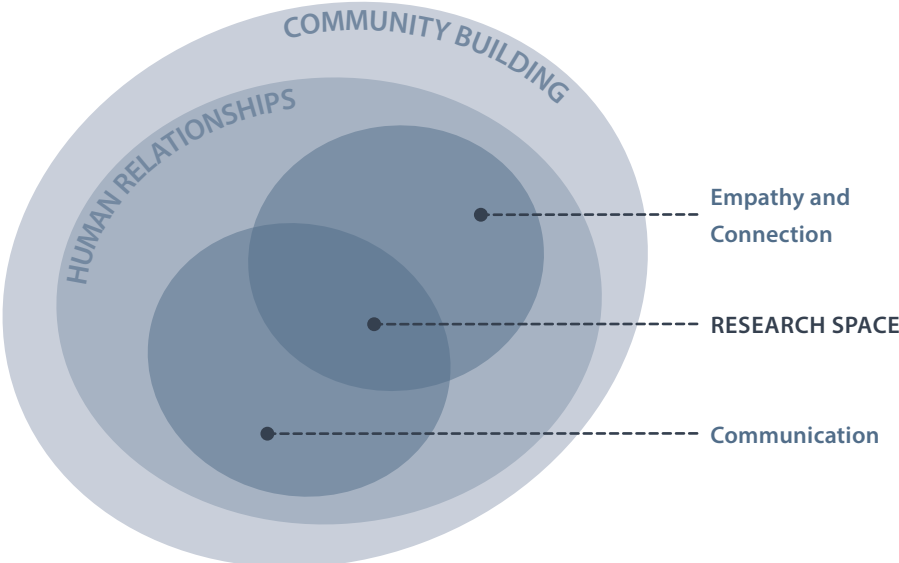


Fig 01 Diagram of research space.

1.1 Context and Framing

In order to better understand the context of this research and uncover gaps and design opportunities, it was important to look into the way we currently collaborate and relate to others. This section investigates the topics of collaboration and community building, and lays down the groundwork for further explorations discussed in section 2. *Research Methodology and Process*.

Collaboration and Community Building

A growing number of people are not only rediscovering the value of collaboration, but are also learning again to collaborate. (Manzini 2015, p. 99)

We live in a complex and highly connected society. Today, we can be virtually anywhere at anytime. We meet people on social media, we exchange information in real time, and we collaborate with people from across the globe without ever having to meet them in person. Social thinker Jeremy Rifkin (2009) observes that “the world has shrunk and the human race finds itself nearly face-to-face in the world of cyberspace” (p. 424). There is no doubt that the continuous advance of technology and the Internet allows us to come together more easily. Yet, how effective are those encounters in developing a lasting sense of community?

For Ezio Manzini (2015), a leading thinker in design for social innovation and sustainability, “the likelihood of [innovation] happening depends largely on an encounter between people who collaborate to create new values” (p. 77). In a document written

for the *Culture of Resilience*—a project from the University of the Arts London (UAL)—Mazini (2016) says that “while digital connections in virtual space are increasing exponentially, personal encounters in physical spaces are dramatically decreasing in both number and quality”. Manzini claims that traditional communities have been progressively disappearing leaving us with a decreasing societal resilience. The result, according to him, is a fragile network of people incapable of adapting to change and learn from previous experience.

Fortunately, the scenario that Manzini and others presents us with can be turned into an opportunity. It affords the space for designers—amongst many others—to rethink the way we collaborate and build our communities. Grassroots movements, such as the *Transition Movement*¹, are emerging with the intention of building resilient communities capable of connecting individuals around common interests. Rob Hopkins and Michael Thomas from *Transition Network* (2016) argue that a healthy group is central to the success of any project (p. 13). These communities are creating spaces to facilitate connections, and more and more people are re-discovering the value of building strong relationships.

While these initiatives are very positive, working with individuals in all their complexities is not always easy. Many communities struggle to build the connections they are seeking. According to Elizabeth Doty (2003)— president of a consulting firm that focuses on social processes for knowledge discovery and learning—“communities of practice do not ‘click’ automatically. It takes work to develop a true community, and some groups never actually make it” (p. 16).

¹ Transition is a movement that has been growing since 2005. It is about communities stepping up to address big challenges by starting local. They seek to nurture a culture focused on supporting each other, both as groups and as wider communities. (Transition Network, 2016)

1.2 Opportunity Space

Throughout history, human beings have always established social communities, developed rules of social exchange, embedded their members in complex reciprocal relationships, and built social trust. (Thackara 2005, p. 133)

The need to build strong community comes with the challenge of strengthening the social ties that hold those communities together allowing people to engage more fully in collaboration. Laura W. Black (2008)—PhD in Communication from the University of Washington—states that groups have difficulties connecting and managing differences because they “often emphasize their differences, rather than commonalities” (p. 97). She also notes that dialogues emphasize human connection as it “allows group members to explore more fully the complexities of other people’s commitments and perspectives as well as their own” (2008, p. 94).

According to Manzini (2015) every collaborative encounter is an interaction between human beings that “calls for some degree of personal engagement and empathy” (p. 103). Manzini proposes four dimensions of collaborative encounters that provide criteria for designing the conditions that make them possible. They are: active involvement, collaborative involvement, social tie strength and relational intensity. This thesis focuses on the latter two dimensions.

Social philosopher, Roman Krznaric (2014) notes that we are “born to empathize and wired for social connection” (p. xvi). With this in mind, I began to reflect on the importance of creating opportunities for empathy and connection to happen with this project.

Research Question

How can a design tool, method and or strategy foster empathic conversations and connections between individuals?

FURTHER INQUIRIES

- » What are the challenges faced by adults in connecting with others?
- » What criteria should be taken into consideration when developing a designed tool for groups to build strong relationships?

The Role of Communication

Conversation and empathy are intimately intertwined [...]. The challenge is to rethink how we talk to people so we can gain greater insights into their thoughts, feelings, and world views and deepen our emotional bonds with them. (Krznaric, 2014, p.98)

Communication is key to establishing a collaborative environment. The quality and nature of any discussion is deeply dependent on the connections established between individuals. Krznaric (2014) identifies conversation as “one of the essential ways in which we come to understand the inner emotional life and ideas of others.” (p. 97). Thus, the ability to listen to the other and take in another perspective becomes essential in building those connections. “Only by listening can one respect the complexity of reality and navigate among the multiplicity of possible visions and ideas.” (Bertolotti, et al., 2016).

During my one-on-one interviews with group facilitators, I was made aware of existing methods used to help individuals engage with each other in group settings. Ross Moster, Executive Director at Village Vancouver Transition Society, shared a method/activity called *Good and plenty*. “We go around the room and each person quickly reflects on the meeting or on anything they want to talk about. People don’t have to defend what they are saying and it’s intended to be a non-judgmental space” (Moster, personal communication, February 2, 2017). In his community based work Moster has developed the habit of running the *Good and plenty* activity as a means of facilitating society members being able to express themselves and listen to others.

“Sometimes we need to slow-down and talk to people in order to make progress. There is information inside of us that is important to acknowledge and incorporate into our collaboration.”

Wilson, personal communication,
January 19, 2017

“We haven’t been taught to listen. I say something and then you remember something and suddenly the conversation becomes about you and not about me anymore.”

Moster, personal communication,
February 2, 2017

1.3 Scope and Limitations

This thesis project aims to foster empathy and connection between individuals working in collaborative groups. It does so by focusing on the communication aspect of human interactions. There are many factors that influence the way we relate to others. Self-awareness, trust in the other, context of interaction, and the individuals' ability to deep listen are all key factors. While this project considers these factors, it does not delve into people's intentions and willingness to connect. Starting from the premise that relationships are built through the active engagement with others, the body of work described in this thesis project is aimed at supporting individuals who already desire to establish connections.

The design outcome, discussed on section 3.2 *The Sensory Cards*, presents opportunities to engage individuals on an emotional level. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the project does not intend to create a space for group therapy, conflict resolution or to introduce mindfulness or meditation. Such practices require particular expertise that is not within the scope of this research.

