

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 93

RESHAPING LIVES: THE IMPORTANCE OF RADICAL PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Victor Udoewa**

MARCH 15, 2023

Shawn (00:01):

Welcome to the eighth season of the Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO and founder of MOFI. As a maverick-minded human-obsessed experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you the listener, with cutting-edge leaders who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter, and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Victor Udoewa is Chief Technology Officer, chief Experience Officer and service design lead of the NASA Small Business Innovation Research and small business Technology Transfer research programs. That's SBIR/STTR for short. Before joining NASA, he was director of strategy at 18 f a civic consultancy for an inside the federal government. He also worked as a global education instructional designer and training development specialist at Google, where he created learning experiences for people in low to middle income countries around the world. And if all that weren't enough, he occasionally teaches math and education. Teachers conducts medical and engineering research and serves as a certified health crisis and trauma counselor. Well, welcome to The Combustion Chronicles Victor.

Victor (01:46):

Thanks for having me, Shawn. It's good to be here.

Shawn (01:48):

What an impressive bio and I hope we can dive into bits and pieces of it all today, uh, in this short episode. But obviously Victor, you do a really awesome job at keeping a lot of plates spinning, like when you read of all those things that you're doing. And as I would say, your bio sort of makes my head spin cuz I'm like, how in the heck does he even do all this? And I think I'm busy. When you're at a dinner party and you're standing around having a drink, does someone asks you what you do, what do you tell them?

Victor (02:24):

You know, I usually say that I'm a former rocket scientist who's now redirected his science towards helping people live better lives here on Earth.

Shawn (02:32):

Okay, say more about that. We gotta dig into that

Victor (02:36):

Well, it, it means that I studied aerospace engineering, right? And I worked on designing and improving the design and operation of vehicles and planes and air shuttles and things like that. So I got to a point where there were some projects that I worked on where literally I realized that had I not done the project, it would not have mattered. So I said, you know what? I want to kind of direct my work towards things that matter, and if I don't do them, there's a negative impact. And so I began to direct my work and design work and development work towards, uh, community development, uh, national development and national

Shawn (03:16):

Development. You kind of sound like, um, uh, what I love about it is, there's a good analogy there in corporate America where there's a lot of projects that people work on that it really doesn't matter if they work on them, right? Like so, and I know my career, that's why I left corporate America. Sometimes I was working on projects and I'm like, does this really matter? And if you read my bio on LinkedIn, the very first thing it says is humanizing the world one person at a time. So that's where we connected Victor with on LinkedIn. We have this same passion to help people live better lives. And at Mofi, our design boutique firm, we talk a lot about this concept of the experience ecosystem, and so that everyone can have a good experience. My background from Disney gave that mindset to me and something you focus on at NASA is improving, which really cracks me up. I have to just say this, improving government products and services for citizens, immigrants and refugees. Not that it cracks me up that you're doing it for them, but we know how slow the government can move to make some of these things happen. How can organizations better meet the needs of those last two groups in particular, immigrants and refugees?

Victor (04:38):

Yeah, I think it starts first by just realizing that the public experience is broader than the citizen experience. We have people here who are not citizens who live in the

United States. So if we're going to be providing services from the government, we have to think of those people as well. People who are refugees who haven't gotten citizenship yet. People who are immigrants may have residency of some sort or even permanent residency but aren't citizens. So it's making sure that we broaden it out to all the people that the government actually serves, which includes them. But second, I'm not a big proponent or a fan of what people call universal design. I don't know if it's possible to create or build a design of some product or service that is universally useful to everyone. I actually think you have to target. So if I'm gonna try to better meet the needs of immigrants or refugees, I need to specifically target or call it out.

It actually reminds me a little bit of that, um, conversation or the debate or controversy between Black Lives Matter and all lives matter. And one of the things that I've learned in my life is that in order to create and design a particular solution, you actually have to be able to name the particular problem. So instead of trying to create one thing that works for everyone, we say, you know what? If we're gonna get to a place where all the people's needs are being met, we have to start by focusing on one of those groups. And we, and we do that. So you can think of it as more inclusive design. Let me target this group, work on that, and then I may begin to work on the next group, et cetera, et cetera. So the first thing is just the target and who better to help us understand the needs of immigrants and refugees than immigrants and refugees. Secondly, immigrants and refugees have been through some experiences. They have experienced trauma. So we need to make sure that we are using the best trauma responsive design and research practices that we know as we begin to move amongst those groups and work alongside them.

