Alan Harnum: IDRC - Social Justice Repair Kit and Co-Designing Inclusive Cities

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Male: Nothing about us without us. That is our call in the disabled community.

Female: Persons with disability, you know the expectations are low to none.

Mike: I'm Mike Ridley, a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. In Episode 1.5 of the So What? podcast released last December, I interviewed Alan Harnum of the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University in Toronto. We talked about the IDRC, its philosophy and the way it works. This episode continues that discussion and focuses on two specific projects that exemplify the challenges and the opportunities in the inclusive design area.

Alan: I'm Alan Harnum. I'm a Senior Inclusive Developer at the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I've been here for about three and a half years now, and prior to that I worked for Toronto Public Library for a decade. I have a Masters in library science. I have worked several years as a public service library and, before moving into library digital services and now I work as an Open Source software developer and design researcher on all kinds of different projects having to do with inclusion and accessibility.

Mike: So, I think today we'd like to talk about two of those projects that the IDRC is involved in, the Social Justice Repair Kit and Co-Designing Inclusive Cities. I'd like to use these as examples of how the IDRC actually works in particular settings and hopefully the particular outcomes that resulted. So, why don't we start with Social Justice Repair Kit? Maybe you could describe the project a little bit and its particular objectives.

Alan: Sure. So the Social Justice Repair Kit project, which we typically shorten it to SJRK as it's a bit of a mouthful, is a project funded by the Oak Foundation with the goal of helping youth movements and social justice initiatives become more welcoming environments for youth with learning differences, and to help them benefit from the advantages of inclusive design. And one of the specific goals of that project is to work with youth

in context outside of the formal educational system, with the insight that youth involvement with activists and social justice movements can offer opportunities for re-engagement with learning for students who may have been alienated from the formal education system.

Some of the research that we've seen in this project has been around the experiences of students with learning differences in formal education causes, among other things, doubt in their own ability and capacity to learn. So a specific role of the project has been looking at re-engagement opportunities and possibilities of learning outside of the school context.

Mike: I'm intrigued that it's called the "repair kit". Why repair? It's an interesting word to use.

Alan: So, I didn't name the project, but I'll give my opinion, best guess on that naming, because I can't walk into our Director's office and ask her right now because she's meeting with someone, which is that you repair something that's broken. And what's broken in this case is the formal education system for students with learning differences.

Joi Ito, the Director of the MIT Media Lab, had a really interesting column in Wired last month called the Educational Tyranny of the Neurotypicals, which is worth reading but it has this statistic near the start which I'm just going to quote from the article here which is, "According to the Centres for Disease Control, one in 59 children and one in 34 boys are on the autism spectrum, in other words, neuroatypical. That's 3% of the male population. And if you add ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and dyslexia, roughly one out of four people are not neurotypical." So that's the quote from the article.

And that quarter of the population statistic is without even accounting for other situations we might describe as learning differences; vision, hearing, cognitive or motor disabilities, sensory processing disorders or childhood trauma. There's a really fascinating resource on how experiences of trauma impact learning and how schools can better design around that from another Oak Foundation grantee which is called Trauma-Sensitive Schools.

So one of the goals of this project has been to try and increase awareness for those working with youths outside formal educational context, about possibilities for doing better work and being welcoming to youth with learning differences, including them, supporting them, co-designing with them. And you said you wanted to kind of get to the so what of this, so of course libraries are one of the contexts in which those kind of learning opportunities for youth can happen outside of the formal educational context. I actually spent a couple of years as a teen and children's librarian, so I've got some direct experience of that.

Mike: When I look at this particular project, I described it, or thought about it as sort of process infrastructure as opposed to a particular task that you were trying to accomplish. In other words, you were trying to help other people

help themselves in very different contexts and very different situations. So it is sort of more infrastructure building it seemed to me. Is that sort of how you see the project? Is that how it plays out?

