

consensus when they could not figure out everyone's motivations and interests. A group may have the same goal, but may not realize it or may struggle to find a way to achieve it. People are passionate about their own approaches, so they may even view other approaches as challenging rather than collaborative, even though development is supposedly a collaborative field. There can be blinders when people are so driven by a mission or passion. For instance, those who are giving money may not always have the complete picture, sometimes hearing just a few things and becoming focused on them before hearing from all the stakeholders (particularly the users).

Many students admit that they got a little creative and ended up breaking out of the expectations of the role to find a solution. It's important to start with the rules of the roleplay as a guide, but you do not have to let the roles define you. About a third to a half of the students playing the NGO management role, users or parents followed the special instruction to refrain from speak freely and only answer direct questions. It is not always common for a wheelchair user to be present during a decision-making meeting, but even when they are, they may not volunteer information as freely. Some of this may be cultural – at the International Development Design Summit in Ghana this past summer, Amy noticed that students from the US participated a lot while their Ghanaian teammates could barely get in a word, even though they knew the most about the context of the projects. Western students are often trained to volunteer their opinions all the time, compared to people from elsewhere who may have more relevant information but may not have as many opportunities to share it and tend to be more soft-spoken. It is an interesting dynamic.

Students talk about how they struggled between a moral standpoint or keeping their job. One role in particular has indicators and performance goals (a certain number of wheelchairs) that are supposed to be met for their company, but feedback from users has been that those chairs are not particularly useful. A student shares that they felt bad about pushing hard about the money, but they were representing someone who did not want to see their organization die off. It can be complex when people's livelihoods depend on certain funders, who may be more motivated by short-term incentives to show growth than long-term sustainable impact support livelihoods. In one group meeting, the discussion almost became a contest for who could give the most eloquent argument to the funder and throw out the most supporting numbers, while the wheelchair user and parents felt more like spectators and were less empowered to participate. Think about what it takes to really create a level playing field for negotiation. There may be a lot of unbalances with power and social status.



In the real world, places are often littered with broken wheelchairs – not only are there wheelchairs that break after a few months, but there are even chairs that cause physical harm (that can lead to sores and eventually even death) – yet people are still pushing them out, because the incentive is to send more chairs out rather than making sure that we are sending good quality chairs. Someone may hold a fundraiser here, for example, to raise money to ship used wheelchairs from the US to people living in poor communities of Guatemala. At first glance, this might seem like a worthy cause, but it is important to try to find out more about the situation before deciding to support it. Are the chairs appropriate for the intended use? How robust are the chairs and could they be fixed in Guatemala, or do they contain fragile specialized parts with no locally available replacements?

In this class, D-Lab does not want students to develop a jaded mentality, but rather a healthy and realistic skepticism that takes into account the complexity of the situation and tries to figure out what may be the best solution for sustainable, long-term impact. It often helps to start by looking at something that has worked a little better than other programs, and then build on it. No one really knows what the best answer is, necessarily.

The D-Lab Philosophy:

Before getting too far into the semester, Amy wants to get into the D-Lab philosophy a little to give students a sense of where this approach comes from. [Please Note: It is not easy to capture and represent this philosophy well through written notes, so readers are encouraged to take a look at the D-Lab website (<http://d-lab.mit.edu>) for more details. A video of Amy speaking on the D-Lab philosophy will eventually be posted online, as part of a library of resources entitled “D-Clips.”]

What does the “D” in D-Lab stand for? What are some of our guiding principles?

Development: the belief that development actually can happen and that there are sustainable ways for communities to go about it

Design: technologies can have a role in improving people’s lives

Dissemination: technologies alone cannot have an impact, however – we need to get these technologies into the hands of users

Dialogue & Discovery: emphasis on learning from people who have more direct interactions with the users or from the users themselves (D-Lab teams don’t have the hubris to believe that they can make the most effective lasting change over a single IAP January period, but it is important to go and talk to people and try to experience life in the region firsthand, rather than just reading about it, to get a sense of what people’s needs are)

Not everything that D-Lab values has to start with a “D” (this is not Sesame Street):

Respect: it is really important to respect the communities we are working with to truly work together (realize that education and intelligence have very little to do with each other – some of the smartest people you meet may never have attended primary school, so we need to shake up our preconceptions coming from MIT), but also remember to respect your own capabilities and offer to contribute in ways that you are able

Humility: recognize that there are also issues in our own society and be open to learning (a student once said they wanted to “show people how to live,” which is not what D-Lab is about)

Optimism, Idealism & Enthusiasm: these are what keep people in this field going, as development work is not easy – we do not want to discourage people from thinking they can make a difference, but we want people to think about how they can do it in a sustainable way (Amy is proud that she left the Peace Corps as idealistic as when she started, which is considered fairly rare)

“The real optimist sees even an empty glass as half full” – Amy Smith

We should remember to be idealistic, to do the work in the best way that we can think of, and to do it with enthusiasm.

Amy goes on to describe her transformative work in a refugee camp in Uganda. One of the most brutal violent conflicts occurred in northern Uganda, and communities are starting to move back to their villages after 20-25 years in refugee camps. Amy was invited to work with these communities to show them technologies that could be useful and ease this transition. When she visited with a graduate student named Kofi, they found that there were not a lot of workshops, access to local blacksmiths, and such, so they decided to just teach everyone how to make corn shellers on their own. Amy and Kofi were excited to see how people got really engaged – even people who have never worked with metal before or thought of themselves as makers. When they returned the next day, there were stacks of nicely-made corn shellers that were being sold at half price within the community, and at full price to neighboring communities. This experience has solidified Amy’s belief that we can work with communities in a respectful way, really believing in the capacity of people to make technologies to impact their own lives.

D-Lab wants to build the creative capacity of communities, changing the paradigm so that people feel empowered to build their own technologies, instead of having the expectation of being merely recipients of technologies. This is a very exciting and revolutionary methodology that D-Lab is actively promoting, and it goes against how a lot of development work has been done historically. A few groups are also taking a similar approach – Whirlwind Wheelchair has wheelchair users actually designing and building their own chairs. D-Lab asks students to be open to experiencing this and to bring their enthusiasm, interest and willingness to work with people. Bring your nerdiness! Jump in and try to learn and experiment and do something. In Ghana, the D-Lab team tried to build a well together with the community despite the fact that no one had done so before, but everyone jumped right in and got muddy and worked hard together – and they made it!

“You cannot do this work if you fear mud” - John Manu

Also, do not expect people to do things for you. When a D-Lab team needed wood for demonstration, the students just took axes and chopped their own wood, even though the men in the community were more than willing to help. It should be part of the D-Lab ethos to clean-up after yourself. After a community demonstration, the team took straw and helped to sweep up the community space so they would not leave extra work for the women. Be willing to take initiative to help out and do things – not only is it the right thing to do, but you will learn a lot in the process. [Amy takes this opportunity to point out to the class that they have might noticed how the regular rows of chairs and tables got displaced during the group activity, so students should feel free to jump in and help rearrange the classroom afterward.]

Finally, it is always important to think carefully about what you are asking people to do, especially when you are working with people who are living under \$2 a day. Are you asking

people to risk their entire crop by trying a new technology, which may still be at the stage of an untested prototype? You cannot just say, “oh, maybe this will work if you put raisins in the soil.”

These are just some of the useful ways you can think about approaching development work. There may be a naïveté in this approach, but there is also a strength in believing in your ability to do good. D-Lab is challenging students to look at all these different dimensions, not to discourage them, but to empower them to take action in a positive way.

The class discussion on stakeholder analysis will continue next Monday.

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