Shawn (06:26):

Inclusive design. I think that's the first time I've ever heard that term inclusive design. And what I love so much about what you talked about is you are preaching. And sorry, that's my church background coming out of me. Cause you were preaching.

Victor (06:42):

I have it too.

Shawn (06:43):

You are preaching right now, brother. And I got my hanky going because listen, we have tried for so long and our mindset at is make sure you're solving for the right problem. And so we are deeply rooted in human-centered design and that starts with empathy. And everything you're talking about to me, Victor, around this, these special groups is we gotta learn to empathize, not sympathize, empathize, walk in their shoes, understand what those refugees have gone through, understand what immigrants have gone through to truly be able to design for them or inclusively design for them. And that's a powerful statement because I'm not sure that many people as well on LinkedIn. Uh, it says that I'm a neurodiverse advocate, so I'm neurodiverse. I have a son, daughter, my wife is Neurodiverse. We're a whole neurodiverse family in particular. Then my son has autism on top of that and epilepsy and childhood AP apraxia. And I've been on this whole kick around how do designers start thinking about how do you design for the neurodiverse. And I think that's the same concept that you're talking about for immigrants and for refugees. It's the same for all kinds of groups. And that's where my passion is. And that's, I I just wrote inclusive design and like circled it. I'm like, that's what we're talking about. And that's what's so important to me. So yeah. Thank you.

Victor (08:20):

Yeah. You know, I should say that, you know, some people try to do it, uh, by, they have a design, but they're gonna target a particular group and try to improve the design or make sure the design addresses their needs, and then they go on to the next group and go to the next group. Some people try to actually just create, I'm just gonna create a different design for different groups. You know, that's another way to do it. But however you do it, and there are many other ways it highlights the difference of my, in my experience between working in the private sector and the public sector. And nonprofit can go either way. But when I was in the private sector, there are many times I was on a, where we would do our research and we, we would be able to say, these are the different, um, qualities, right?

I'm doing qualitative research. These are different categories of people whose needs we're trying to meet. And you might group them in, you know, into personas or characters or behavioral archetypes, whatever you use. And you know, in the private

sector we would say, you know what, I'm not, let's not worry about persona A or B or persona F or G I just wanna focus on persona, C, D, E, and we can make enough money doing that. But in the public sector, and let me use the US Postal Service as an example, we don't have the ability to say, you know, that persona, when I mix qualitative with quantitative research, that persona that only represents 5% of the actual population. I've, I've quantified how many people fit into that persona. You are still mandated as a US process service to deliver the mail to everyone who has an address. You cannot say, you know what, I'm not gonna worry about that person. I'm not gonna worry about that person. And that's how it is with many of our government services, whoever they're supposed to target, we have to get to everyone. We can't just say, we're not going to serve this person or that person. And so it's definitely, and even more so important to learn how to do that in the public sector because we have a public mission, a social mission.

Shawn (10:10):

So let me just ask you this question. What's the secret sauce for making those experience better?

Victor (10:17):

I don't know that I have a secret sauce, but then again, when I hear you say that the immediate thing my mind jumps to is participatory design, and specifically for me, radical participatory design. So I think that what we do as designers is useful and helpful, but it really only access as one type of knowledge, right? We're pulling from what we call mainstream institutional knowledge. The knowledge we get from a bootcamp or from the university or education or design books, great, but there are so many other types of knowledges. There's lived experiential knowledge, there's aesthetic knowledge, intuitive knowledge, embodied knowledge, relational knowledge, energetic knowledge, et cetera. And part of what I think we're trying to do when we do radical pier design is to say, wait a minute. If we can be experts in this type of mainstream institutional design knowledge, then other people can be experts in other types of knowledge.

