Creating personas

**Author:** Elizabeth Donovan  
Aarhus School of Architecture

**Level:** Foundation / Intermediate / Advanced  
**Learning environment:** Studio Project  
Active learning, creative learning, scenario-based learning

**Context & Objective of Activity**

This learning activity was conducted within an undergrad (mixed 2nd and 3rd year) design studio but as an integrated but separate workshop. It is flexible, which means it can be more or less integrated, change in complexity, and alter the level of independent study.

In this context, personas are fictional characters created to represent different user types or stakeholders. They are used as an active teaching method to enhance students’ understanding by emphasizing the human aspect of the built environment. Through personas, students engage in creative and scenario-based learning, gaining insights into various user groups’ unique needs, preferences, and constraints.

The learning objective of using personas as a teaching method is cultivating a user-centred design approach among students. They learn to empathize with the intended users of their designs, fostering a deeper appreciation for the social and community aspect of architecture. Through personas, students acquire skills in conducting research, analysing user requirements, and translating those insights into thoughtful and inclusive design solutions.

Additionally, using personas encourages students to think critically, communicate effectively, and develop a holistic understanding of the impact of architecture on people’s lives and community spaces. This learning activity can also be used as community-based learning but was not in this example.
Method

- This workshop has been run for undergraduate students over a period of 2 days (can be broken up and spread over several weeks) in conjunction with an ongoing design project.
- For these year levels, it is recommended to be a common activity to create a common ‘catalogue’ for the student group. To help facilitate this, some prescribed persona groups can be provided to reduce the complexity.
- For students in the later years of their education, there can be a greater level of independence where they can create their own individual personas for their briefs. In this context, it can also be used as part of a programming phase of a design project.

Equipment or learning environment:

- No specific equipment is needed – however, pinboards or presentation screens may be helpful.
- Space is needed for group work and presentations – it works best when the students can work together in co-presence.

Objective: This teaching activity aims to develop students’ understanding of diverse user groups and their needs and apply that knowledge to create inclusive design solutions. By creating personas, students will gain insights into the specific requirements and preferences of different user groups, fostering empathy and enhancing their ability to design for diverse populations.

Example activity structure for an undergraduate common workshop:

Introduction:
(Through lectures or seminars – could also include an ‘expert user’ to participate and contribute to the discussion)

- Introduce the concept of personas and their role in user-centred design.
- Discuss the importance of inclusivity and the impact of design decisions on different user groups.
- Explain that students will create personas to inform their design process for an inclusive project.

Research and Analysis:

- Divide students into small groups.
- Assign each group a specific user group or stakeholder relevant to the student’s project (e.g., elderly, children, people with disabilities, working professionals, etc.).
- Instruct students to research their assigned user group, including demographics, lifestyle, needs, challenges, and preferences.
- Encourage them to gather information through interviews, surveys, case studies, and relevant literature. Inviting users to be interviewed can be beneficial to
reduce the time needed for students to source their own person to interview. More advanced students could find their own people to be interviewed; however, this needs more time.

Developing Personas Scenarios:
- Instruct each group to co-create a persona based on their research findings. This uses scenario-based learning tools.
- Each persona should have a name, age, background, occupation (if applicable), and specific needs and preferences related to the project.
- Visually represent the personas. Reflective writing can also be used to help structure and develop the complexity of the persona, which is helpful for some students.
- Students should consider physical, sensory, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the persona’s experience with the built environment.

Persona Presentation and Discussion:
- Have each group present their persona to the class, sharing key characteristics, needs, and preferences.
- Encourage students to explain the reasoning behind their persona’s traits and how they might impact design decisions.
- Facilitate a class discussion on the diversity of personas and the potential implications for design solutions.
- Collate all the persona into a common ‘community’ for the workshop to be used within their design project.

Applying personas to a design project:
This can be taken into the design studio learning space and activities. But it requires studio tutors to be involved or follow up.
- Discuss how students incorporate the personas they have created into their design process, considering their requirements and preferences.
- Discuss how their new personas may change or impact their current or future project.
- Encourage students to think creatively and find design solutions that address the diverse range of user needs represented by the personas.
- Encourage constructive critique and feedback from peers and the educator, focusing on the inclusivity and effectiveness of the design solutions.
- Promote a collaborative learning environment where students can learn from each other’s ideas and perspectives.

Reflection and Conclusion:
- Facilitate a reflection session where students share their insights and lessons learned from the activity.
- Discuss the importance of designing for diversity and the value of incorporating...
ing personas in the design process.

• Conclude the activity by emphasizing the significance of empathetic design and the potential impact on users' lives.

• Follow up on the chosen personas during typical tutoring and reviews.

Reflection and challenges:

• Persona creation and incorporating them into the design process can be time-consuming. Finding a balance between providing enough time for research, persona development, and design iterations within the constraints of a limited timeframe can be challenging. To address this, educators can consider extending the duration of the activity or breaking it down into multiple sessions to allow for thorough exploration and development.

