

LEARNING EMPATHY DESIGN BY WORKING WITH VISUALLY IMPAIRED ATHLETES

AUTHORS

Associate professor Yong Xue (Grace)
Shih Chien University, Taipei, Taiwan
yxhsieh@g2.usc.edu.tw

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ABSTRACT

In the Service and Learning class at Shih Chien Fashion Design department, we designed clothes for stroke patients, elderly people, and mentally disabled people. To continue this trend toward inclusivity, universality, and empathy design, and honour those who actively pursue their own health and happiness in the face of adversity we posed the following question. Could we also successfully engage our students to work with disabled athletes to meet their needs related to sportswear design?

We worked with an organization that promotes universality in sports to team our twenty-one students up with ten visually impaired track, marathon, and triathletes. Running tethers used in guide running and swimming tethers for guided swimming were identified as the focus of this first project. The selection of available tethers is very limited, and many athletes need to improvise their own.

The groups of students met with the blind athletes and their guides at their training sessions. They observed how the tethers were used and interviewed the athletes and guides about their needs and preferences. They produced a wide variety of tethers with different materials, functionality, and appearance. Shorter ones for track races, longer, more skin-friendly ones for marathons, and more complicated ones for swimmers. Special features included high visibility and even tactile pneumatic communication pouches. Finally, the students presented their best prototypes to the athletes, the press, and the public at an exhibition. Although some designs did attract attention and enquiries, the project stopped short of commercial production. Some of the students are individually looking into the possibilities of production of their prototypes by looking for sponsorship or corporate partnerships.

I collected qualitative data from student reports, discussions with the students, interviews with the athletes, and students' evaluations of the course. The athletes communicated appreciation for the students' attentiveness and varying degrees of satisfaction with the different tether designs that were tailored to their needs. They were delighted to have the option of expressing their individual style by means of their chosen design and colour. Correspondingly the students generally found the course meaningful and even inspiring. It took them out of their comfort zone and brought them in touch with a part of society that they would normally not meet. A few even expressed that it gave them a sense of purpose that they had not experienced in fashion design before.

Our students can indeed find meaning and make a meaningful contribution when applying their design skills to address the needs of disabled athletes.