And these communities whom we're trying to serve, they're experts in lived experiential knowledge. And I would say in my experience, that that knowledge is even more

important than the design knowledge. So I try to practice radical disciplinary design where I'm not just involving people through research. I'm not just interviewing people, you know, they're research participants, therefore it is participatory design. And I'm not just inviting them into a session. And then we have some sessions with just the designers or developers or design strategists, and we have some sessions where we invite the people. But really when I say radically design, the participation is complete. It's top to bottom, beginning to end from A to Z. There is no time where the design team is making phone calls, having meetings, brainstorming separate from the community members because the community members are full fledged members of the design team. So I actually have people for whom we're designing who are on the design team, usually a representative, a qualitatively representative sample, helping to lead the process and bring that live experiential knowledge onto it and guiding it. So to me, that's the most important sauce I could ever have, uh, in this process because they really, really, um, fuel the work and make it better.

Shawn (12:23):

Now I want our listeners to be clear, Victor and I have never met in person. We've met over LinkedIn. We've never had a conversation prior to this podcast. In 2020 when the pandemic hit Victor, two colleagues of mine and I wrote a book called Kiss Your Dragons. And the tagline or the subtitle for the book is Radical relationships, bold Heart Sets, and Changing the World. And when we define radical relationships, there's two things I wanna read to you, and I want your to throw even more with this radical participatory design. We say the starting place is all about relationships, radical relationships to be more specific. When you're fortunate enough to have radical relationships, you can embrace any fear or challenge with wisdom, insight, humor, and greater awareness of yourself and those around you. Like all healthy relationships, radical relationships are grounded in love and respect, but that's just the beginning. So we then go on to define it, and I wanna read this to you, radical relationships are about depth and authenticity, boldness and heart. More importantly, they're about being willing to be in relationships with people and systems that are very different from where you are. And embracing the mess that comes with it.

Victor (14:03):

Yes, yes. Amen. Now, now you're taking me to church. Yeah, my handkerchief. I'm taking notes over here. Like, this is good. Yeah. Like, you know, it's one of the reasons I don't worry too much about empathy. I know we talk a lot about empathy in this community, the experience community, the design community. But I avoid having to work on finding, getting, securing, keeping empathy in me as a designer by just naturally embedding it through the lived experience of people through the bodies of the community members who are on the team. And I see it all the time. We go through a process and the team, the team members that are community members will check that, wait a minute, no, no, no, no, we can't do that. Uh, that's gonna trigger people. Wait a minute, that doesn't work at all for this. You know, my brother and my, like, it's, it's just there.

And I've been on so many teams that were not participatory, participatory design teams, radical participatory design teams where it could be as short as a day, as long as, you know, six months later, whatever it was that we created, whether they were personas or whatever, design research artifacts, they, it just didn't carry, there wasn't what you might call empathic endurance. It didn't, whatever empathy we generated from the research just didn't stay with us as we went forward, even with super senior people. So this is really about embedding it. And one of my projects, one of the things I'm working on right now is, uh, relational design. I'm thinking about the radical relationality that you're talking about from your book. I asked this question sometimes to a few people, uh, when, when I've done some sessions, I'll say, Hey, if I took away all your money, all your possessions, your job, you didn't have any of that, how long would it take you to get, uh, food to eat?

Now, most of the people, these are people, these are middle class, maybe up in middle-class people, they'll say, you know, uh, a few hours, how long would it take you to find a place to sleep? I could find a place to sleep by that, by that night, by the same day, how long would it take you to find another job? At most, I'll say a few months. I say, well, why is that? What is it that allows you to find that within those time periods? I'll say, oh, well I know this person, I know that person. Oh, I have family, I have friends. I, you know, and so I, I've learned to redefine in economic terms poverty. Poverty isn't the absence of money, it's the absence of relationships through which money flows, right? Hmm. But money isn't the only resource that flows through relationships.