Alan: Yeah, I think that's very true for a lot of aspects of the project. A lot of what's been involved, and I'll speak about the IDRC perspective first and then kind of a little more about the work that we've done with all the various partners, which is some of it's involved thinking about how to use inclusive design principles and tools, especially co-designing different contexts, particularly how do we adapt things that we have done on other projects like co-design activities for youth-based environments.

This is also the first project that's I've been involved with here that's got a significant number of international partners involved. In addition to partners in Canada we have partners in Mexico, Colombia, Rwanda. And much of the direct work with youth has been done by the partners supported by us. We've kind of worked together with them on co-design activities, and some of the IDRC researchers spent time in Colombia recently. And the different work streams have kind of flowed into and informed each other over the project's timeline.

And I do like that term "process infrastructure", and I think one of the reasons for that is that we actually – the IDRC itself doesn't have substantial expertise in working with youth. We needed to combine our knowledge of accessibility and inclusive design with partners who have that expertise and those connections, and learn from each other and kind of, over the time of the project, kind of co-design and figure out in sometimes kind of like messy ways how do we effectively work together.

Working with the international partners has just been tremendously valuable. Just personally, I've learned so much on this project that's expanded my vision of necessary considerations for inclusive design, particularly around questions of language and localization.

Mike: This project, for me at least, exemplifies maybe specifically the activist perspective that the IDRC takes, particularly with working with youth in these contexts. So I'm very curious about how you've been able to assess success here. What sort of examples can you give us on the outcomes of people actually using this repair kit, using this sort of an approach? Because obviously it's being used in very different contexts and very different parts of the world, but are you getting a sense that there's a common outcome here? Or is it very contextual?

Alan: Well, I mean I think that generally it's probably not going to be surprising to hear that the IDRC response to what are the objective metrics and what are the common outcomes are like we're not huge fans of that as a thing in general. Everything is very, very contextual.

What I do have is, we actually just had the Year 2 face-to-face meeting for the project, so I can highlight a number of partner projects that have made use of some of the inclusive design tools and processes, and we should

have more information about all of these on the site in the wiki in the next month or so. So this is going to be a bit of a rundown.

Taking IT Global, which is our Canadian partner, has done some really, really interesting work co-designing a project with indigenous youth called Whose Land, which is a project on land acknowledgements in Canada. The CHARISMA Foundation, which is one of our Colombian partners, has been part of a festival called – I'm going to mispronounce the Spanish, so I apologize to our Colombian partners in advance – Motavendo Alegal, which is bringing together young women from the city of Medellin to work around topics such as collaborative technologies, feminism, urban agriculture and social cartography.

FootCo, another Colombian partner, has worked with a youth movement called the Environmental Guardians that monitors and protects the ecosystem of Colombia. And we've worked with them on tools for accessible visualization and mapping of environmental data. They've also built a really great platform called [Cuintalo], where young people from the city of Cartagena tell their stories, a sort of virtual place of memory.

And one of the researchers from SmartLab – which we kind of call IDRC Ireland because there's an inclusive design research centre at the University of Dublin – they've collaborated with Uwezo, which is a national organization in Rwanda for young people with disabilities for some on-the-ground co-design and research with youth. And they're in the process of developing some localized materials for that context on business development and management. So, I mean just that kind of rundown. There's been quite a number of other initiatives that have kind of been seeded from this project.

It's hard to say kind of what common outcomes are because the contexts are so wildly different. One of the things that we have seen, both in our partners and in other groups that they have worked with, is there's a real desire for a better level of training around how to include youth with learning differences, and be more inclusive with disabilities at all kind of levels of the work. And some of that is just at the level of practical things like how do we make sure our website is accessible. Or, we produce a lot of material for youth in PDF format, is that a good idea? And then I say no and we try and talk about why PDF accessibility is such a challenge. But anyway, that's a bit tangential.

From the IDRC side, we've been using our learning on the project to drive software development activities and add new material to our inclusive design guide and inclusive learning handbook, and we've considerably improved the internationalization capabilities of user interface options, which is one of our kind of flagship tools. And we're working on some really interesting new tools around inclusive multimodal storytelling that we'll get to do some more work on in year three of this.