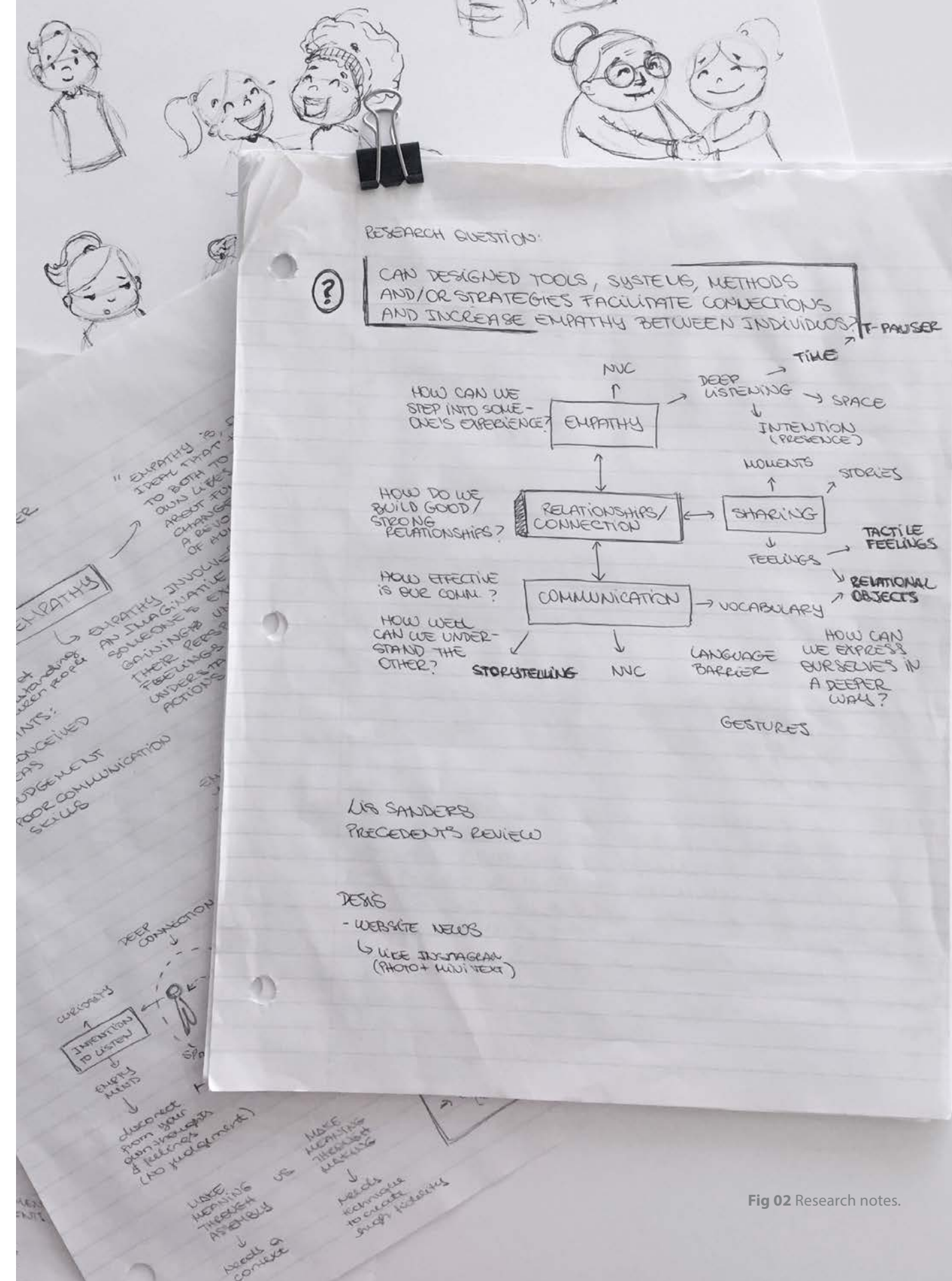


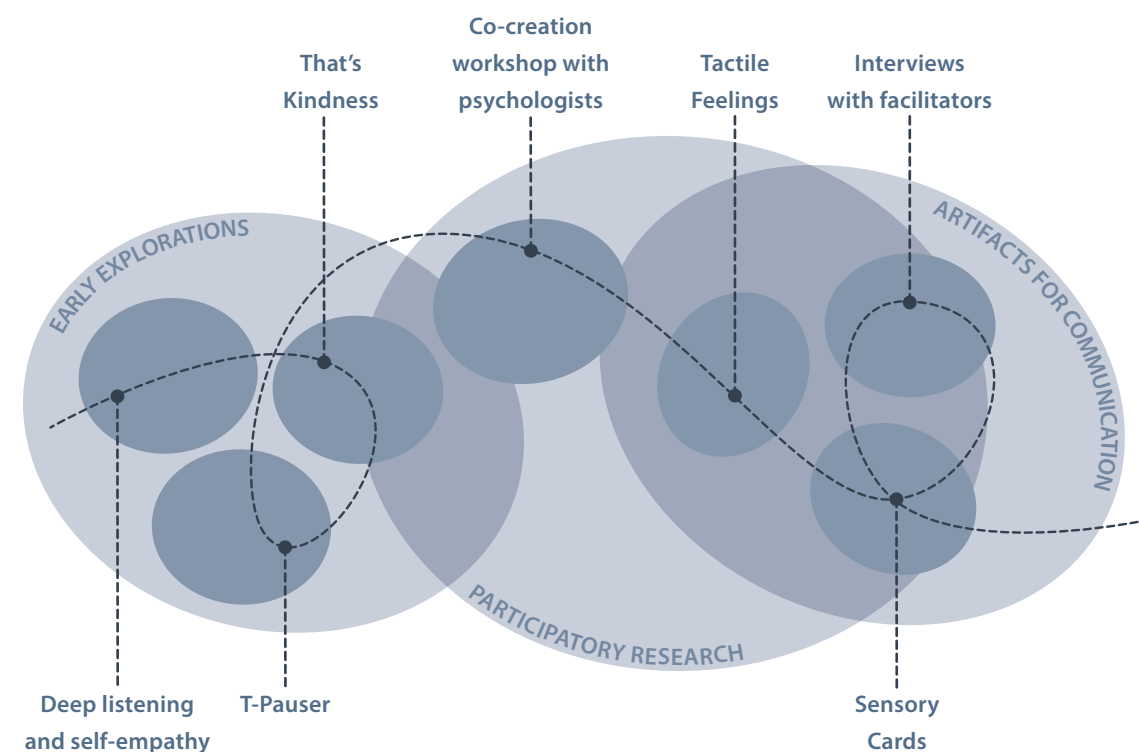
Fig 02 Research notes.

2. Research Methodology and Process

My research was based on self-reflection, intuition and lived experience. It has involved the creation of stories and visualizations that supported my investigations and helped me access tacit knowledge. According to humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas, this type of research is described as Heuristic Inquiry, an exploratory approach to research aimed at “discovering the nature and meaning of an experience” (Given, 2008). In addition to the introspective quality of my process, my explorations have also allowed me to reach out and interact with many different people who were important to the development of my work.

In this section I discuss my early explorations in the topic of empathy and connection, the participatory research conducted to engage psychologists in the design process and my research on artifacts as tools for communication.

Fig 03 Diagram of research methodology and process.



2.1 Early Explorations

My goals for this research phase were to facilitate an immersion in the topic of empathy and connection, and to access tacit, intuitive knowledge through a series of reflective experiments. Three projects are described in this section: *Deep listening and self-empathy*, *That's Kindness*, and the *T-Pauser* (for more exploratory projects go to *Appendix A* and *B*). Each project generated new insights and was integral to my creative research trajectory.

Deep Listening and Self-Empathy

Communication is the basis of all human interaction. According to PhD psychologist, Marshall B. Rosenberg (2003) most of us need to learn how to communicate in a way that doesn't lead to judgment, conflict and violence. In his book *Nonviolent Communication*, Rosenberg presents specific techniques for describing *observations*, *feelings*, *needs* and *requests*. He claims that these forms of communication can help us become more compassionate and therefore better at connecting with others. According to Rosenberg (2003) "nonviolent communication fosters deep listening, respect and empathy, and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart" (p. 12). One of the premises of Rosenberg's model for communication is that we "need empathy to give empathy" (Rosenberg, 2003).

With this in mind, I decided to test Rosenberg's model through an intentional act of deep listening and self-empathy. I set aside time in order to connect with myself, and paid close attention

to my own *observations*, *feelings*, *needs* and internal *requests*. Embarking on this experiment led me on a journey of self-discovery. I found myself judging myself, feeling anger towards others, and in turn ashamed for having those feelings. This process led me to self-empathy, but at the end of my experiment I was completely exhausted.

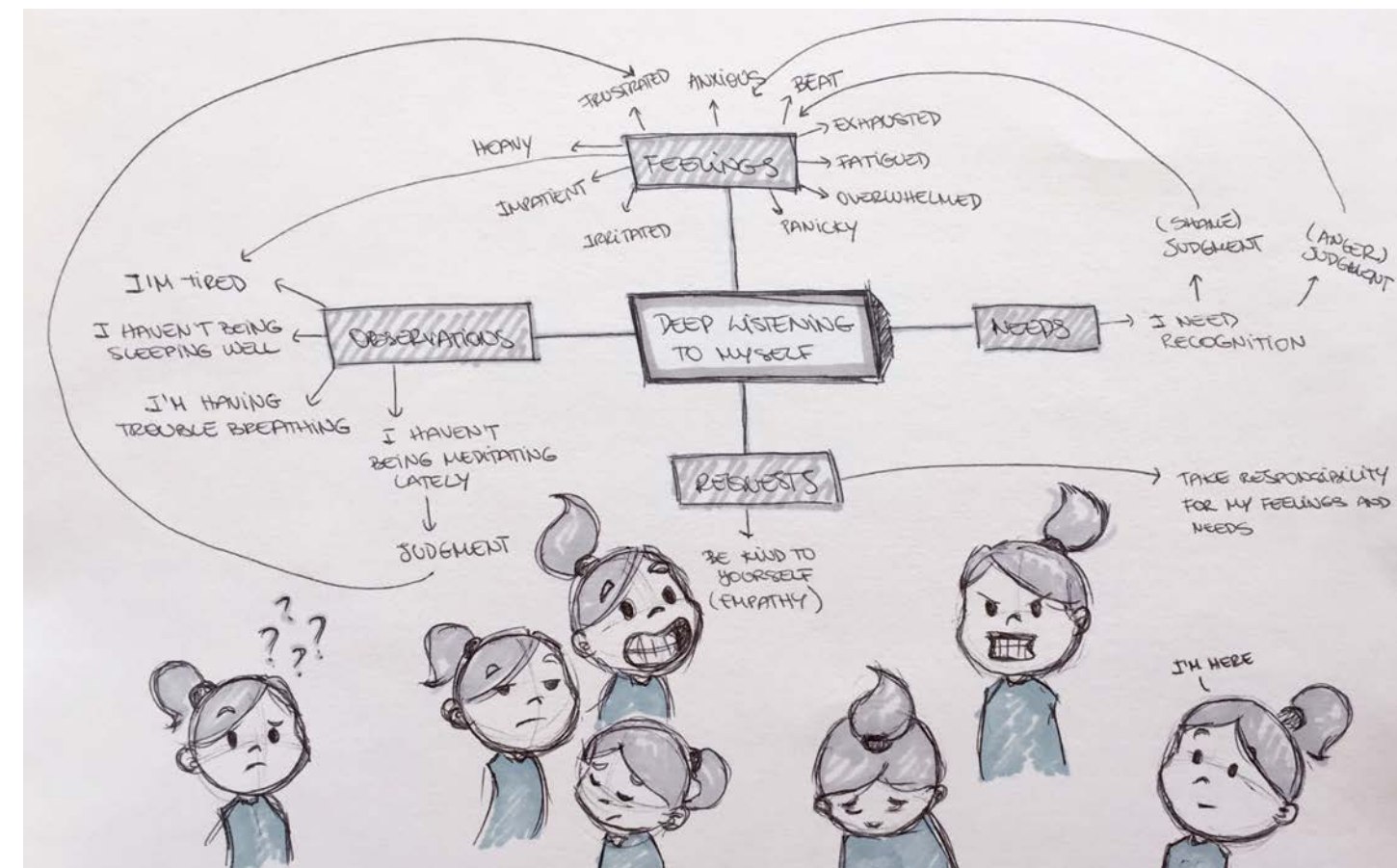


Fig 04 Deep listening and self-empathy exploration.

I realized that even though I was highly motivated it took me a lot of effort and energy to be fully present. I had to set a time and a place free of distraction in order to be able to connect with myself. Identifying and communicating my feelings was not easy either. I used the *Feelings Inventory* from the *Center for Nonviolent Communication* (CNVC) to check that I was expressing myself properly. According to the CNVC, this list is “meant as a starting place to support anyone who wishes to engage in a process of deepening self-discovery and to facilitate greater understanding and connection between people” (CNVC, 2005). Although helpful, the list was overwhelming and the words seemed to be quite precise while my feelings were confused and messy. This exploration brought me to understand that empathy and connection are highly dependent on the ability to access and communicate emotions.

FEELINGS INVENTORY FROM THE CENTER OF NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (CNVC)

FEELINGS WHEN YOUR NEEDS ARE SATISFIED

AFFECTIONATE, compassionate, friendly, loving, open hearted, sympathetic, tender, warm // **ENGAGED**, absorbed, alert, curious, engrossed, enchanted, entranced, fascinated, interested, intrigued, involved, spellbound, stimulated // **HOPEFUL**, expectant, encouraged, optimistic // **CONFIDENT**, empowered, open, proud, safe, secure // **EXCITED**, amazed, animated, ardent, aroused, astonished, dazzled, eager, energetic, enthusiastic, giddy, invigorated, lively, passionate, surprised, vibrant // **GRATEFUL**, appreciative, moved, thankful, touched // **INSPIRED**, amazed, awed, wonder // **JOYFUL**, amused, delighted, glad, happy, jubilant, pleased, tickled // **EXHILARATED**, blissful, ecstatic, elated, enthralled, exuberant, radiant, rapturous, thrilled // **PEACEFUL**, calm, clear headed, comfortable, centered, content, equanimous, fulfilled, mellow, quiet, relaxed, relieved, satisfied, serene, still, tranquil, trusting // **REFRESHED**, enlivened, rejuvenated, renewed, rested, restored, revived

FEELINGS WHEN YOUR NEEDS ARE NOT SATISFIED

AFRAID, apprehensive, dread, foreboding, frightened, mistrustful, panicked, petrified, scared, suspicious, terrified, wary, worried // **ANNOYED**, aggravated, dismayed, disgruntled, displeased, exasperated, frustrated, impatient, irritated, irked // **ANGRY**, enraged, furious, incensed, indignant, irate, livid, outraged, resentful // **AVERSION**, animosity, appalled, contempt, disgusted, dislike, hate, horrified, hostile, repulsed // **CONFUSED**, ambivalent, baffled, bewildered, dazed, hesitant, lost, mystified, perplexed, puzzled, torn // **DISCONNECTED**, alienated, aloof, apathetic, bored, cold, detached, distant, distracted, indifferent, numb, removed, uninterested, withdrawn // **DISQUIET**, agitated, alarmed, discombobulated, disconcerted, disturbed, perturbed, rattled, restless, shocked, startled, surprised, troubled, turbulent, turmoil, uncomfortable, uneasy, unnerved, unsettled, upset // **EMBARRASSED**, ashamed, chagrined, flustered, guilty,