Another resource that flows through relationships, if we wanna bring it back to design and experience is knowledge. So then ignorance, you could say the same thing. Ignorance isn't necessarily the absence of knowledge. Ignorance is the absence of relationships. And one of the reasons we, as in our organizations have to do all this work to pull out all this information that we need in order to design things correctly or best for people is because we don't know this stuff. Because we're not in radical relationship. We're not in purposeful, meaningful relationship with them. And so we go through these extractive transactional means to get what we need in order to create what we want, in order to make the money that we need. When, if we were in a relationship that knowledge would be flowing all the time anyway. This is a social design project. We're trying to design a racially just parent-teacher organization or parent-teacher association.

And if you're listening right now and you don't know some of the dynamic dynamics that happen in PTAs or PTOs in the United States, what happens sometimes is that there are some voices in certain schools in the United States that are louder than other voices are stronger than other, other voices and their needs or what they believe is their needs or what they believe is their kids' needs, um, get heard more in our addressed than the needs of other people. And there's there, and it's, and there are racial components, uh, to this as well, economic component, class components, but definitely racial components. And so we're trying to work on how to be a racially just, uh, p t a where it's not just white parents or white mothers, uh, who get heard most. And we're, we're at the school and I'm that I'm a parent. the school that my kids go to is a dual immersion school.

So it's, they're top 50% of the time in English, 50% of the time in Spanish. So we're also thinking about, uh, linguistically like native Spanish speakers versus native English speakers. And we don't want to all the native English speakers to get their needs met. And so we are doing a practice, which I call relational design. We enter into these groups of 10 to 12 and we do what we call dialogue. It's called sustained dialogue, where you say, no matter what happens, no matter what I say to you, no matter how you offend me, we agree to meet every week together for this time and just get to know each other. And as we build these relationships, guess what happens? Knowledge passes through and I learn, oh my gosh, stuff about you and your background that I

didn't understand and things that I'm doing that are hurting you and offending you and things that you were, and all of this is helping us to learn how to better without necessarily doing interviews and observations or whatever else you might do. So we're doing this type of relational design in it and design comes out of the relationships that we're building. It's really, it's really a beautiful process. But then you just reminded me about that with your book.

Shawn (18:54):

Well, and what I didn't tell you, and then we'll move on from this cause I think we could be on this for hours the book quotes me and saying, this is the core of who I am as a person. Victor, that to have radical relationships, you have to have honesty, integrity, trust and loyalty and everything you're talking about, there is all have to be rooted in that because to have those hard conversations, you have to have that. And then we can really move the needle. So we have this whole concept that we talk about at MOFI called about being maverick-minded and human-obsessed. I have no doubt that you're maverick-minded because everything you've been talking about is challenging the status quo and talking about blowing shit up and talking about pushing the norms, right? So perfect maverick minded and everything, human obsessed. So when you're teaching or counseling someone, you have to be human-obsessed. And that's come clear through your conversation today. How do you translate that to larger groups then, or to audiences that are only connected through technology?

Victor (20:10):

Yeah, it's a great question. You know, I experienced this a lot in, in government because when you think of the audience of the entire United States, right, or an entire department or ministry or office, et cetera. And one interesting thing is that we live in a country or an area or region that aspires to certain democratic ideals, right? But what's strange is that we have a government of the people, by the people, for the people, and we have people, and for some reasons the needs of the people are not the needs of the government, of the people. And that's a problem because if it is a government of the people, then the needs of the people should be the needs of the government, of the people. And you know what I learned in the private sectors? Look, my job as a designer, as an experience strategist is to work at the intersection of the business needs and the

user needs or the business businesses and the human needs. But that's not my job anymore. And not, that's not how I think about it specifically. And especially in the public sector. When I'm working in education or even in counseling, what I'm trying to do is better align those. If this is a government of the people and these are the people, well, the needs of the people should be the needs of the government, of the people, the needs of the people should be the needs of the government by the people. The needs of the people should be the needs of the government for the people. And my job is to align those because as institutions become bigger and bigger and bigger, getting to your question, they take on their own. I identify their own, they become their own entity with their own kind of needs and system dynamics, et cetera. And so my job is to kind of bring those into alignment.

