

DESIGNING SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT IN DESIGN COURSES/PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the way it is possible to work in design courses (both in product and communication design) the acquisition of competences in the areas of ethics, social commitment and responsibility. This includes developing interpersonal skills, research abilities, critical reasoning and critical action and it also requires the engagement with the community, the society in real time, addressing real problems and devising sustainable and enduring solutions.

The structure of the paper includes a theoretical framework dedicated to the areas involved in the social design learning/teaching process namely it presents social design as a transformation process both using user-centred design and participatory design methodologies. It stresses the role of partnership and interdisciplinary actions assuming process management and nourishment as key issues to the implementation of design solutions. The argument is based on 2 projects: a) a briefing launched in communication design studio regarding the importance of being paid by the work done as a way of contributing to the dignity of the design profession. The project had the participation of 8 other schools and all together they displayed the results in the 1st of May (worker's day) in different towns; b) a briefing addressing social design services launched in the course Service Design in which students had to work with real problems from real communities and making use of a specific set of methods.

Finally in the conclusions acknowledge results obtained in both courses thus being proposed ways of working the social issues – from awareness to a committed reflection and practice – in design education.

Keywords: Social involvement, design services, design education.

1 INTRODUCTION

As proposed by Fuad-Luke [1] “Design contributes to the evolution of individual human capital and defines our collectively held social capital¹. Design is the medium through which these capitals are transformed into materialized and symbolic languages. For the past 250 years design has endorsed the notion of economic progress by making the newly materialized forms ‘culturally acceptable’, in symbolic, aesthetic and functional terms.” (p.xix)

To prepare students to be socially engaged and to have an ethical intervention as future practitioners implicates to make them aware of their dimension of “citizen designers”, involved with collective and community issues/problems that they must critically scrutinize and try to solve bearing in mind the benefits to society. Matters of awareness, concern, pertinence, systemic and holistic implications and consequences of every design move, decision and action are outright fundamental in social design [2].

A design ethical approach to nowadays society's problems is a complex and knowledge demanding challenge since it involves the use of numerous skills coming from different scientific areas such as: sociology, pedagogy, psychology, politics etcetera. Additionally as in western societies prevails a more individualized modus operandi in the hands of the empowered single user, designing for the

¹ Social capital is concerned with connections between and within social networks that encourage civic engagement, engender trust, create mutual support, establish norms, contribute to communal health, cement shared interests, facilitate individual or collective action, and generate reciprocity between individuals and between individuals and a community. Social capital is represented by two important subsets – institutional capital and cultural capital – that have considerable influence on whether social capital is used to deliver positive growth or negative impacts on the whole or parts of societies. (Wikipedia)

“social creature” [3] is a relative renewed focus on the role and potential of products and services. It is also hard to be succeeded in this matter since one can see social involvement has the first step towards social design one that implies transformation and change. Thus we are talking about initiating a process that ultimately will result in self-transformation as a key issue to be able to proposed change to others.

2 SOCIAL DESIGN LEARNING/TEACHING PROCESS

The social design learning teaching process was taken as a threefold challenge: a) knowledge about social design constructs, aims, b) social design skills development; c) social design methods.

Regarding the context of intervention of social design and its aims it is fundamental to deliver to students a broad and meaningful overview of the vastness of actions occurring in the world under the social design umbrella.

Concerning social design territory and aims this is an area that in our view includes typologies of work, processes and aims under different names such as: Design for the Base/Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP), Humanitarian Design, Design as Development Aid, Socially Responsible Design or Socially Responsive Design, Design for Social Good, Design for Social Change, Design for Social Impact, Design for Social Innovation, Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability, Social Economic Environmental Design, Useful Design, Transformation Design, Design for Public Good, etcetera. As Veiga and Almendra stated “This abundance of expressions makes clear that there isn't a common language or unifying discourse among these practitioners (Drake & Drenttel 2011; Lasky, 2013) [4]. Thus it is important to unfold knowledge about this large band of interventions.

In terms of social design skills development one should be aware that social design is heavily dependent on human interaction and relies intensely in communication and interpersonal abilities.

Of great importance is the way students frame their beliefs/perceptions since this contributes to defining their purpose or goal-orientation and hence their intention achieved through specific actions to reach the goal.

Since Intention informs a series of iterative actions that continually allow interrogation of the purpose in order to reach the goal it is of crucial importance to incentivise this iterative process that connects intention to action to interrogation of purpose. Relevant is also to ‘measure’ the effectiveness of the intention and purpose against the change in system from an initial state to the altered state [1].