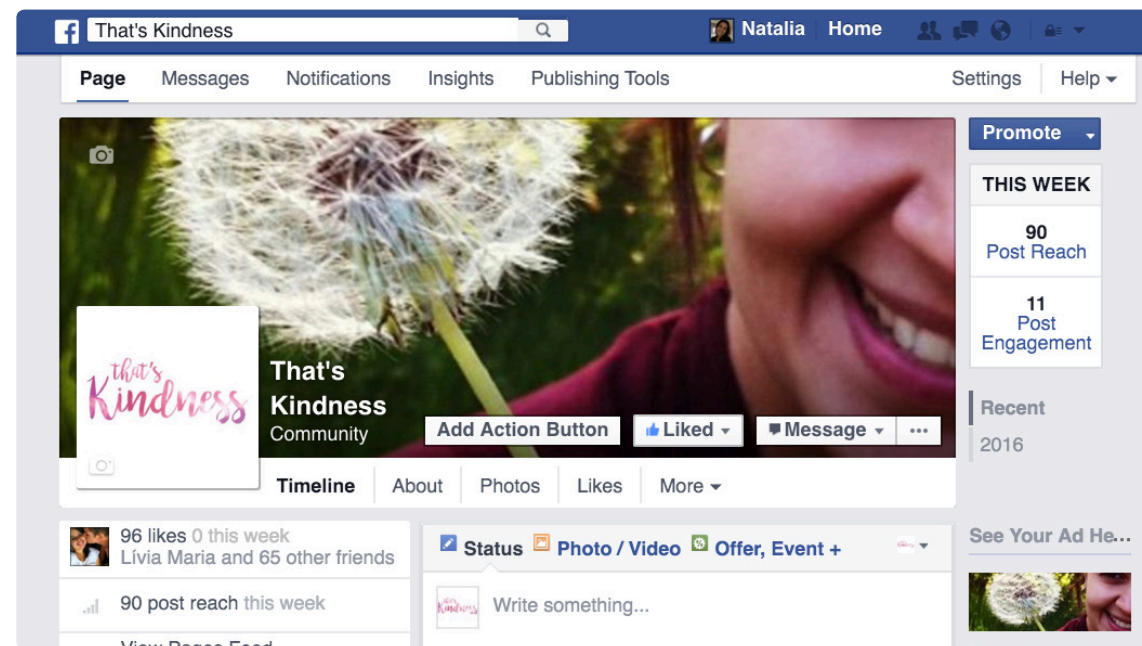
mortified, self-conscious // **FATIGUE**, beat, burnt out, depleted, exhausted, lethargic, listless, sleepy, tired, weary, worn out, // **PAIN**, agony, anguished, bereaved, devastated, grief, heartbroken, hurt, lonely, miserable, regretful, remorseful // **SAD**, depressed, dejected, despair, despondent, disappointed, discouraged, disheartened, forlorn, gloomy, heavy hearted, hopeless, melancholy, unhappy, wretched // **TENSE**, anxious, cranky, distressed, distraught, edgy, fidgety, frazzled, irritable, jittery, nervous, overwhelmed, restless, stressed out // **VULNERABLE**, fragile, guarded, helpless, insecure, leery, reserved, sensitive, shaky // **YEARNING**, envious, jealous, longing, nostalgic, pining, wistful

That's Kindness: Exploring with Social Media

Wondering how the insights from my self-empathy exploration connected to the social space, I decided to explore the use of social media and build an online community. *That's Kindness* was a project intended to encourage people to share stories, inspire others and generate conversations around random acts of kindness. I was particularly interested in social media's capacity to connect/or not connect people around common topics of interest. Could a sense of community be created through social media?

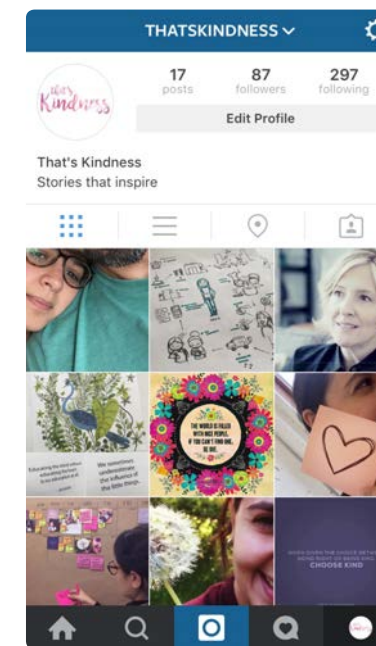
The planning phase of this project involved defining goals, identifying what social media to use and setting the tone for the message. Two weeks after launching the community it became clear that social media was not ideal for the level of connection I intended. Although very effective in creating visibility, the social platforms fostered a unidirectional communication format. I

Fig 05 *That's Kindness* social media platforms.



quickly realized that meaningful discussions were not taking place and the interactions were reduced to basic actions of *following*, *liking*, *commenting* and *sharing*. In an article written for the *Roots of Action*, PhD psychologist Marilyn Price-Mitchell (2014) states that, among other disadvantages, social networking lacks emotional connection, conveys inauthentic expression of feelings, and diminishes understanding and thoughtfulness.

I also noticed that being present in social networks has a different dynamic than being physically present. In social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram people are expected to constantly make appearances, but are not required to be fully present. It became a space where the quality of the communication is often measured by the number of *likes* and not by the depth of the reflections generated.



PLANNING PHASE OF THAT'S KINDNESS

GOALS

1. Create a community of interest
2. Share and collect stories
3. Encourage people to participate

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Facebook and Instagram

TONE OF THE MESSAGE

Simple, clear, fluid, accessible, positive, empathetic, powerful.

VIDEO

What is important to you? Who is important to you? Listen. What do you hear? Warmth. Care. Laughter. Joy. Gratefulness. Love. Kindness. Share your story. #thatskindness

T-Pauser: The Challenge of a Busy Life

The cognitive dimension of empathy is born by mentally evoking an experience lived by another person, either by imagining what the other person is feeling or the way the experience affects the person, or by imagining what we would feel in the same situation. (Ricard 2013, p. 40)

Realizing how difficult it was to connect with people through social media, I decided to further investigate the challenges most people face when trying to establish deep connections with others. Having stories as a familiar method for immersion and reflection, I decided to create a fictional story about Jane, a middle class woman from Vancouver. I imagined this character as a divorced mother of two, who owned a small catering business with her best friend. I considered a series of questions: What would Jane's daily routines be? What things might she do? Who would she meet up with on a daily basis? What would be her joys and frustrations?

I thought about the challenges Jane would face in connecting with others and developed a visual journey map about a typical day in her life. This visual map allowed me to create an overview of her daily experiences, pinpoint every time she would interacted with people, and identify why she might have difficulties connecting with those people in a meaningful way.

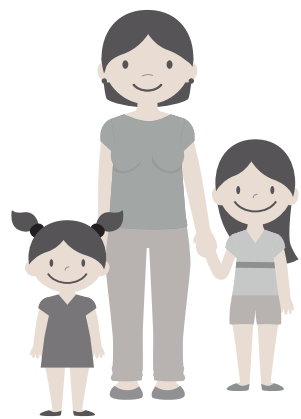


Fig 06 Jane and her two daughters.

Jane wakes up, drinks coffee, prepares breakfast for the girls and drives them to school. Traffic is terrible this time of the day but she manages to get to work on time. She cooks and manages any ongoing situations with clients, layers and suppliers. In the afternoon she delivers her food to events, gatherings or business meetings. She usually has to work late, so she asks her ex-husband to pick the girls up from school. After all the paperwork she makes sure everything is in place and goes back home.

