Mediating bodies: universal design methodology and post-phenomenology

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Abstract.

This paper develops a methodological argument about the challenges that universal designers face as they engage with bodily difference and diversity. Adopting a post-phenomenological perspective, the paper indicates that Universal Design practices could benefit from a critical dialogue around the assumptions and ideas about embodiment and the world that design methods and tools advance as they are employed to make sense of everyday experience. Without such a dialogue, there is a risk that the widely different ways in which bodies, objects and spaces interact can remain unaccounted for and thereby limit what may be designed. We argue that post-phenomenology, through its detailed understanding of the socio-technical mediations of experience, can inspire universal designers to develop a range of critical and creative ways of using and sharing embodied knowledge.

Keywords. Universal Design, methodology, embodiment, post-phenomenology

One of the challenges faced by professionals following the principles of Universal Design (UD) is attending to the "tacit, contextual, subjective, first person knowledge" that people develop as they engage with different objects and spaces [1, 2, 3, 4]. While there are several methods and tools that enable designers to trace the shifting bodily experiences of people—including empathic design [5], co-design [6], and various simulation techniques [7]—limited critical attention has so far been directed towards the actual workings of such methods and tools, as well as the wider socio-cultural assumptions about embodiment and the world that they advocate.

Our work argues that attempts by designers to develop sensitivity to bodily diversity not only entails creating new methods and tools but engaging in critical reflection on the premises that shape their elaboration and use. We therefore draw on post-phenomenological thinking to open a space for an interdisciplinary dialogue about current UD methods. Post-phenomenology is rooted in the earlier work of phenomenologists such as Heidegger [8] and Merleau-Ponty [9], who regarded the embodied self and the world as inescapably entangled. Post-phenomenology extends this argument by emphasising the role of 'mediation' for human experience. As Ihde

[10] and Verbeek [11] suggest, our engagements with objects and environments are modulated by a range of mediators—including shoes, glasses, phones and wheelchairs—that are never neutral, but actively shape "our sensory relationship with reality, transform what we perceive" [12]. Post-phenomenology directs particular attention to how these mediators are designed, what kinds of assumptions about the body and the world they advance, and whether these are desirable or not.

Our work demonstrates that approaching methodological development in UD through the post-phenomenological notion of mediation could help designers to make sense of the ideas and values built into the methods that they employ to mediate user experience. Much like any other designed object or environment, UD methods can be evaluated according to the assumptions about users and the world that they advance. Without making explicit the ethics and politics of such assumptions, there is a risk that designers might inadvertently perpetuate stereotypical notions of users and create the impression that their methods are value-neutral.

The post-phenomenological notion of mediation encourages the cultivation of a critical methodological awareness that recognises the specificity of embodied experience. It does so by eschewing abstract and pre-formed notions of the body and the world, because understanding the variability of experience necessarily entails the continuous and creative variation of the methods that mediate these experiences [13]. Instead of concentrating on the standardisation of methods and thereby on keeping them still, post-phenomenology suggests that UD professionals might benefit from developing a set of flexible but critical skills and sensibilities that help them in keeping their methods alive to the unfolding bodily diversity of the world.

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