Flourishing in graphic design education: incorporating Ubuntu as a curricular strategy.

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Abstract: The role of the contemporary graphic designer has changed and in order to practice within this new paradigm, designers have to acquire skills grounded in other disciplines. To recognise social responsibility designers have to consider applying human-centred processes. According to the Aristotelian perspective human beings should achieve eudaimonia (flourishing) through a lifetime devoted to virtue and rationality. Therefore, a process such as human-centred design enables designers and end-users to be a foundation for flourishing through the co-development of purposeful design solutions. Additionally, the significance of Ubuntu within a South African design education environment is becoming increasingly important owing to the values of co-creation and empathy within the context of shared social interactions. This paper advocates for the incorporation of the principles of Ubuntu in the formulation of curricula as a means of integrating flourishing and an increased social responsibility in graphic design education.

Keywords: graphic design education, flourishing, eudaimonia, Ubuntu.

1. Introduction

It has been established in the literature that design and human concerns are inherently linked (Buchanan 2001, Frasca 2012, Krippendorff 2006). Design is associated with all societal, civic, cultural, ecological, technological and commercial domains inhabited by people. Fundamentally design is so ubiquitous that it impacts on the lives of all human beings regardless of their gender or culture, and according to Buchanan (1995, p.6) “there is no area of contemporary life where design ... is not a significant factor in shaping human experience”. Buchanan (2001, p.14) further argues that a greater mindfulness of the relationship between people and artefacts, and the way that artefacts facilitate human collaborations within their social environment, has steered a change in design towards human-centered problems rather than commercial aspirations. Sanders and Stappers (2013) stress the shift from a (traditional) focus on the outcomes of design to a (new) focus on the...
purpose of design (design as an agent of change). Design academic Joseph Giacomin (2012) is in agreement with this view by listing the three principal design paradigms prevalent in contemporary design dialogue as sustainable or ecological design, technologically-driven design and human-centred design. Thus, the strategies and methodologies applied to the design profession are continually changing and designers have become adept at addressing a variety of social, cultural and environmental challenges in contemporary practice. Thus the standard definition of design is shifting, and design education and industry must adjust accordingly to contribute to these innovative systems of practice.

2. Design for human concerns

Social engagement and truly human-centred products are more than occasional civic-minded outcomes or projects motivated solely by altruism and the need to produce ‘good’ work (Akama 1998). To succeed as design practitioners, designers must work within multi-dimensional domains and have the ability to engage within several disciplines in addition to the skill to use the tools and methods of a number of fields to interpret the needs of the client. Human-centred practices enable designers to experience the environments inhabited by the users and audiences of their outcomes in settings that frequently differ from their own. Dutch designer and academic Kees Dorst (2006, p.15) upholds the collective view of graphic designers as problem solvers and suggests a more inclusive engagement with the other stakeholders in the design process, as prescribed for human-centred practice. This more inclusive engagement rests not only in effective communication (understanding the needs and desires of users) but also in an empathic engagement with own as well as other cultures and an embracive attitude to outsider input.

Frascara (2002, p.39) introduces the concept that design has the power to improve people’s experiences and general wellbeing by acknowledging three distinct areas of design: “design that works to make life possible, design that works to make life easier, and design that works to make life better”. This perspective, that design has the power to create satisfaction and happiness is closely linked to the concept of eudaimonia, or ‘personal well-being’ which, for the purposes of this paper is near to the principles of human-centred design. It is acknowledged that design may express social priorities and may additionally be a carrier of cultural values (Howard in Akama 2008, p.13). Willis (in Akama 2008, p.13) states that these values are often imperceptible but are inescapably inscribed into the design process. Eudaimonia is inseparably linked to values and “[E]udaimonic pursuits are guided by beliefs of what it means to do something right or authentically” (Huta 2013, p.8). This paper argues that by applying human-centred design principles, framed in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, to a series of design Interventions undertaken at a South African University of Technology, design students were empowered to facilitate and negotiate collective values innate in a design project and thus contributed to human flourishing (eudaimonia).