Finally in relation to social design methods the options are vast and one can present a pool of methods targeting different tasks at different stages of their design processes. This seems to be the more convenient way to proceed so students to not lose their focus on the problem they have to solve, instead they can dedicate more time and thought to it. The choice of what method to use in each moment is also a task to be performed in a collaborative manner and allows students to critically assess the problem since the choice of each method implies that students determine the goal to be achieved with that use and the way information to be gathered or generated or evaluated will contribute to the solution.

3 SOCIAL DESIGN IN ACTION – 2 PROJECTS

3.1 Whenever you accept to work for free you are hindering (damaging) others

Katherine McCoy [5] argues that in design schools and design education in general there is a construction of apathy and a-politicism linking that circumstance with the fact that “most introductory graphic design courses are based on abstract formal exercises inherited from the Bauhaus and the classic Basel school projects.” This pedagogical approach isolates students from the world at large and banish criticism in general especially the one related with topics perceived as distant from the design action which is the case of politics. This was an action proposed to 17 universities, involving the writing of reports on the part of the students, 300 posters, and 12 towns, impacting 17320 persons in social nets, having had 1TV report and 3 news in media. The motto that gave origin to this work (to create a campaign) had his origins in a story written by a newspaper journalist named” Lets write one hundred times: writing is work”, published in a Portuguese newspapers “Público” on 25 March.

3.1.1 Procedure

The first task to be accomplished was the gathering of a significant number of teachers and universities. Some key academic personalities were enlisted that would enthusiasm others to

participate. A Facebook closed group was created and teachers that would act as ambassadors in each university were invited to join this select and closed group. The number of teachers that wanted to participate was big but then the first problems arise: dispute between hierarchies in the same university in one hand, and the difficulty of private universities to join since some of them do support non-paid work.

Without imposing a programme, a model for a briefing was available to download, along with some texts, in order to help students to work in an informed way. Teachers were asked to instruct students to write a text about: 1. What's "work"; 2. what is the value of "work"; 3. when one should and should not do pro bono work before engaging in the visualization process. After a written reflection that resulted in a text arguing about the value of work, the work contracts (allowing a dynamic notion of contract in the cases the work is auto-started or pro bono), different modes of framing work and its respective values, students were required to design an A1 poster that integrated the proposed motto.

The goals of the work were: a) to ponder and argue – in the most extensive possible way – about social implications of non-compensated work; b) to reflect about the responsibility of those that act in a market society being invited to work without remuneration; c) the evaluation of the context of the proposed work; d) the prediction of resulting consequences.



Figure 1. (from left to right) - poster student Marisa Baixinho (Lisbon University); going to the street (students from University of Madeira); a poster in town (xxx from Lisbon University)

3.2 Designing social design services

3.2.1 Procedure

44 students (2 classes) in a total of nine groups. Near half of them worked (groups of 5/6 elements) in existing social projects (Type A); the others also in groups of 4/5 elements designed their own social design services (Type B).

Type A - The groups working on existing projects had a brief named *Citizen Designer*, developed by a PhD student supervised by one of the authors so the gathered information could be analyzed and contribute to her PhD Thesis. The Briefing had clear instructions on what to gather and what methods to be used; it was an activity inspired by research project EMUDE (funded by the European Commission in 2004-2006), that by putting students acting as researchers, doing fieldwork, direct and first hand observations of social design projects would make them able to build a critical view about their work and set personal definitions of the problems and issues at hand, crucial to possible subsequent resolutions [6] (Meroni, 2007). The method proposed in this activity was the probes that is known as “a method for developing a richly textured but fragmented understanding of a setting or situation. Developed in a design context, its purpose is not to capture what is so much as to inspire what might be. [...] Most fundamentally, it makes a virtue of uncertainty and risk, acknowledging and celebrating the idiosyncratic interpretations of designers and participants. It aims to open up possibilities, rather than converging towards singular truths, and can be understood as part of a conversation among designers and people and places for which they design” (p.185). Furthermore students had not only to analyze the existing projects but also to propose ways of improving it – either by creating new services, remodelling it etcetera.

Type B – The groups worked on the briefing developed by the teacher of the Service Design course. The briefing asked them to design a social service having as a methodology manual guide “The Social

Design Methods Menu” one proposed by Lucy Kimbell and Joe Julier [8] that includes 4 stages: Exploring; Making Sense; Proposing and Iterating. Thus the briefing was more open than the *Citizen Designer* one not only because students could create services in areas of their interest but also because they were free to choose the pool of methods they would work with.

For both groups it was mandatory to involve at least three types of stakeholders (being one the designers).