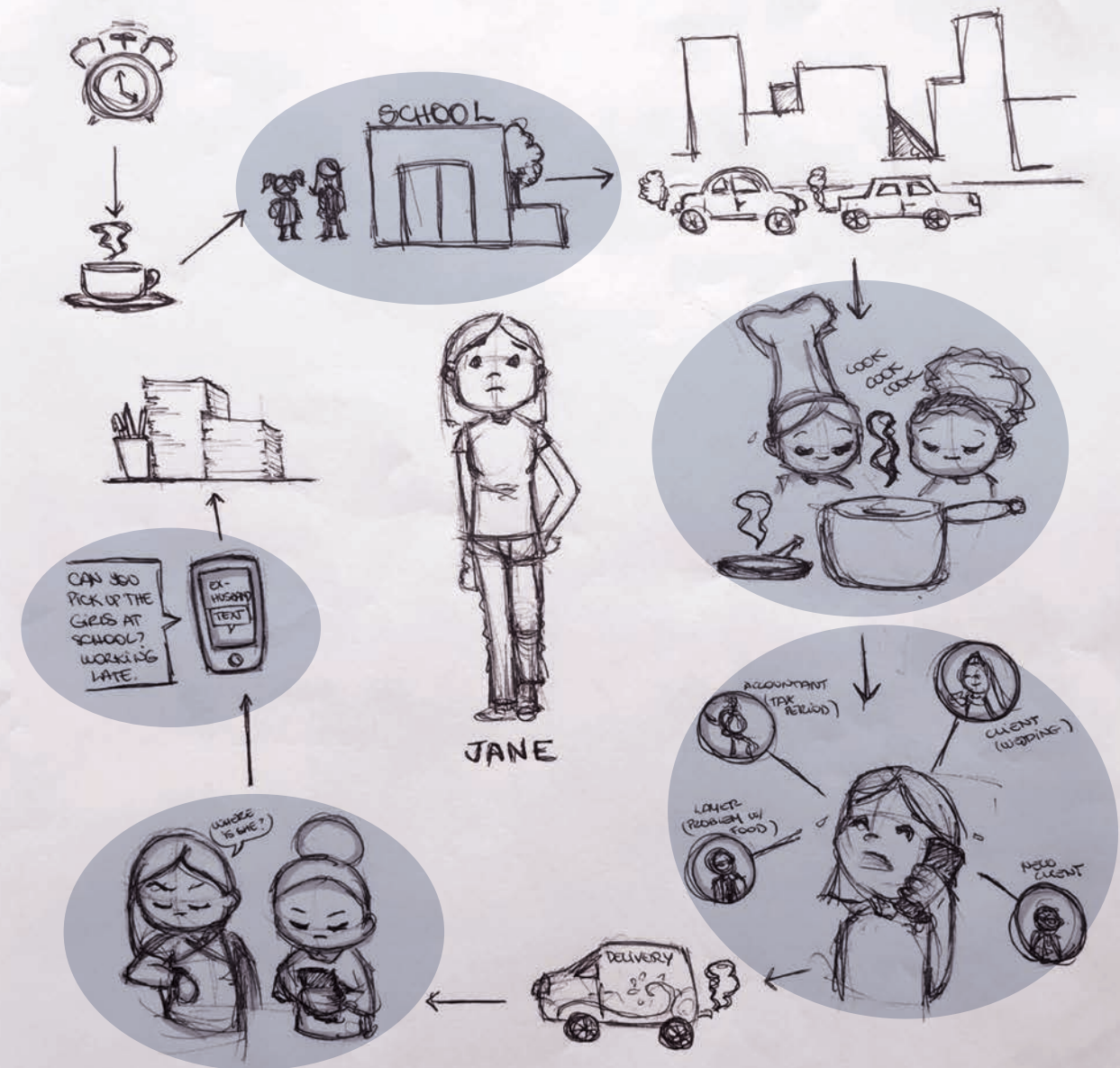


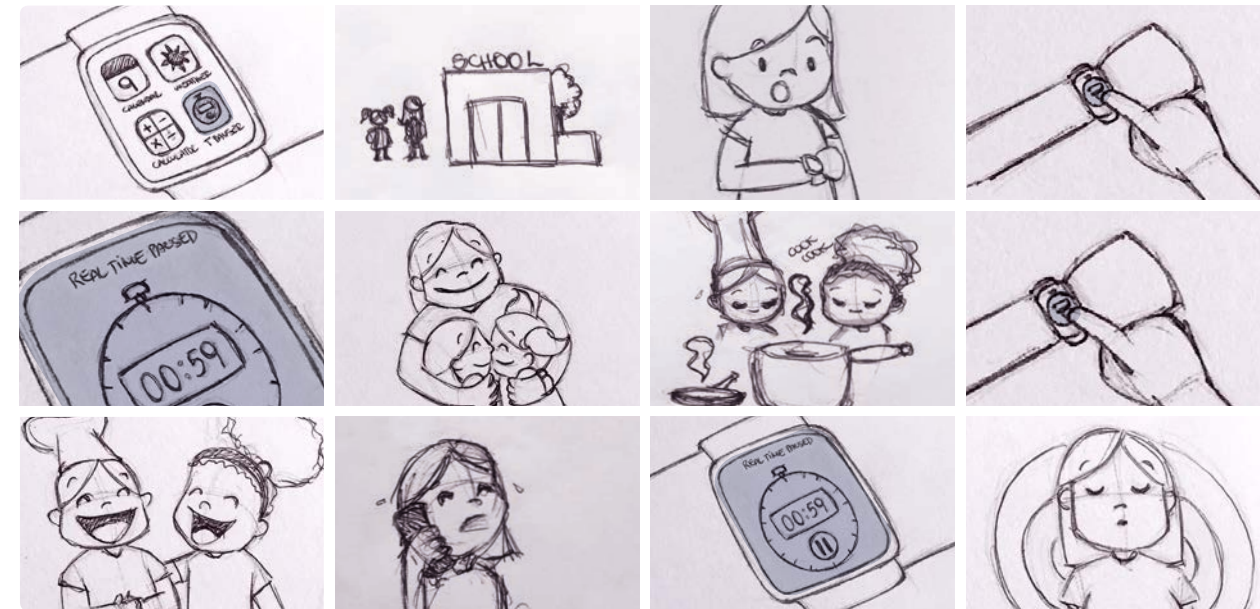
Fig 07 Jane's journey map.

As with most people living in a big city, I realized that Jane would always be busy, rushing through life. In a book called *In Praise of Slow* Canadian journalist and writer Carl Honoré (2004, p. 9) reflects that “a life of hurry can become superficial. When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people”. Constantly thinking about lists of tasks and to do’s takes most people away from the present moment and causes them to miss out on important moments of connection with themselves and the people around them.

2 According to Dunne & Raby (2013), “conceptual designs are not conceptual because they haven’t yet been realized or are waiting to be realized but out of choice. They celebrate their unreality and take full advantage of being made from ideas”.

The process of developing Jane’s story allowed me to reflect on the conflicting relationship we have with time and on our inability to be present in the moment. Thinking about ways to help Jane stay connected with herself and the people around her, I asked myself: how could I, as a designer, change the way she deals with time? What if she could pause time whenever she needed? This led me to the use of *Conceptual design*² and fiction.

The *T-Pauser* is a speculative artefact, an iWatch app capable of pausing time whenever we feel we need to bring our awareness of the present moment. While drafting a storyboard to represent the scenario of use of the *T-Pauser*, I realized that Jane would not need to use the app for pausing long periods of time. Simple laughs, a kiss, or a relaxed conversation do not take up a lot of time and suffice to establish connection. The speculative app would only be required to pause time for one minute.



SCENARIO OF USE

- » Jane downloads *T-Pauser* to her iWatch.
- » As usual, she takes the girls to school and...
- » “Oh no, I’m late for work!”
- » She pushes the *T-Pauser* button.
- » The time pauses and the watch starts counting down one minute.
- » Hugs, kisses and a proper goodbye!
- » At work, Jane remembers something funny.
- » She pushes a button.
- » Laughter and joy without worrying the food will get burnt!
- » Hard call?
- » *T-Pause* it!
- » Take a loooong, deep breath! :)

Fig 08 Storyboard with scenario of use for the T-Pauser.

“The first act we have to accomplish in learning to see is the stop. Without this stop, we cannot achieve enough inner silence, that is, freedom from the fracturing commotion of the discursive mind, to undertake a sustained attending to the other.”

Bai, 2001

“Self-awareness is about understanding your own needs, desires, failings, habits, and everything else that makes you tick. The more you know about yourself, the better you are at adapting life changes that suit your needs.”

Klosowski, 2014

The idea of pausing time seems impossible, but when I reflected on the concept as an inspiration, I realized that the notion of time could vary enormously according to a person’s state of mind. My work on the *T-Pauser* inspired further exploration of different ways to slow down and connect with the present moment. It also led me to a series of one-minute video explorations around things that invites me to connect with myself, with the environment and with others. (See *Appendix A* for more information on the Slow videos project).



LOW-TECH PROTOTYPE

I created a low-tech prototype of the *T-Pauser* in order to test it. Every time I felt that I need a break I would move the dots from the straps to the centerpiece and bring my awareness to the present moment. This activity allowed me to take the time to reflect on what triggered the need to pause and connect with myself.



Fig 09 *T-Pauser* prototype.

Through my explorations I was able to better understand the context of my research and identify some of the challenges faced in connecting with others. I realized that empathy and connection are highly dependent on the ability to access our feelings and emotions—self-awareness—and communicate them effectively to others. Being physically and mentally present, and deeply listening to the other also plays an important role in fostering dialogues and building strong connections.

According to social analyst Richard Sennett (2012), dialogic—unlike dialectic—is a conversation that does not attempt to find common ground. Sennett (2012) explains that “thought no shared agreement may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another” (p. 19). The insights acquired during this exploratory research phase made me start thinking about the importance of a shared language for deep conversations to happen.

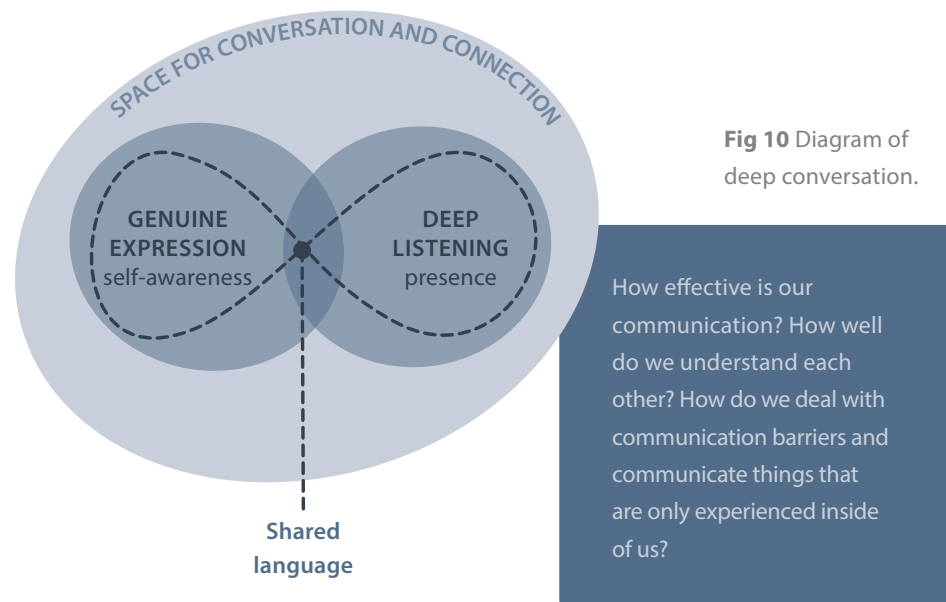


Fig 10 Diagram of deep conversation.

2.2 Participatory Research

Looking for more insights, and the opportunity to deepen my knowledge on human relationships and empathy-building mechanisms, I reached out to the psychology community. In Summer 2016 I brought together a group of nine psychologists for co-creation workshops. The following section discusses the importance of communication in a social environment and the use of different modes of conversations.

Facilitating Conversations

Sensory stimulation enriches life for everyone and sensory stories are a beautifully simple way of facilitating that stimulation. (Grace, 2015)

During a preliminary conversation with a psychologist, I perceived a communication barrier between us. We didn't share the same professional vocabulary, cultural background, life experience and native language. Communication was challenging. In an attempt to better express my design process, I showed Jane's journey map (section 2.1 *Early Explorations*). Looking at Jane's story, the psychologist immediately understood what I was saying and we were able to develop a conversation about the theory and implications of empathy in her professional practice.

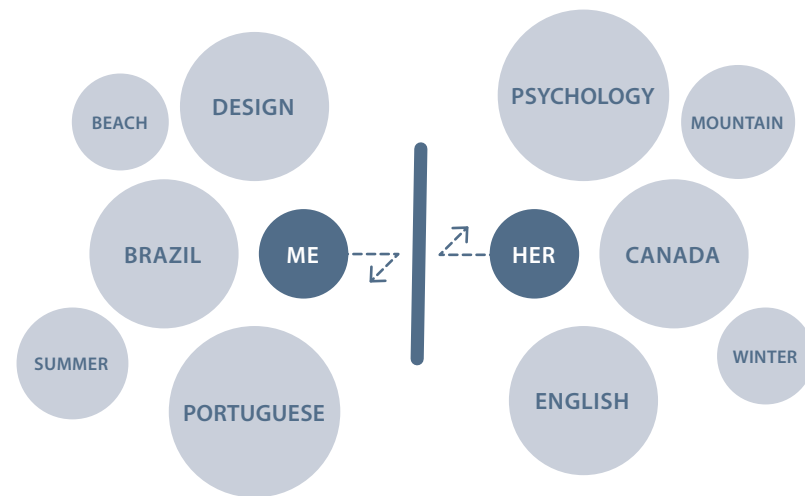


Fig 11 Barriers of communication between me and the psychologist.

I realized that the visual created to consider Jane's everyday life experience acted as a dialogic artifact. It helped both the psychologist and myself to stop relying solely on words to communicate and was very successful in translating ideas. This experience led me to start contemplating the potential benefits of working with all of the senses in order to facilitate the expression and understanding of ideas, feelings and emotions (Fig 12). Could a sensory dialogic experience—one that could be experienced with our whole body—help individuals access their thoughts and feelings and better communicate with others?

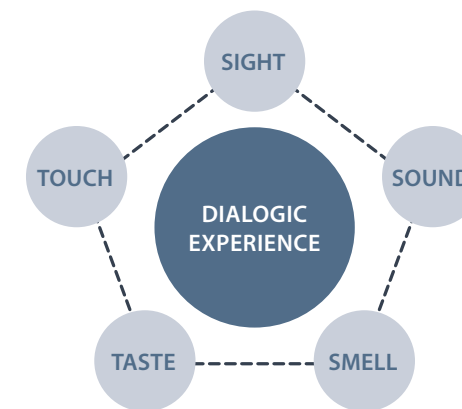


Fig 12 Sensory dialogic experience.

Intent on facilitating a creative space for conversations to emerge, I conducted three co-creation workshops with psychologists at the CPPL – *Centro de Pesquisa em Psicanálise e Linguagem*, in Recife-Brazil. Participants were asked to take part in a series of activities designed to help them express their knowledge in a way that was easy to understand and process. The goals were to gather information about the challenges individuals face when trying to connect with one another, and begin to imagine ways to build empathy and connection. Storytelling techniques based on *generative research*³ and existing methods of sensory stimulation were used during the workshops.