But simple things that I might do when I'm working with audiences or, or groups or working through technologies is a lot of pre-work. First of all, I send a lot of, in any kind of teaching session, I often send pre-work homework ahead of time for people to begin to, even if they don't do the work, just to begin to prime their thinking, to begin the thinking about what we're gonna, um, engage in. And hopefully that, uh, makes them more ready to contribute and participate. But I'll also ask like, hey, if you feel comfortable sharing, what are the different needs you might have? Accessibility needs, I wanna make sure that this, uh, educational experience, this conversation is one that, uh, works for you and where you're able to be your true self. Sometimes I'll send a survey, which I'll just have, I'm trying to think one or two questions, but one of the questions is, look on a scale of one to five, and let's say five is I'm completely comfortable and, and a one is I'm completely uncomfortable, how comfortable do you feel being honest?

And if people are at five and four, we do the session. If anyone is at a three or below, we don't do the session because we're not ready to have the honest space that we need. We need, we have more work that we need to do in order to truly have a space where we can learn from each other. Because if you think you're gonna come into an educational space and it's just about you learning from me or me learning from you, that's a problem. We need mutual multi-directional learning for this to truly work, right? I should be learning alongside you because you have experiences, you have knowledge that can help me. Even if I am build as the teacher or educator, I'm learning from you.

You help me even teach it better to other people in the future. You teach me from your experience.

And so I want that honesty to be there. And if we need to do pre-work to get there, then let's do it. And let's delay the session until we can get there. So I do, I do a lot of work in terms of that. I often think about connection as being based on a few different things, experiences, people can connect on, experiences, people can, uh, connect based on values, people can connect on goals. EVG is what I often think of, but also people can even connect on future visions of where they wanna be and what they want to see the world to, be like. And so I kind of use those to help us stay grounded and connected and to guide us as we move, move forward. I don't know if I answered your question, but some of the things that came to mind, listen,

Shawn (24:02):

You have not only preached the sermon, you've taken the offering, you've given the altar call you have done it all. We have had a full church service in 25 minutes here, brother. So

Victor (24:15):

That's what I, that's what I hate to do. Maybe we're gonna have another service right after

Shawn (24:20):

That's right. That's right. We're gonna go have lunch and then come back and have another service. I think it's safe to say that you are really creating some amazing experiences even at NASA and that it's not rocket scientists, but it's, especially with people like you around really starting to address that need of government and what the people's needs are. And I'm so appreciative of that. So two last questions. What's your advice for people who want to do what you do today?

Victor (24:51):

That's a tough one. I often try to tell people that I didn't plan what I'm doing. So my advice actually would be different depending on which person I'm talking to, cuz different people have different needs. So let me first preface that. Let me give one

specific advice. If for instance, you are a person who is earlier in their career and you're trying to see, well, how did you get to that particular point? did you plan all that? And my answer is no, I didn't plan all that. The main thing that I tried to do or learn to do, let me say, is to be aware and open and awake to all the different possibilities. So when you are aware of the possibilities, you might look at all the options before you and you might just take one decision. Let's say I'm gonna go with option D and option D is a slight tweak or a slight pivot from the direction that you were going before.

But then now when I've moved into this option or this project or this job or this, whatever it is, this community initiative, it opens up a whole new set of options. And then I might take option E and it takes me in a slightly different direction. And then all of a sudden as this happens over and over again, you realize, whoa, I've gone on this path that I never would've made the connection from today to 10 years from now in one step. But because I was open to the possibilities and aware, I was able to kind of move step by step by step, and it created this new arc and brought me into this new space. So one of the things I always try to say is to be open and aware to the possibilities. And part of that in involves making your intentions known, right?

To give you an example, I tell my friends, Hey, I am working on a book proposal. I tell my friends, Hey, I'm doing this thing radical <inaudible> design. I'm really trying to, I hope increase awareness of it and I hope more people will, uh, increase adoption. Well, guess what happened because I said that, right? And especially I was talking about in the government increased adoption in the government of radical OI design because I said that even though I didn't see something, my friend saw this, um, opportunity, it's called racial equity and technology policy, et cetera, accelerator. My friend saw that, knew my intention and said, Hey, let me pass this on to Victor. He said, Hey Victor, I don't know if this would be interesting, interesting to you, but check this out. I looked at it and I had been doing much more work on the implementation level, like doing projects that use radical historic design.