3.2.2 Goals

Among the goals of the work there was the one of not only recognizing the social design practices but to design within this field; the one of acquiring a field work practice using social design methods and finally developing competences of working within multidisciplinary teams in collaborative and cooperative ways.

Table 1. List of the Social Design Projects

	TITLE OF THE PROJECT	SCOPE	STAKEHOLDERS
A - EXISTING SOCIAL DESIGN PROJECTS (Citizen Designer Brief)	Grandma has come to work	Elderly integration	Designers; psychologists; old people; social assistants; commerce
	Solidarity Lockers	Homeless integration	Designers; Municipality; social assistants; psychologists;
	Dress for Success	Women self-esteem and autonomy	Designers; women; commerce
	Alzheimer – RM	Alzheimer patients Well Being	Alzheimer patients; designers; doctors and nurses
	Pick -It	Elderly integration	Designers; psychologists; old people; social assistants; commerce
B - PROPOSED SOCIAL DESIGN PROJECTS	SOS Erasmus	Erasmus social integration	Erasmus students; University students and staff; designers; Tourism
	CarSharing FA	Students life quality	Designers; University students; university offices
	In_Ajuda	Disabled student’s integration	Designers; Faculties of Lisbon university; students; university services (library; canteen;
	Honeycomb	Novice student’s integration	Novice students; senior students; teachers; School services

Table 1 presents a synthesis of the work produced by teams of both groups A and B. It identifies the title of the project, the main scope and also the type of main stakeholders involved. Summing up the areas of intervention were clearly distinct in the two groups. The existing projects that were chosen by 5 groups were mainly dedicated to elderly, social exclusion and social empowerment (see Figure 2); On the other hand in what concerns proposed social design projects the territory of action was the education one (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Type A Project - Solidarity Lockers an existing project for homeless people