³ Sanders and Stappers (2012) describe generative research as a method that “gives people a language with which they can imagine and express their ideas and dreams for future experience.”

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES:

1. The first activity the participants took on was the creation of personas⁴ who had difficulties relating to others. They were asked to create the personas using only visual and tactile materials.
2. Once these personas had been created the participants were asked to describe each other's personas and imagine what kind of relationships and interactions the personas would develop in a twenty-day car trip.
3. For the final part of the workshop, participants were encouraged to imagine in which ways the personas could strengthen their relationship during that journey. This activity was supported by a collection of objects that participants could use to physically represent their ideas.

⁴ According to Hanington & Martin (2012) a persona is the archetypal description of an individual's behavior that humanizes design focus and facilitates communication (p. 132).



Fig 13 Objects offered at the workshop.



Fig 14 Participants developing personas during co-creation workshops.

Insights and Observations

The persona activity was very effective in helping participants communicate abstract information. Since they were asked to create personas using only visual and tactile materials, they were forced to abstract what it means to have relationship issues and not use specific—sometimes restrictive—words. When asked to describe each other's personas participants were able to interpret the abstracted representations created by others and add new layers of complexity to the description of their personalities.

Fig 15 Personas developed by psychologists.



Steel sponges on the arms and shoulders of this persona along with red scribbles on its chest evoke aggression. Taking a closer look, however, the sand paper and rubber squares create a protection shield and give the impression of fear. The use of wound up yarns in its head space point to confusion and the silicon circles under its feet suggests fear and uncertainty. Looking at these features made me consider the role of visuals as a means to express character complexity and give voice to things that are perhaps difficult to put into words.

Fig 16 Objects chosen by participants during co-creation workshop.



Following the persona activity I asked the participants to consider how the personas might interact if they were on a twenty-day car trip. The time to create the personas, and imagine a car-trip together was quite important for the success of the workshop. When asked to express with objects what could help the personas improve their relationships, participants were already aware of the relationship issues and personalities they were dealing with. They were able, in a very short period of time, to use their expertise as psychologists and make important suggestions. After analyzing and categorizing the objects chosen by the psychologists (fig 16), I identify three main sets of objects that were seen as important when dealing with relationship challenges: *objects that evoke relaxation*, *objects that initiate group activities* and *objects that start conversations*.

The psychologists emphasized, in different ways, the importance of conversations to foster connection, understanding and acceptance between individuals. They also expressed the value of an environment that helps people release their tensions and share moments of joy. Through this participatory research it became even more evident that in order to help individuals to connect at a deeper level, we need to create opportunities for meaningful conversations to happen. In addition, it also affirmed the value of visuals and artifacts to help putting thoughts, feelings and emotions into words.

OBJECTS INSPIRATIONS

- » A little cushion was used to suggest physical comfort.
- » A squeeze ball inspired collective play.
- » A piece of lace could start and set the tone of a conversation by bringing up memories from the past and encouraging people to share their stories.
- » Wine cork, cinnamon and cloves inspired conversations around collaborative cooking and shared meals.

“By stimulating the senses we were able to facilitate communication, interpretation of abstract data, and understanding of complex human descriptions.”

Gomes Franca & St-Pierre, 2016

2.3 Artifact as Tool for Conversations

Good communication is key for the development of empathy between individuals and according to Michael Brian Schiffer (1999)—Professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona—artifacts play a major role in interpersonal communication. Schiffer (1999) states that “there can be no such thing as pure ‘interpersonal’ communication because of the involvement of artifacts in all person–person interactions” (p. 31). Artifacts are everywhere and they deeply influence the way we think and communicate.

I was particularly interested in understanding the potential role that physical objects might play in facilitating the access, expression and understanding of feelings and emotions. Esther Pasztor (2005)—Professor in Pre-Columbian Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University—asserts that “we make things so we can understand them” (p. 21). Inspired by my prior explorations, as well as the relational objects described by Julia Suwalski (2014) as “objects that establish relationships”, I set about developing a series of dialogic artifacts.

My goal was to explore communication and materiality in a way that could inspire multiple interpretations and create a generative space for the expression of unprocessed feelings and emotions. What if we could communicate how we feel through material artifacts? How would that change the way we interact with one another? My design explorations followed a natural progression. They helped me to translate and incorporate insights from the previous phases and created an ongoing space for conversations with others that directly influenced my work.

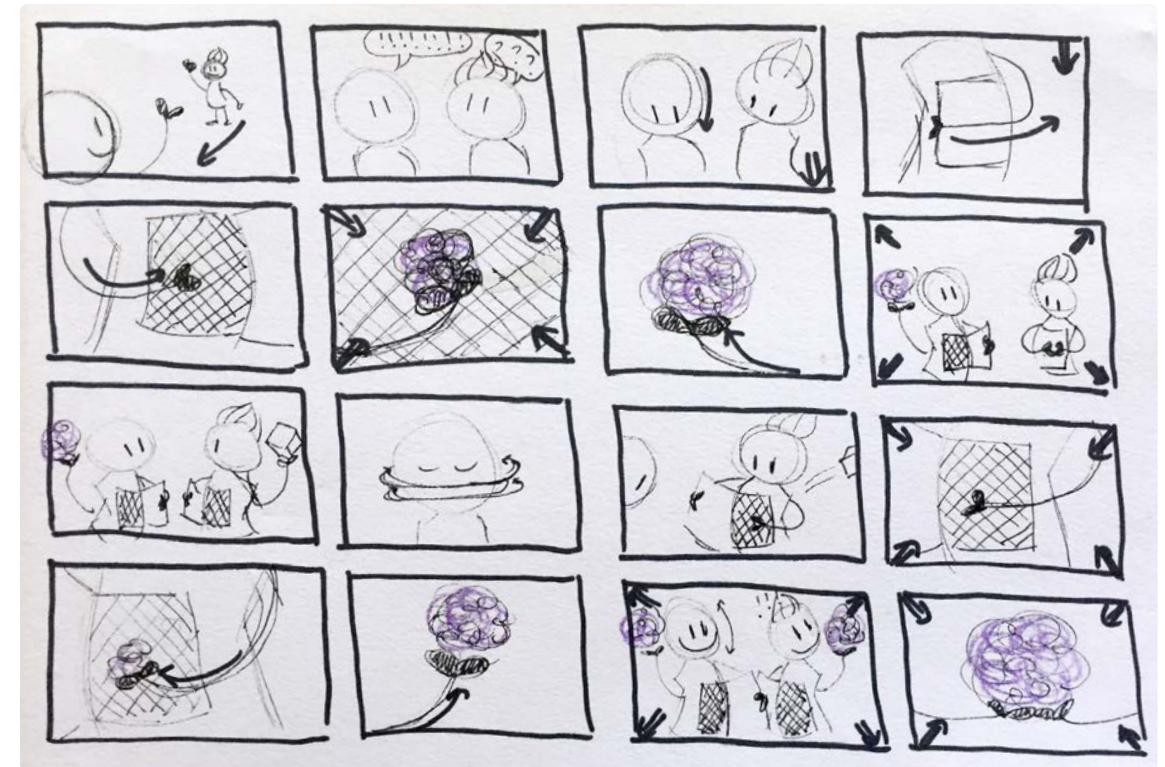


Fig 17 Storyboard of artifact being used as tool for conversation and empathy.

ARTIFACT AS TOOL FOR CONVERSATION AND EMPATHY

Two friends, Bob and Alex, meet and begin to talk. Bob says something that Alex doesn't understand. Bob reaches out to his belly, opens it and gets something to show to Alex. Alex looks at it, reaches to his own belly and begins to search for the same thing. He finally finds it, and now, he is able to understand his friend.

“Empathy is a choice, and it’s a vulnerable choice because in order to connect with you I need to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling.”

Brené Brown, 2013

Tactile Feelings

Tactile Feelings are a series of abstract and ambiguous forms that were created using easily accessible materials and processes. In the act of creating these artifacts, I realized that I intuitively attributed particular meanings to them. As a communication designer, stepping into work that was 3-dimensional was challenging. I quickly became aware of my unfamiliarity with material exploration. I was frequently frustrated at not being able to translate simple ideas in a 3-dimensional form. This feeling of inadequacy encouraged and pushed me to go out of my way to talk to designers and technicians who were more comfortable and proficient at working in this space. During these conversations I noticed that people would associate different meanings to the artifacts I had created. More significantly, the meaning of an artifact would change radically depending on the people I was having a conversation with and the context in which the conversation was taking place.



Fig 18 *Tactile Feelings.*



Fig 19 Ensemble of *Tactile Feelings*.

I realized that it is through the interactive triangulation of people, artifact and context that we are able to attribute collective meaning to the things that surrounds us. Lambros Malafouris (2013), a researcher in creativity, cognition and material culture from the Institute of Archeology at the University of Oxford, defends the idea that “meaning does not reside in the material sign; it emerges from the various parameters of its performance and usage as these are actualized in the process of engagement” (p. 117). Malafouris describes artifacts as ‘material signs’ that have no meaning in and of themselves, but that can afford the possibility of meaning. In other words, without engaging and generating conversations around the artifacts, they wouldn’t carry any social value.

Wanting to further explore the boundaries of this triangulation, I posted curated images of the *Tactile Feelings* artifacts on social media. Could visual representation of artifacts also encourage interpretation and self-expression? Framing the artifacts in a visual way and inserting them into an online space allowed me to involve more people in the conversation. I noticed that people responded to the images by attributing meaning much the same as they had reacted to physical artifacts. This reinforces Scott McCloud’s (1993) claims that “a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer” (p. 121). More than being the visual representation of an artifact, the images acted as a catalyst of multi-sensory interpretations.

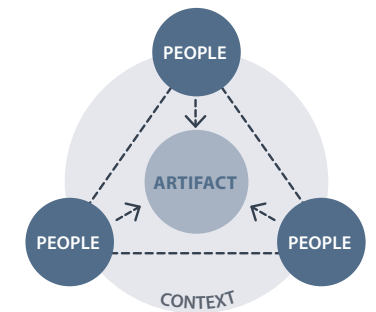


Fig 20 Diagram of triangulation: people, artifact and context.

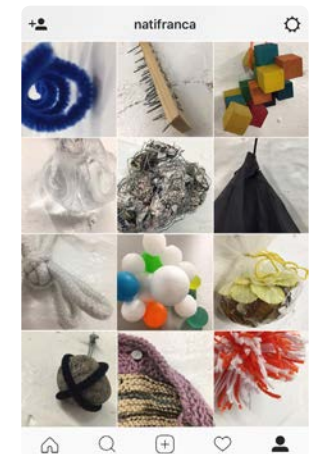


Fig 21 Images posted on social media.

Sensory Cards



Fig 22 Sensory Cards in use.

Since the goal of this project was to foster conversation in face-to-face encounters—not in virtual spaces—the images were translated back into 3D space in the form of cards. The materiality of the cards, although more subtle than the *Tactile Feelings* artifacts, allowed me to reincorporate sensorial elements that the images did not have, and increase the possibilities for multiple interpretations. Each *Sensory Card* had its own image on one side and a texture on the other.

The *Sensory Cards* were used in different contexts and with different people. They became what Nina Simon (2010) calls a social object—objects that have the ability to spark conversations and facilitate exchanges among those who encounter them. Simon (2010) says that social objects “allow people to focus their attention on a third thing rather than on each other, making interpersonal engagement more comfortable” (p. 127). People seemed comfortable expressing their feelings while interpreting the images and textures on the cards. I also noticed that people would use the cards in ways that I had not foreseen—combining an image from one card with the texture from another cards for example.