• Depending on the availability of resources and access to diverse user groups, students may face challenges conducting first-hand research. It might be difficult for them to interact directly with the intended users or obtain comprehensive data. One potential improvement is providing students with a range of pre-existing research materials, case studies, and interviews conducted by professionals or researchers to supplement their research.

• Students may unintentionally fall into the trap of stereotyping or making generalizations about specific user groups while creating personas. This can lead to oversimplification and overlooking individual variations within the group. Educators can address this challenge by encouraging students to focus on individual needs and preferences rather than relying solely on broad generalizations, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the diversity within user groups.

• Students might struggle with effectively integrating personas into their design process. They may find it challenging to translate the personas' requirements and preferences into tangible design solutions. To address this, educators can provide clear guidelines, examples, and practical exercises that help students bridge the gap between persona development and design implementation.

• Students may encounter ethical considerations when designing for diverse user groups. They need to ensure they approach the personas and design solutions with sensitivity and respect. Educators can address this by incorporating discussions on ethics and social responsibility throughout the activity, highlighting the importance of considering the broader societal impact of architectural decisions.

Output & Evaluation

• When evaluating the outcomes of a teaching activity, it is important to consider both the process and the student outputs. When used in the past as a parallel workshop to design studio, it has been assessed as part of the overall design project, not as an individual grade. However, some key themes to consider in the evaluation are:
• Students develop a deeper understanding of the users' perspectives and needs by engaging with personas. This can lead to more empathetic design solutions that prioritize user experience. Evaluating student outputs and processes would involve assessing how well they incorporated the personas' requirements and preferences into their designs, demonstrating their ability to prioritize users' needs.

• Creating personas requires students to conduct research and analyze data. Evaluating student outputs and processes would involve examining the quality and depth of their research, as well as the accuracy and relevance of the information gathered. Additionally, assessing their ability to critically analyze the data and draw meaningful insights for design decision-making.

• Group activities involving personas foster collaboration and teamwork. Evaluating student outputs would involve assessing their ability to work effectively in teams, including their communication, negotiation, and consensus-building skills. The outputs and process should demonstrate a cohesive integration of multiple personas and perspectives into the design solution.

• In evaluating the outcomes of the teaching activity, it is important to consider the alignment of the student outputs with the intended learning objectives. Assessments should focus not only on the final design solutions and summative evaluation but also on the process and formative evaluation.

Learning Outcomes

Some learning outcomes of the workshop include encouraging students to think critically about the implications of their design choices. They consider how different user characteristics and requirements can influence spatial configurations, material choices, and functionality, fostering a more thoughtful and intentional design process.

• Through group work and presentations, students learn to collaborate effectively, exchange ideas, and communicate their design concepts and rationales to peers and educators. This improves their ability to articulate design decisions and receive constructive feedback.

• By developing a user-centred design approach that prioritizes the needs and experiences of the intended users, students recognize the importance of designing for inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability, resulting in architectural solutions that better serve the community.

• From the workshop, students are encouraged to consider their designs' broader context and implications. They learn to analyse the social, cultural, and environmental factors shaping user experiences and integrate these into their design solutions.

• The workshop involves reflection sessions where students discuss and evaluate their design choices through peer-to-peer feedback and learning from both successes and failures. This fosters a culture of continuous iterations, improvement and self-reflection, empowering students to refine their design process and make more informed decisions in the future.
Recommendations
To improve a teaching activity on personas, the following potential improvements can be considered:

- Ensure that the activity aligns closely with the intended learning outcomes of the design studio project. Clearly articulate how the activity contributes to developing specific skills or knowledge related to user-centred design and empathetic architecture. It is crucial to connect the persona activity with actual design projects explicitly. Instead of treating it as a standalone exercise, incorporate personas into larger design assignments, allowing students to apply their persona's insights directly to their designs. This integration reinforces personas' relevance and practical application in the design process.

- Encourage students to use first-hand research methods to gather insights about the personas, such as conducting interviews, surveys, and site visits. Provide guidance and resources to help students conduct adequate research and ensure ethical considerations are addressed. This would require the learning activity to continue longer to allow time to research, contact and conduct research.

- It is also important to strive for a diverse range of personas representing various demographic backgrounds, abilities, and cultural contexts – this may require assigning different ranges of different personas to avoid overlap. Additionally, integrating multiple iterations of the persona development process within the activity can help to avoid this, as their initial user group may change. This also allows students to refine their personas based on feedback and new discoveries, promoting a deeper understanding of user needs and enhancing the quality of their design solutions.

- Encourage collaboration and peer-to-peer feedback throughout the activity. Provide opportunities for students to share their personas, insights, and design ideas with their peers, facilitating constructive discussions and promoting a supportive learning community. However, if students are not opening up naturally, it may require forcing some peer interaction and collaboration through teacher-prompted discussions.

- Lastly, supplementing the activity with real-world case studies can add depth to the workshop and demonstrate the successful application of personas in architectural design projects. This could also be strengthened by inviting guest experts or practitioners who have experience using personas in architectural design to share their insights and experiences with students. This provides a valuable perspective from professionals working in the field and exposes students to real-world applications of persona-driven design.