The ancient notion of ‘flourishing’ is associated with the philosophy of eudaimonia and means “to live well and thrive” (Compton 2005, p.12). In African philosophy, the concept of Ubuntu or African humanism is associated with human wellbeing and flourishing through “moral norms and virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy and respect and concern for others” (Letseka 2000, p.179). A process such as human-centred design enables design solutions to be a source of happiness through the co-development of purposeful resolutions that are meaningful and appropriate to all stakeholders. In order to do this well, designers must be effective
communicators and use the power of rhetoric to not only understand the needs of their clients but to convey essential information necessary in the co-creation of artefacts. In a South African context, the understanding and embracing of Ubuntu philosophies may be a useful scaffold for designers who may at times inhabit society or environments that may be unfamiliar with the language and processes of design.

Pohlmeyer (2013, p.543) reminds us that design has various roles and, as such, can be a “direct source of happiness, both as a source of hedonic pleasure as well as manifestations of eudaimonia” that may be “achieved through psychological growth”. The human-centred Interventions that informed this paper aimed to ascertain how all participating graphic design-students and community members were affected by the design interventions that took place, as well as how cultural values effect and are negotiated through this human-centred design process.

3. Perceptions of graphic design education

Friedman (2003, p.4) describes the four challenges facing universities as: “creating new knowledge, preserving existing knowledge, training specialists and educating citizens”. To “meet the needs of the global marketplace” (2010) specialists in human-computer interaction Anthony Faiola, Richard Davis and Stephen Edwards recommend an incorporation of human-centric issues into the design curriculum. This paper considers human-centred design philosophies and processes within the discipline of graphic design.

Conventionally, graphic designers are disposed to using intuition and practice-based tacit knowledge in creating applicable visual communications with specific users in mind and, unlike in product design, frequently the amount of information regarding the users and audiences of the design outcome is limited. The consideration of user engagement with the products of design has significantly affected the manner in which design and design research is taught. Students must consider the values and concerns embodied in their design outcomes and are thus increasingly encouraged to reflect on aspects such as usability, simplicity and the impact that their design outcome has on society. Human-centred processes take into account collective and individual user engagement, a view supported by Junginger (2012, p.172) who maintains that human-centered design has a far-reaching accountability associated with individual engagement as well as with shared interactions, recognising the positive significance of certain artefacts to particular individuals whilst, at the same time, harming the environment or others.

In the second decade of the twenty first century, human-centred design is emerging as one of the dominant trends in design education and is progressively included as the philosophy that guides the formulation of pedagogic content at prominent design schools worldwide. To incorporate human-centred design practices into existing curricula a number of educators have integrated activities with a fundamental core of human-centredness in the approach to design education (Hanington 2005, p.1). For example, the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University in the Unites States of America may serve as a model for the successful integration of a human-centred research and design philosophy into its design programme. Introductory modules in human factors are introduced at the undergraduate level for all industrial and communication design students to provide a methodology for the collection and translation of human information into creative solutions. Additionally, the
perspectives offered in these modules are complemented by subject content in several other classes including design studies and practical studio components (Hanington, 2005). More in-depth engagement with human-centred practice is then incorporated at postgraduate level.

4. Design education in South Africa

Although design education in South Africa must appreciate international disciplinary developments, it should additionally answer prescribed national and institutional imperatives. In short, South African higher education needs to equip graduates to contribute to the country’s social and economic progress and Higher Education (HE) Institutions must undertake to fulfil the primary functions of teaching, research and community engagement (Rosochacki & Costandius 2012, p.166). Driving factors for consideration in this context include the general under-preparedness of first year students for Higher Education, issues of language and communication (South Africa has eleven official languages with English being the language of instruction at most institutions), the de-colonisation of existing curricula, the consideration of democratic citizenship and the call for the radical transformation of HE institutions. In South Africa graphic design is taught at a number of different types of HE institutions including ‘traditional’ Universities, Universities of Technology, private HE institutions and some Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) colleges. Theoretical engagement and the consideration of the social impact of design differs greatly from institution to institution with postgraduate engagement being the norm where applicable. While an awareness of the social impact of design holds great relevance for the design profession and should be an integral part of any future design education programmes, within the scope of professional practice the sole focus on social and human-centred design as an area of study is a luxury most future designers cannot afford. Currently, a depiction of what may be incorporated under the umbrella of human-centred design education, and a systematic and widespread academic dialogue of the educational approaches for human-centred design as a component of South African design curricula has not yet taken place.