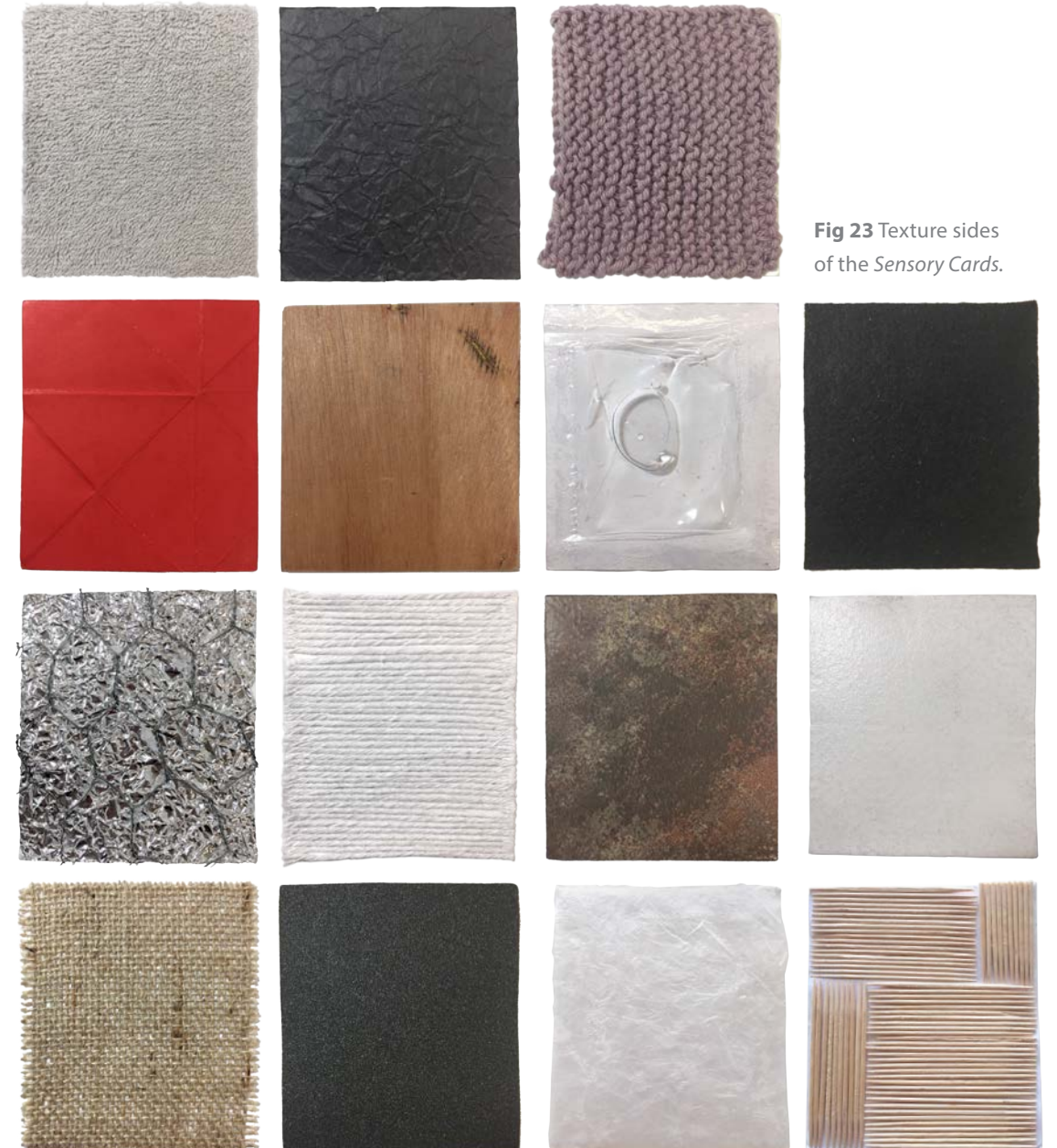


Fig 23 Texture sides of the Sensory Cards.

Although successful in fostering a casual atmosphere for interactions, the cards still needed an invitation and a facilitation process for engagement to happen. Three interviews with group facilitators were conducted in order to thoughtfully consider the role of facilitators in fostering relationships. Each of my interviewees had a different approach to facilitation and responded to the cards by suggesting a number of possible uses for them. Their feedback reinforced my concept of a set of cards designed for a wide range of possibilities of use. They might be adaptable by the users themselves and integrate to the culture of any given community. Based on my previous work and with a clearer idea of the application of the cards in a community context, I developed two scenarios for their use: *expressing feelings and emotions* and *connecting with the present moment*. I detail these further in section 3.2 *The Sensory Cards*.



Fig 24 The first set of *Sensory Cards*.

“Depending on the culture where you put these cards, they will do things radically different. They need to be able to assimilate the culture of the group. You need to go in and see how the cards can be used in that culture and in that context.”

Wilson, personal communication,
January 19, 2017

3. Design Iterations and Outcome

3.1 Iteration Process

Talking to facilitators and observing people interact with the cards allowed me to see the potential of the *Sensory Cards* and inspired me to take this project forward. I decided to look closely into the cards' functions and forms in order to identify the features that needed to be kept, changed, or eliminated. My intent was to reduce the cards to their essential elements without losing their functionalities. I identified three important elements that needed to be addressed: the *format*, the *photos* and the *textures*.

The format of the cards was the first element to change. The cards were excessively wide which made them hard to manipulate when given to people in a stack. I began conducting research on existing card decks and cellphone sizes for inspiration and used this to determine a revised, new format. The number of cards in the set was also reconsidered in this phase of the project. The cards were reduced from fifteen to twelve based on earlier observations of the cards in use. Intuition and my own personal preference to have an even number also played a role in my decision-making.

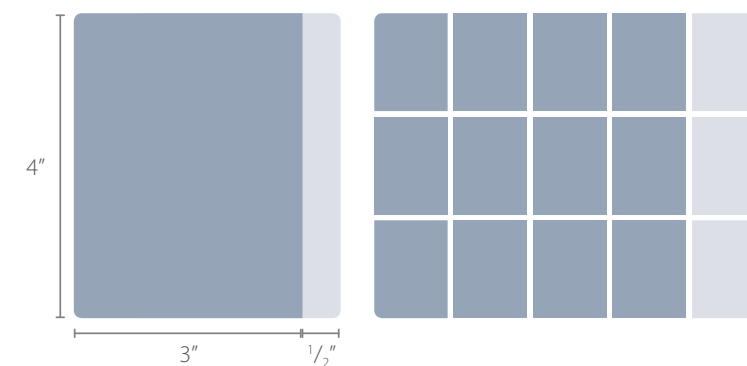


Fig 25 Rethinking the set format.

The second element to be challenged was the photos. I began to wonder if I could completely eliminate images and instead rely only on the textured side of the cards. I prototyped a set of cards that would use only materials and patterns (Fig 26). Looking at this concept I realized that the cards had lost the organic and spontaneous feeling of the previous set. They had becoming almost sterile. I chose to return to my earlier use of images.

Once I had incorporated images back into the cards I began considering an alternate elimination of stimuli. I wondered if I could eliminate the textures and have them only visually

The idea of this set was to have materials such as leather, wood, metal and acrylic cut into a card size and laser cut them using vector patterns that I had created.



Fig 26 Materials and patterns cards.

represented in the photos. I prototyped another set of cards using just images of textures found in the environment (Fig 27). The visual result of this new set of cards felt almost too ethereal to me. Lidwell, Holden & Butler (2003) describes a Gestalt principle of perception called Figure-Ground Relationship that asserts that human perception system separates stimuli into either figure elements—object of focus—or background elements (p. 96). I realized that most of the images in this set were lacking objects of focus and I was no longer able to access visceral feelings or unprocessed ideas through them. I decided to rework the images and bring elements of texture back into the design.

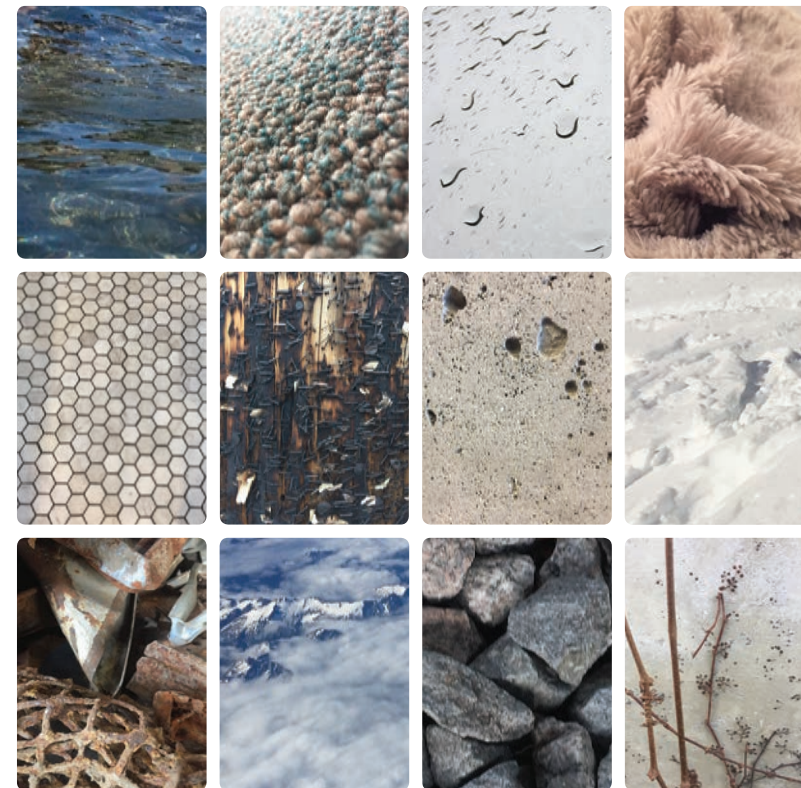


Fig 27 Image cards.

Photos of concrete walls, soft fabrics, metal scraps, snow and the sky were taken and used on this set.

As a means to explore alternative ways to use both the photos and textures I created a set of mood boards cards (Fig 28). I soon realized that this iteration of cards still didn't suit my intent. Each of the mood board cards had been designed in a way to evoke a specific sensation. This meant that the users would not be triggered to use the cards as a means for creating their own meanings, which was one of my main intentions.

Returning to my initial set of cards, I reflected on what made them more successful than the subsequent explorations. I was able to identify what was working and what still needed to be addressed. The *Sensory Cards* were very successful at incorporating both images and textures in a way that was open-ended and engaging.

Each mood board card would have a different image, shape, color and finishing techniques such as embossing, spot UV, foiling or laminating.