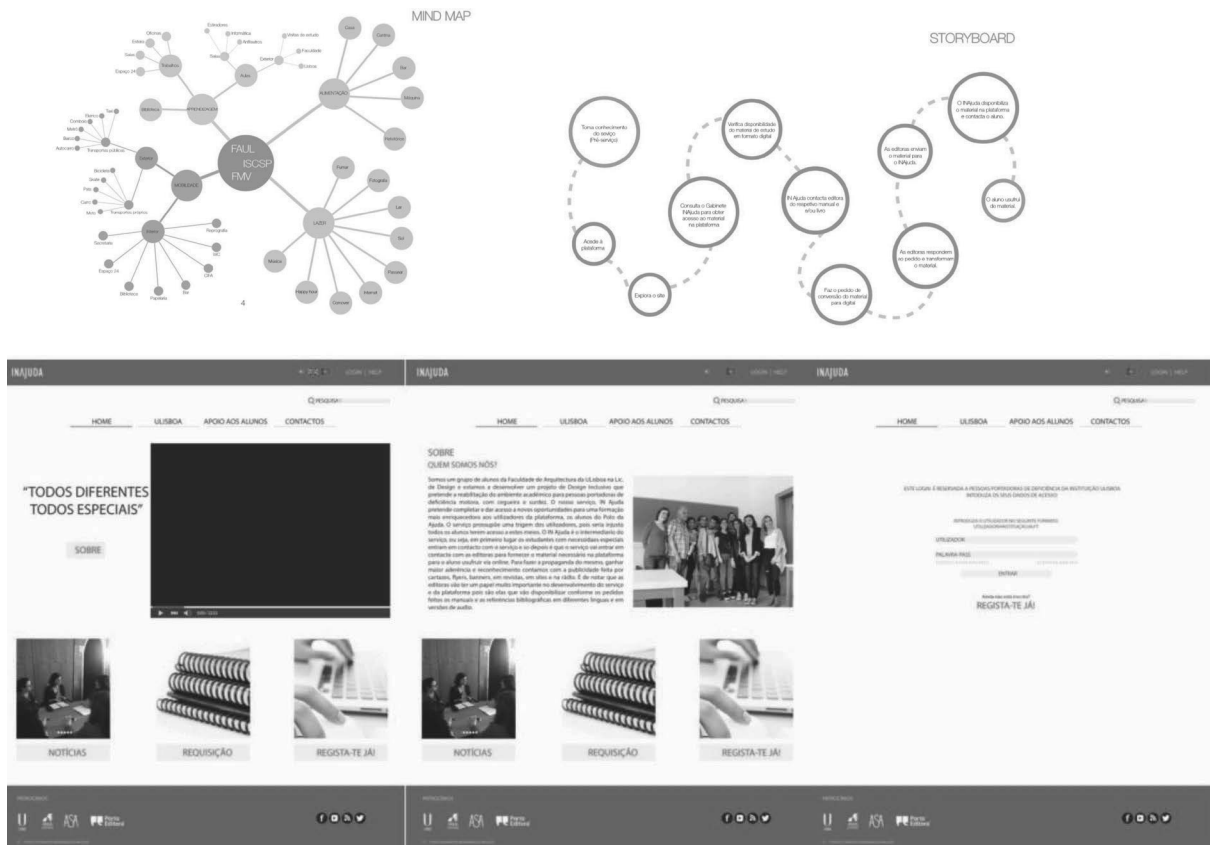


Figure 3. Type B Project- "InAjuda" project (disabled students integration) elements: mind map; storyboard and online platform layout

4 DISCUSSION

By and large the activities proposed to the teams both in service design projects and in the communication campaign projects opened a space for reflection on the relation between university and the communities. It has created an opportunity for the students to engage, rather independently, with concrete projects and problems outside academia. It also provided the chance to reflect in the class, about the implications (wider cultural awareness and political consciousness) of what they do and not do. That made possible the desired transition ‘from mindless to mindfulness’ [2] which means that students become aware of what social design is in terms of the collaborative and collective commitment. Additionally and also in both courses while observing the students behaviour during information gathering, people inquiry and discussing among them one clearly realize that their focus is on objects, technical and formal issues thus being very uncomfortable to them to deal with interaction and experience aspects, issues that are crucial both to service design and to communication campaigns.

In the case of Design Services project it was observable that it was easier for students to diagnose, characterize and contextualize than to propose new services to be implemented. Methods guide helps them to reveal the problem in very clear manner, to organize the tasks to be performed but it does not tell them how to use that knowledge to make it real. Moreover complexity of services gets heavier due to the nature of the projects – social environment issues have an emotional charge and impact that young students (21 year average) have a hard time dealing with it. Probably that was one of the reasons why most of the students had initial contacts with stakeholders but did not engaged in a continuous and energetic collaborative work until the proposed solution.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of working with existing projects or new created projects it was visible that having the freedom of identifying a problem and building a solution for it restrained the universe of themes to the ones related with education (the territory in which students feel more comfortable to intervene) while working with existing projects gave students the possibility of getting out of their comfort zone thus experiencing challenging reflections about design ethical and social dimensions. An example of such a transformation experience is the case of solidarity lockers, a social design project from Duarte Paiva (see Figure 1) that promoted a social change by design.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The Portuguese reality in terms of Design Education presents us a situation in which 2300 designers graduate per year in a market incapable of absorbing 10% of this figure. This situation favours the strategy on the part of some universities (especially the private ones) of advocating a high number of employment after the course. These employment numbers are obtained by stimulating students to work for free for a short internship period in companies that survive of free pitching as a *modus operandi*. This is one of the first elements that we should consider when looking to this issue: Designer courses are trendy and not that expensive in terms of technical equipment. Therefore they pop up everywhere offering ad hoc “design formation”. The first project created a high conscience about this ethical problem and made it in an enlarged scale which had positive impacts not only at the level of universities but also in terms of society (since the action of exposing posters in different towns was and still is highly commented by social media).

To work in social design is to work focused on processes instead of products and to do it in a humanized and transformative way, i.e. privileging social contact, interaction and collaboration to achieve structural change. Students reaching the 3rd and last year of college (average ages around 21 years old) are not aware that design work has always social, cultural, economic, political, environmental implications and consequences. Although some authors [5] defend that teaching the values of the social and the political have to be raised from the beginning and not in advanced students “after their activities have been fixed on neutrality” what we can conclude with these experiments with graduation students is that it is not only the neutrality that affects their performance it is also maturity especially at the emotional relational level that inhibits them to fully engage in collaborative ethical processes. Since the university is the place and time for questioning functional and politically the world (including social design aims and implementation) [9] it is fundamental to activate and to develop social thinking and commitment in design in design curricula. To do so and, aligned with the reflections of world experts that joined the “Social Impact Design Summit,” [10] we endorse a few actions that would improve students’ performance in this field such as: a) to broaden their knowledge base by taking courses related with public health, international development, sociology, anthropology, history, economics, politics and finance; b) To promote the involvement of students with social design firms and to incentivise them to volunteer with organizations to engage underserved communities so they will experience cultural immersion and international humanitarian aid. C) to develop a teaching/learning culture of “learn and listen in the field, before speaking and designing” which was found to be the most critical skill students can gain from working directly with communities.(pg.43) .

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