And I saw this and I said, huh, I hadn't worked on the policy level before. Well, he sent it to me. This is interesting, let me send in a proposal. So I sent in a submission, they accepted me into this cohort, and now I'm in this nine week accelerator program at the end of which I will have a ready-made policy memo for the federal government that this program is gonna help me shop around to places in the White House like Office of

Management Management and budget, et cetera, to get them to create a policy that will help the federal government begin to implement this across agencies. That would not have happened. I wouldn't have had the opportunity if I didn't make that announcement known, let my friends know about it. And it multiplies the eyes and the ears that are open and in tune for that because it's one of those things, it's like when you know how you learn a new word, then all of a sudden you start seeing that new word everywhere you went. Well wait a minute, people just start using that new word. No, it's because you were more aware of it because more aware of it. You had an intention. Yeah. So when you, you say, look, this is what I'm want. This is what I want to do, this is what I care about, this is where I'm going. You become more aware, your eyes are open, but also when you make that intention known to your friends, they that multiplies the eyes and ears and those opportunities start to come to you.

Shawn (28:16):

Well, amazing. And we could go on for hours here, but this comes to that point in this episode where we do these things called the combustion questions, Victor, which are three randomly selected questions, um, that I am just now seeing for the first time. So are you ready for your combustion questions?

Victor (28:35):

I think so. Let's let's give it a go.

Shawn (28:38):

All right. Combustion question number one, what's your favorite crayon color

Victor (28:43):

Purple.

Shawn (28:44):

Why?

Victor (28:45):

Something really beautiful about it. I, my favorite color is yellow and the color that matches best with yellow from a complimentary perspective, you, you take the other two

primary colors, uh, blue and red and you combine them, it's purple. So I like that purple yellow combination. It also has a history of being associated with kings and royalty, et cetera. But there's something just really deeply, it has a bit of the purpose in it, but it also deals, it's real. It has a bit of the tragedy, the nostalgia. It can convey both of those, like, uh, a vision for the future, but also I'm dealing with the reality of life. So I like, I like that combination of purpose.

Shawn (29:19):

Love it, love that. All right, question number two. Okay. If money were no object, would you rather have a private yacht, a private jet or a private bus?

Victor (29:32):

Huh. I think I would say yachts. And I think I would say that because of the climate because jets contribute a lot to greenhouse gases and the bus buses as well. But you know what, if you gave me a solar powered or like a, a biodiesel bus or a solar powered jet, I might give a different answer. But based on, uh, things as they are, I would say yacht and I might turn it into a boathouse and invite people who are experiencing homelessness to come in and live and say, for as long as they need,

Shawn (30:03):

Of course. Love it. All right, number three. What do you think about snail mail?

Victor (30:10):

The snail mail meaning the kind that you write by hand and you put in the mailbox. Okay, big advocate of that. Even when email hit, I was still doing that. There's something to be said about taking your time and going slow, right? You know how everyone thought, oh, these, all these different innovations, whether it's the computer or the typewriter or, or even email, we'll have so much more time now to be home with our families because we'll get our work done faster. Well, what did we do? We just ended up doing more work, right? So I actually love Snail Mail because it increases the time between responses and it builds up more of an expectation of, okay, I can't wait to see

what this person says instead of getting the immediate email back and forth. I like taking my time with that and I have extra appreciation and, and gratitude when someone has taken the time to sit down and hand-write a message. I kind of love that. So I like snow.

Shawn (31:00):

Love it. Well, again, so many great points of wisdom and nuggets that you gave us today. And so thank you for that until we meet in person, which I hope is very soon, Victor. Um, likewise. Please stay safe and be well my friend.

Victor (31:15):

You too. Take care. And thank you for having me. It's been good.

Shawn (31:19):

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate, and review. Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big thinking Mavericks, so let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn. If you want to discover more about human-obsessed, maverick-minded experience Ecosystems™, go to <http://mofi.co> where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution. Or go to experienceevangelists.com to learn more about my mission, to challenge leaders to blow up outdated, siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.