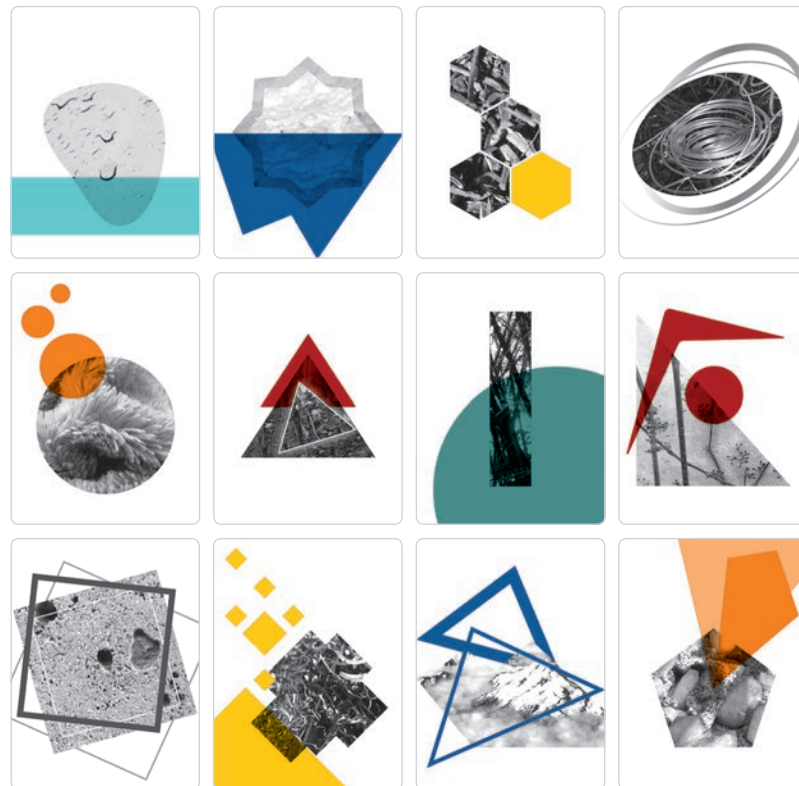


Fig 28 Mood board cards

While this was great, they were also limited in use in two ways. First, by associating images and textures from different cards to create new meaning—which I saw as a positive and spontaneous reaction—people were also ignoring the opposite side of the card and holding back a texture or an image that could potentially be used by someone else. Secondly, since I would never have a deck of cards that could represent the infinite ensemble of human's emotion, it was imperative to allow individuals to create their own meanings and not be constrained by limited possibilities. I realized that I didn't have to make associations between images and textures because it was important to encourage individuals to make their own associations and create meanings for themselves. I prototyped a set of deconstructed cards (Fig 29 and 30).



Fig 29 Prototype of the deconstructed cards.

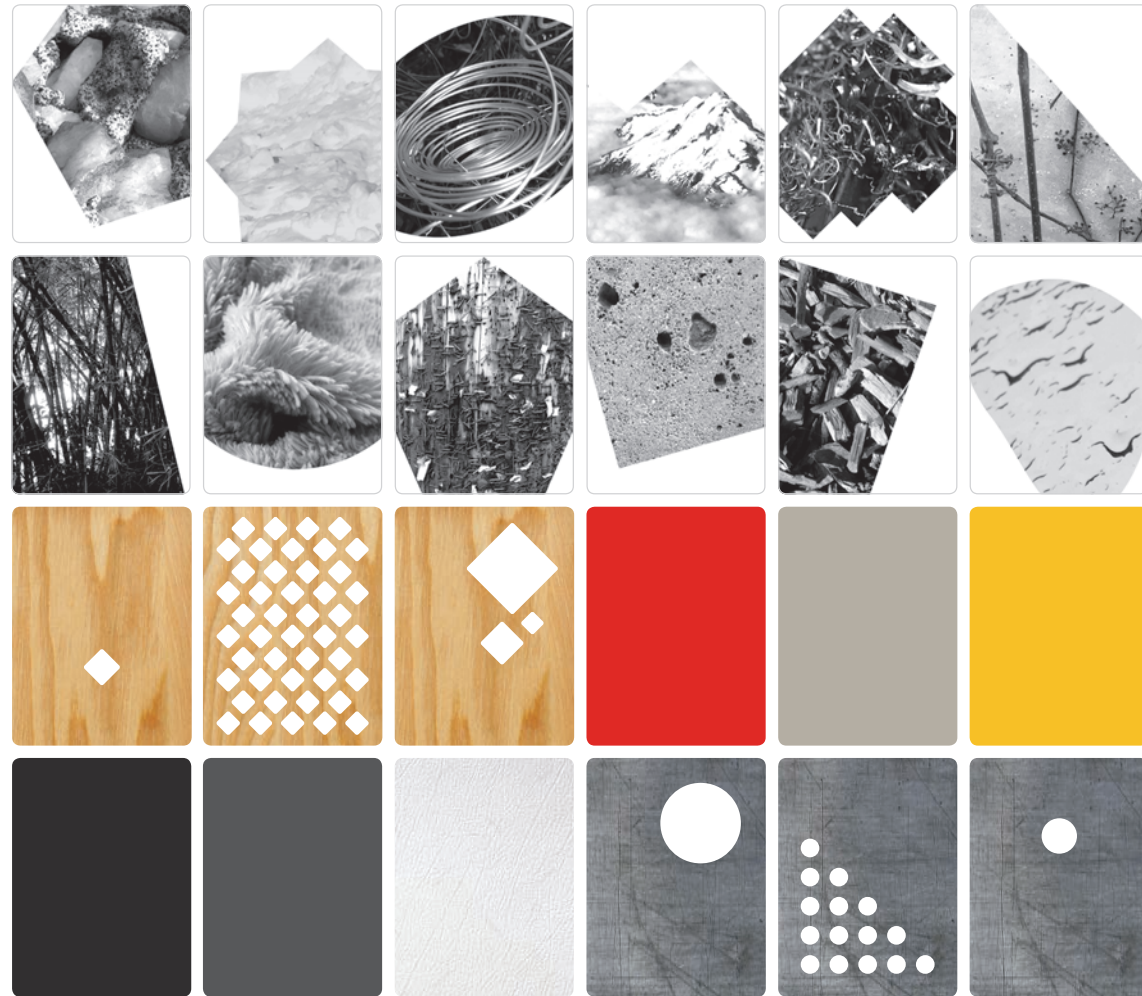


Fig 30 Deconstructed cards.

Instead of having the texture on one side and the images on the other, I decided to split the two sides apart and double the number of cards having twelve image-cards and twelve texture-cards. This would allow individuals to play with the cards and associate them in the way they want and not hold possibilities that other individuals could use.

“We don’t learn to navigate a conflict intellectually. It doesn’t matter if we understand a feeling if we are still feeling anger. So, it’s important to engage people in emotional and physical levels and I think your cards might create a bridge between the intellectual, the emotional and the physical.”

Wilson, personal communication, January 19, 2017

3.2 The Sensory Cards

The *Sensory Cards* is a set of visual and tactile cards with suggested guidelines intended to facilitate the communication—access, expression and understanding—of feelings and emotions in community groups. Two suggestions of use are presented here: *expressing feelings and emotions* and *connecting with the present moment*. These suggestions should not be seen as rigid instructions, rather as triggers for facilitators to adapt and discover new use scenarios that best suit the context of their work.



Fig 31 Prototype of the new *Sensory Cards*.



Fig 32 The *Sensory Cards*.

Scenarios of use

EXPRESSING FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

Sometimes, acknowledging our feelings and emotions can help us move together towards the next step. This activity can be used during a meeting or group discussion to check-in with individuals on their general emotional state. It can help to establish better understanding and connection between individuals. Research has shown that expressing emotions can also help to bring new perspectives to the group and broaden an otherwise limited discussion.

Guidelines:

1. Put the Sensory Cards on a table at the center of the room.
2. Ask everyone to choose 1-2 cards that most resonate with their present emotional state.
3. Ask individuals to show their selected cards to the group and explain in 1-2 sentences why they chose the cards. *Keep it casual, but make sure to create a safe, judgment-free environment. People should not have to defend what they are saying. The intent is not to get into deep discussions, but rather to let colleagues, peers, friends have a visual reading of how each individual is feeling at that instant in time.*
4. Allow them to keep their cards for the duration of the meeting, in case they are needed again.

Optional: Repeat this activity every time you feel that the conversation is going off track. It may be that people need to reconnect with themselves and others, or acknowledge a change in their state of mind.

CONNECTING WITH THE PRESENT MOMENT

It can be hard to lead heated discussions. This is a quick activity that can be used to help people pause during difficult moments and bring their awareness to the present moment. When participants become accustomed to this technique, they may begin to turn to the cards spontaneously as needed.

Guidelines:

1. Have the cards on hand during the meeting. Be sure that everyone knows that they are there.
2. If conversations become tense or challenging, pass the deck and ask everyone to quickly choose a card. They may discuss the feelings associated with the card, or they may choose to stay silent.
3. Allow everyone to keep their cards for the duration of the meeting, in case they are needed again.
4. Resume the discussion.



Fig 33 Instructions brochure for the Sensory Cards.

3.3 Reflective Analysis

Design must become an innovative, highly creative, across disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of men. (Papanek, 1985)

The *Sensory Cards* carry the potential to build empathy between individuals collaborating in community groups by fostering conversations during face-to-face encounters. It invites individuals to interact with one another and acts as a tool for facilitating communication and connection. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the *Sensory Cards* in facilitating strong connections and resilient communities can only be fully assessed through time and ongoing experimentations.

Relationships don't happen overnight. "Trust accrues through time and is built during encounter and interaction between people; it cannot be digitalized, and cannot be rushed." (Thackara 2005, p. 43). Even though the *Sensory Cards* present an opportunity to help individuals engage on an emotional level, it is important to acknowledge that it does not intent to accelerate the natural process of building a relationship. Rather, the goal is to help establish a solid base of empathy, trust and consideration from which strong relationships can be built from.

The open-ended nature of the cards allows them to be adapted in different contexts and for different purposes. A number of possibilities of use for the cards emerged during the design process. Wilson (personal communication, January 19, 2017), for example, imagined the cards being used to help children communicate their emotions. According to him this might

help them develop self-awareness and also help others better understand their needs. Another idea that emerged was to support the work of psychologists by helping their clients to access their feelings and communicate difficult matters in a new way. I noticed that the cards could also support an inner search towards self-awareness and self-knowledge. This possibility becomes a venue for future explorations.



Fig 34 Analyzing the *Sensory Cards*.

4. Conclusion and Future Directions

A success factor in research is time – time to understand a user community, time to get to know individuals within it, time to conduct research at a speed that does not threaten people, and time to reflect on results. (Thackara, 2005, p. 38)

This thesis explored the role of artifacts in developing empathy and connection within community groups. A series of reflective and exploratory projects were conducted in order to facilitate immersion into the topic. Psychologists and facilitators were engaged through participatory design methods and brought important insights on how to design to support empathy in human interactions. This research led to the development of the *Sensory Cards*, a set of visual and tactile cards intended to facilitate the communication of feelings and emotions in community groups.

From this research, it became clear that empathy is a behavior that is partly developed in a social environment and partly nurtured by an internal desire to see the other. In other words, to develop our empathic self and improve our relationships we need the willingness to look into ourselves and understand our own challenges and strengths. Fortunately, one way to do that is through our relationships. It's in the interaction with others that we see who we are and learn how to relate.

The result of this research was a design tool with the potential to bridge communication barriers and foster empathic conversations and connection in community groups. It is my hope that by fostering genuine conversations between individuals new relationships and collaborative efforts will emerge. The final design proposition sets the stage for dialogue and consideration about the way we interact with each other in valuable ways. For me, this project fits in the space of hope and imagination. The belief that small actions can have a great impact was present during the whole process. I intended to promote collaboration, but above all to provoke meaningful interactions.

“Empathy is, in fact, an ideal that has the power both to transform our own lives and to bring about fundamental social change. Empathy can create a revolution. [...] a revolution of human relationships.”

