

# Touchpoint

THE JOURNAL OF SERVICE DESIGN



## From Sketchbook to Spreadsheet

Service Design Creates Break-through Cultural Change in the Brazilian Financial Industry

By Tennyson Pinheiro, Luis Alt and Jose Mello

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Learning the Language of Finance Gives Your Ideas the Best Chance of Success

By Jürgen Tanghe

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Designing Human Rights

By Zack Brisson and Panthea Lee

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## Austin Center for Design Looks at Homelessness

As part of the inaugural class at the Austin Center for Design, a new educational institution that produces design graduates focused on humanitarian and cultural problems, my class decided to look at homelessness in Austin, Texas through partnership with a local shelter. We began with the explicit understanding that we would come nowhere near ‘solving’ such a complex issue. We did believe, though, that with ethnographic design research and deep excursions into various areas – such as jobs, housing and health – we would be able to uncover new insights.

As we synthesised our findings, the theme that jumped out the most was that the public’s perception of the homeless had to change before any true progress could be made. The people we talked to did not conform to the stereotypical image of a homeless person: we met teenage mothers, college graduates, artists and others who are hardworking individuals just like you and me. They possess a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills, from carpentry and roofing to oil painting and computer expertise. The most surprising finding came when they were being asked about the best part of their days: over and over again they told stories about helping others and sharing their knowledge. Currently, many social services provide shelter,

food and medical assistance that are fundamental to physical survival, but attention to other needs, such as self-esteem and sense of belonging, often separates the long-term homeless from the temporarily homeless. Instead of constantly asking about problems and deficiencies, we need to focus on the things people can offer, in order for them to feel like they have the power to change their own situations.

At the end of the research phase, we presented our findings to the shelter staff. We recommended programs that would allow them to focus more on leveraging people’s strengths and potential contributions, such as allowing those who are computer literate to help keep the lab open, or those who made it into tran-

sitional housing to share their newly learned budgeting skills. The concept of peer learning at the shelter was very well received amongst the staff and their board of directors.

Furthermore, we were also beginning to see from our research that this form of engagement doesn’t only apply to the homeless population, but also to new college graduates, retirees, stay-at-home mothers and other professionals who don’t feel fulfilled in their day jobs. All of them have a need to engage and to contribute. We decided to build HourSchool as a platform to facilitate peer learning by means of small informal classes, with an emphasis on encouraging more people to share their knowledge and engage with their community.

### Peer Learning Platform: from Sketchbook to Spreadsheet

Taking principles from the ‘lean startup’ methodology, we put our hypothesis and assumptions to the test, ensuring that we were serving a need that actually exists. Before we built anything, we leveraged existing





Asking everyone at Church Under the Bridge one question, "What would you like to have happened by the end of the day?"

tools such as Facebook Events to test if people actually wanted to take classes from their peers and would be willing to pay for them. Subsequently, we built a simple web interface to automate some of the logistics, one that still lacks a lot of features but is enough for us to continue to engage in conversations with people, to experiment and to perform iterations on our service.

Our core mission is to empower more people to teach, and we measure our success by the number of students we are able to turn into teachers. Over the last few months, we have deepened our understanding of the core principles that will help us achieve our mission:

- The peer-led nature makes learning more relevant and less intimidating.
- Student-driven topic suggestions and teacher nominations give people a new sense of validation, especially if they have never thought of themselves before as 'teachers'.
- The bite-sized, one-hour class gives students a taste of a new topic and gives first-time teachers a taste of the teaching process.

'HourSchool for Community' has allowed us to create awareness, to learn a great deal about people's behaviour and to generate revenue by charging a small service fee for class hosting and providing resources for teachers. Since its launch, we have been approached by people inquiring about using HourSchool as a platform for peer-led training programs at companies, universities and non-profits. We are now developing HourSchool for Business, allowing organisations to use it as a software-as-a-service (SaaS) subscription. Meanwhile, we're using a percentage of our revenue

to subsidise the usage of our platform by non-profit organisations. By being mission-focused and backed by a business model, we aspire to continue to bring peer learning into people's cities, workplaces and lives. ●



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