Mike: Alan, this is amazing in terms of its scope. I'm really impressed by not just the number projects but the sort of range of participants and the

partners you have. How do you find these projects? Or how do these projects find you? How does the match up occur?

Alan: That's a good question. I mean, I guess part of it is that, when we put together a grant like this, like I'm sure you've written grants like this from your side, which is a lot of the funders that we work with, what they're interested in is partnership grants. So, in the process of kind of putting the grant together itself, you sort of find partner organizations. And this often works through people's personal networks.

In the case of a number of these partners, they are partners that we've worked with before or people that we have known for our work in, for example, the open educational resource community, or we've worked together with them on other projects. So it's all very, this kind of partner-oriented grant work is very much driven by sort of personal and organizational networks.

Mike: So, why don't we move from this project to I think something that's quite different, the Co-Designing Inclusive Cities project? Can you maybe describe that one and its objectives?

Alan: I have an opening disclaimer here. I haven't actually been an active team member of this project, and I've vetted these answers with the team members and taken input from them about responses. I may have to defer answering some things in detail. And that's not me trying to be evasive – which I feel I kind of have to say in the context of this project in particular – it's just me simply not knowing all the details. And a lot more information about the project is available at the project site, cities.inclusivedesign.ca.

So with that disclaimer terms of service agreement out of the way, I'm going to quote directly from the proposal for the project. And one of the things to preface all this with is that this is a project that was funded by Sidewalk Labs, who have been in the news in Toronto quite a bit and in the news internationally quite a bit for working on a smart city development project with Waterfront Toronto called Quayside.

So, quoting directly from the proposal, which I'm able to do because it was posted publicly to our project site, "The goal of this project is to create, document and share an evolving toolkit of perspectives, activities and measures that support the community-led design of civic infrastructure in connected cities. The toolkit is intended to be used by multiple participants including Sidewalk Labs, Waterfront Toronto and the residents of Toronto. It will be co-created by these stakeholders in a manner that reflects the diversity of Toronto and will be posted openly so that others can use and adapt it. This toolkit will be used to assist in the creation of Sidewalk Toronto's inclusion and accessibility principles, which will be included in the Master Innovation and Development Plan for the Quayside neighbourhood."

And functionally, much of the work so far – and this project has been running for about six months and I think it's coming to an end fairly soon. It's a very tight timeline for one of our projects. Much of the work has been organizing co-design sessions with residents of Toronto, including what we've been calling embedded co-design where we provide people with materials and advice for running co-design sessions without the presence of a "trained facilitator". And we've been documenting that process and the work in detail at the project website at cities.inclusivedesign.ca.

Mike: So, this particular project, the Quayside project as you mentioned it, is enormous in scope in terms of I think just not only the objectives, the overall objectives, but the various partners involved. How does the IDRC actually work with all these different partners? Is it a case where you are involved in lots of different aspects? Or is it a more contained project and more contained objective?

Alan: Yeah, so our work is ultimately contributing to the inclusion and accessibility principles, which are part of what's called the Master Innovation and Development Plan for the Quayside neighbourhood. The Master Innovation and Development Plan is still forthcoming before the end of the year, which will kind of be I believe the kind of detailed working agreement for the Quayside development between Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto. And I know that the work of a number of other partners is feeding into the Master Innovation and Development Plan alongside ours.

I also know that we've worked closely with some Sidewalk Toronto staff on some aspects of the project, such as a hack-a-thon session that was held at the Sidewalk offices in late September. But we've also had a good deal of independence in how we've operated.

Mike: So this project obviously takes the co-design philosophy that you've been using in other areas, and the expertise you have around that, but you're applying it I think to maybe one of the most high-profile initiatives certainly in the city and perhaps in even your experience as an organization. This must bring in all kinds of difficult or interesting challenges in doing this.