Krznaric 2014, p. ix

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Some of the photos in the *Sensory Cards* were kindly granted by Breno César[®]. You can find these photos and many more at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brenocesar/albums/72157623278558619>

Fig 33 Instructions brochure for the *Sensory Cards*.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A Slow Videos

APPENDIX B Breaking assumptions

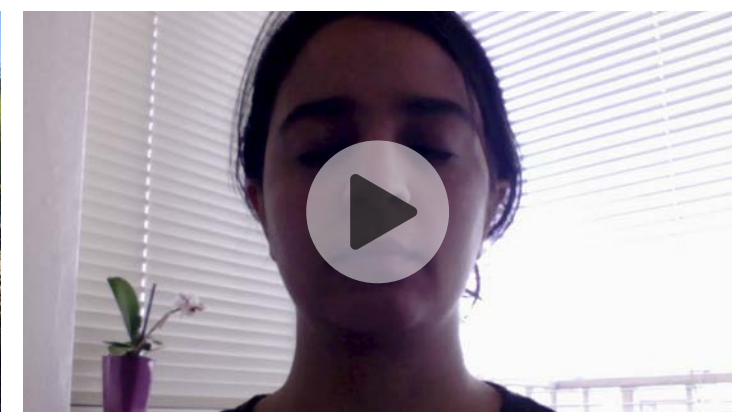
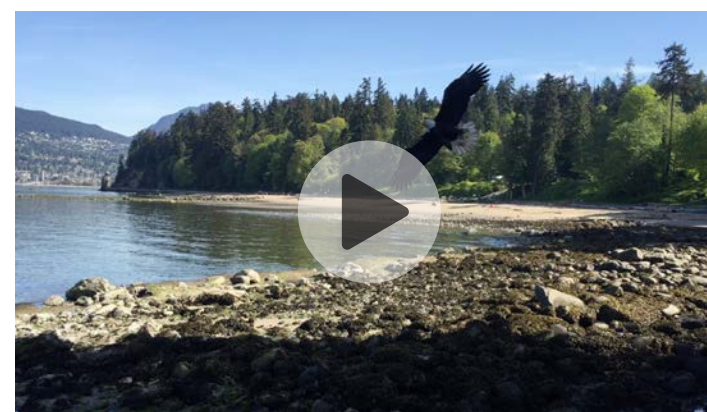
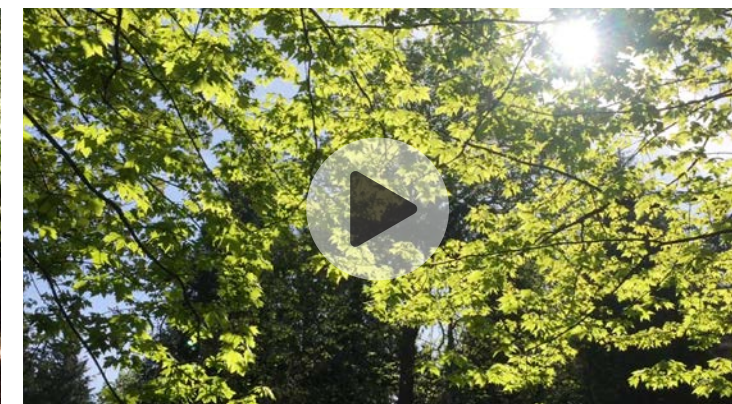
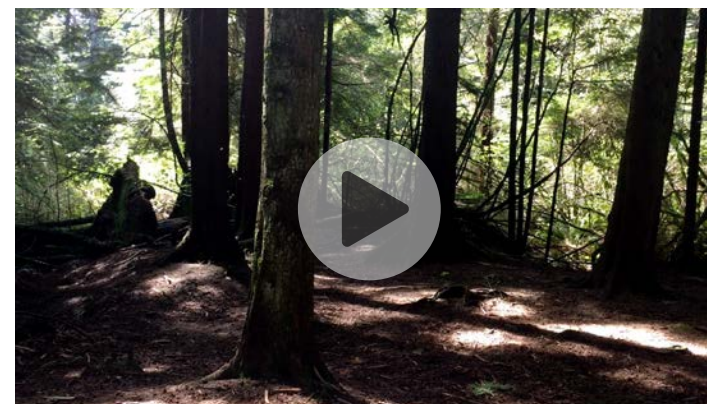
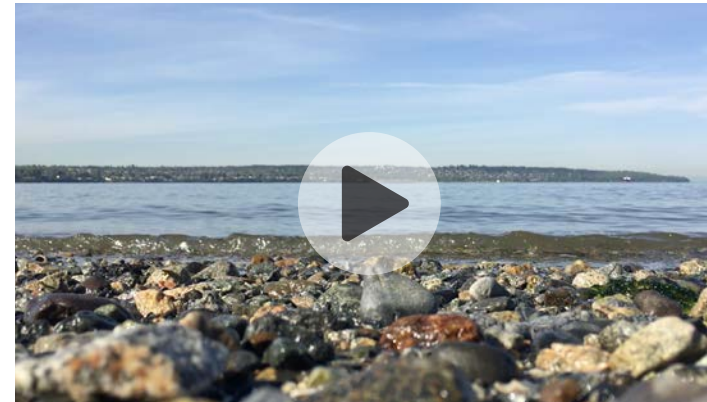
APPENDIX C Ethics Clearance

APPENDIX A

Slow videos

After having created the *T-Pauser* prototype I began to think about all the things that change my notion of time such as meditating, walking and drawing. With that in mind I decided to create a series of one-minute videos to capture these moments. I consciously entered a stage of awareness while creating the videos. The focus was not on the camera or the video, but on the experience itself.

When I watch the Slow videos, I'm transported back to the same head space I was at the moment they were created. They invite me to slow down and connect with myself, with the environment and with others. Since videos have the capacity to be played in slow motion and be fast forward, they also remind me how time passes differently depending on our state of mind.

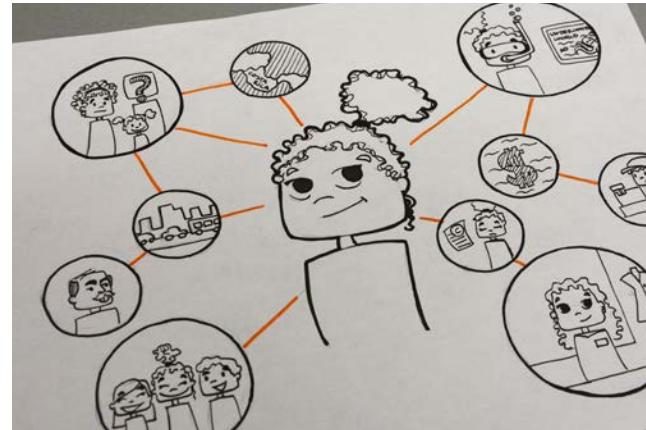


APPENDIX B

Breaking assumptions

In this project I tried to break a personal assumption and empathize with a group of people I didn't feel connected to. Since I had previously worked in a social project in Brazil—with children in situations of extreme poverty and negligence—I thought that children considered poor in British Columbia didn't experience it to the same extent. I looked at the literature and recent reports published by the government and local NGOs to help me better understand the context. This initial research helped me to develop a cognitive understanding of the local context, but I didn't feel connect to the people living in this condition.

In an attempt to further immerse myself in this context, I created three characters based on the information collected and on self-inquiries. What is it like to be that child? How does it feel to live that experience? What would be my hopes or fears? The whole process of researching and creating stories allowed me to step—albeit from a distance—into my characters' shoes and reconsider my earlier assumption. My view of poverty shifted. I was able to shorten the cultural and experiential distance between my characters and myself and emotionally connect with them.



RAFAELA

Rafaela was created by drawing and mind mapping and taught me about relationships and connections in life. She lives in Downtown East Side with her mother and younger sister, and she doesn't know her father. They are immigrants from Costa Rica and her mother works as a cashier on a fast food chain. She is very sociable. Rafaela used to dream about being a scuba diver, but now she thinks working on a store is probably not a bad idea.



GLADYS

Gladys was created with cut-out paper and pop-up technique and helped me understand a little more about the environment she lives in. She is aboriginal and lives with her family in north BC. Her father is an alcoholic and gets violent sometimes. Growing up in this environment, she developed some anger issues herself. She loves to be in nature and has to travel long distance to go to school. The best part of her day is at night when her grandmother tells her stories about their ancestors.

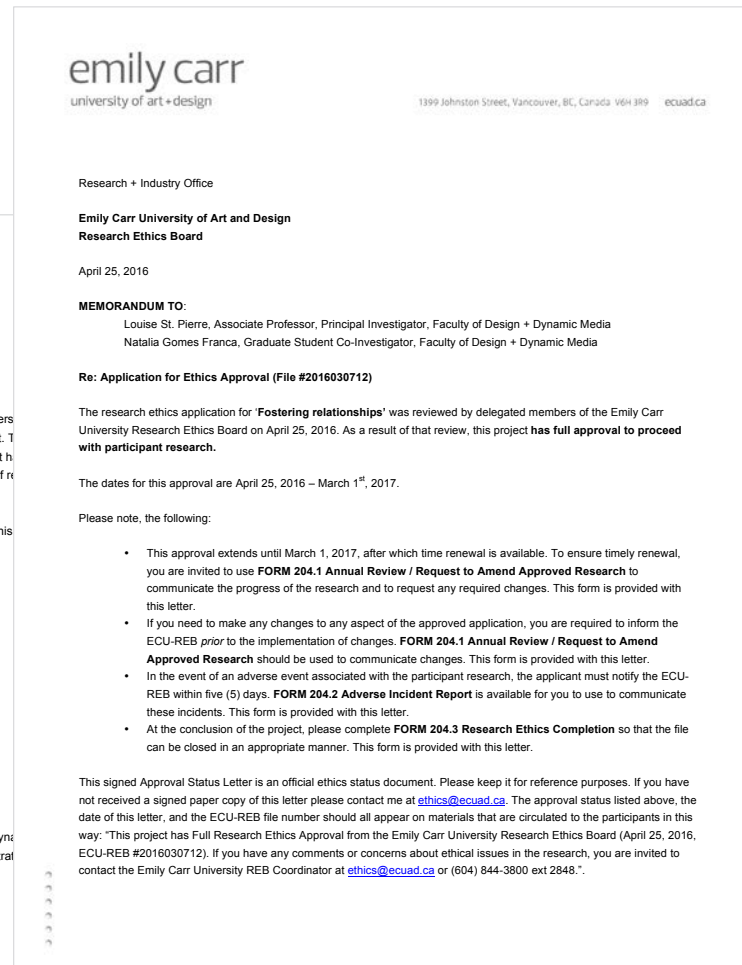
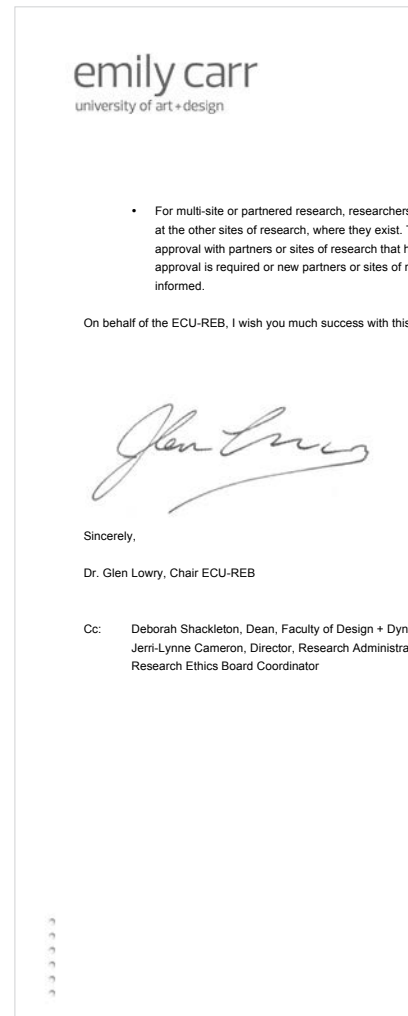


JACK

Jack was created with modeling clay and got me in touch with more profound feelings and emotions of a boy that is losing his childhood to a hard life. Jack lives only with his mother in a little apartment. His mother is bipolar and unemployed, and he takes care of her. They receive government assistance and rely on food bank to eat. Jack is very serious and introspective. He doesn't see the point of going to school. He gets bullied and keeps everything to himself. He loves to cook.

APPENDIX C

Ethics Clearance



A critical & process documentation paper submitted
in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Design
Emily Carr University of Arts + Design, 2017
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