Alan: Yeah, and I think this is certainly the highest-profile project we've been attached to since I started working here. As I mentioned, the Quayside project has been in the news. I wouldn't say – it's been in the news probably at least weekly in Toronto in the last six months and international as well. There have been articles in the Atlantic, I believe the Economist and others about this project.

My sense of the main challenge for us was that it was actually in the initial stages of the project in working out a proposal with Sidewalk Labs that was satisfactory to both sides. We were initially approached to do some relatively straightforward consulting on accessibility for them, and over time, as things were discussed this kind of morphed into that project.

And the IDRC is really, really flexible in a lot of ways, but there are certain things that we don't compromise on, and one of them is that we work in the open. So, working out how we do that with a Silicon Valley company that's used to employing contractors with confidentiality agreements and intellectual property rights and work for hire, that was definitely a process. And I think it was a valuable one for both sides.

One of the things we had to work towards was that all of our work, aside from some financial and legal details, would be openly licensed and co-design work would remain the intellectual property of the co-design participants while being openly licensed. There's also just been of the practical challenges to be expected from conducting co-design at a scale like this, with such a wide possible audience on such a tight timeline, recruiting participants, planning and executing, reporting out on it and doing summaries. I don't feel qualified to speak to those due to my lack of direct experience, but it's definitely been one of the largest and most-involved kind of co-design activities that we've done in such a short period of time like this. As I'm sure you know, like, six months is not a huge amount of time for the pace that academic research usually moves at.

Mike: You mentioned earlier and now that it is a controversial project for the city for a number of reasons, but probably the most, maybe one of the most pointed has been around data and data access and data privacy. And you're philosophy that you've insisted on and it looks like you've been able to continue has been this idea of working in the open, and ensuring that the participants in a sense have control and responsibility for the data that results from it. You've been much more successful in I guess negotiating that than apparently others have, with Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto, any idea or insight into why you've been more successful?

Alan: Yeah, I mean it's an interesting question. We certainly didn't enter the engagement without awareness of those issues. The controversial nature of it was a topic of discussion among the team during the initial stages of the project proposal, which I did have some involvement in. I've been intermittently active in the civic technology community in Toronto over the last couple of years, so Sidewalk and Quayside were familiar to me, as were some aspects of the controversy.

I think that, I mean what you term our success is I think because we asked for it, and we had kind of like an ongoing dialogue with Sidewalk about the contract that took, as I recall, a fair amount of time to sort of get to a point of mutuality about terms that we were comfortable with working on. As I said before, like, we pride ourselves in flexibility in a lot of areas and extreme inflexibility in a few small, in a few kind of key areas, one of which is around the working in the open thing.

And we're fortunate enough in that we're in a position generally as a research group that we don't have to take any work that comes our way. We don't work on terms that aren't acceptable to us philosophically speaking. And I think it was a real – as I said, I think the contract

negotiation was a really good experience, both for us and for Sidewalk, in terms of coming to an understanding.

And I think, personally speaking, we were definitely interested to be involved and have an opportunity to contribute in a critical way to the smart cities dialogue in Toronto – this is very personal to a lot of us because it's where we live and it's where we work – and to emphasize our position that a smart city that leaves out people on the margins and is essentially built to ease the lives of well-off technophiles, as so many start-up products seem to, is not in fact a particularly smart city.

We had to be able to be involved in a way that worked for our values, but we were able to achieve that in the proposal we put forward that Sidewalk accepted and worked with us on kind of coming to an understanding that worked for both of us, which I definitely appreciate.

Mike: Just fascinating, Alan, just amazing stuff that you folks are doing. I am so impressed by the range but also I think by the critical issues you're taking on. This is not easy work. And it's work that for many years, I'm sure you folks are aware, didn't get the kind of attention that it deserved. And now that it's getting a little bit more of it, I really appreciate the way that you folks are pushing the envelope on this. It's inspired work, congrats.

Alan: Thank you.

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