To successfully include human-centered design in the South African classroom educators should consider foundations in Western theory but also de-colonised contexts that may be more familiar to South African students such as the philosophy of Ubuntu. Designers must be comfortable in facilitating dialogue and Ubuntu has the potential for diverse stakeholders to adopt a philosophy and embrace meaning regardless of cultural differences or language barriers making it a suitable reference point in human-centred projects, especially in an African context where the beliefs associated with Ubuntu are already embraced as part of everyday life. In a graphic design classroom setting, to answer to the challenges of human-centred design and consider Ubuntu philosophies, studio components must be allied with complex socially oriented issues, incorporate aspects of stakeholder participation and be complemented by a theoretical programme.

5. Exploring Ubuntu in context

Metz (2011, p.533) defines Ubuntu to literally mean ‘humanness’. The philosophy of Ubuntu, which promotes humanness, communalism, social order as well as the ethic of reciprocity, may be
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applicable to human-centred design, where the tenets of participation, co-operation and interdependence are common.

Ubuntu, defined as a way of understanding ethics is inherently human-centred when supported by the following definition: “an African value system that means humanness or being human, a worldview characterised by such values as caring, sharing, compassion, communalism, communocracy and related predispositions” (Khoza, 2005 in Mabovula 2011, p.40). This definition links to the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia by emphasising that wellbeing must always be considered in the context of society. Further, Ubuntu manifests itself through the understanding that one comes to see one’s welfare as being associated with the welfare of the community (Mabovula 2011, pg. 38). Tony Fry (2004) states that if designers would like to contribute to ethical practice they have a responsibility to consider community welfare, answer to civic obligations and therefore to act as human-centred practitioners. Letseka (2012, sp.) adds that “traditional African education provides ... fertile ground for democratic citizenship” and, appropriately for human-centred practice, Ubuntu has been shown to facilitate communication and co-operation in groups of diverse stakeholders.

Ubuntu philosophies were applied during a study undertaken at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) in South Africa, as part of the collaborations between graphic design students and community participants in the course of four human-centred, iterative, scaffolded Interventions. The Interventions were implemented to align VUT’s graphic design programme with international trends in sustainable and human-centred design, broaden students’ perspectives of the roles and functions of design and to better enable students to understand the social context and meet the needs of audiences for whom designs are intended. Additionally, the purpose of the Interventions was to determine the students’ perception of their own flourishing (eudaimonia) as manifested through the process. Overall twenty-eight Diploma and five Degree students, as well as a number of community members participated in the Interventions that took place in 2015 and 2016 respectively.

Intervention 1 established the students’ knowledge, skills and disposition towards concepts like human-centred design, empathy and Ubuntu. It was established that most students were aware of the concept of human-centred design, were favourably disposed towards the inclusion of human-centred processes as part of their design engagement and were familiar with the concept of Ubuntu. As part of Intervention 2 the participating students embraced the combination of working with the known (Ubuntu) and the new (human-centred design) in an unfamiliar setting (nearby community). Intervention 2 employed human-centred approaches to a number of student-selected community projects with a commercial outcome. Intervention 3 required the students to work in a familiar setting (the VUT library) and develop design solutions from the point of view of both users/audience and student-designers. The final Intervention developed empathic solutions for a local Community Centre that caters to mentally challenged patients. Throughout the researcher/facilitator made certain that concepts such as “peace and harmony...respect for others, tolerance, compassion and obedience toward adults, parents, seniors...” (Nel, Valchev, Rothmann, van de Vijver, Meiring & de Bruin 2012, p.920) were adhered to during all knowledge building activities.

During Intervention 2, for example, which took place within an urban environment and engaged participants from various cultural backgrounds, it was imperative to consider the philosophies of
Ubuntu as these not only supported the social interaction among the various participants but also allowed the participating students and community members to know/understand his or her place in relation to other people in the process of co-creation. In the context of the student’s learning experience the second Intervention specifically followed an unfamiliar approach by engaging with ‘real’ problems in a nearby community and gave the students an opportunity for a unique and re-contextualised, shared experience by working closely with community participants in a new setting. Interventions 2, 3 and 4 utilised the three recommended IDEO human-centred design toolkit phases (Hear/Create/Deliver) at different stages of the Intervention process. Intervention 2 involved the students working collaboratively in groups of two or three, liaising with their chosen community participant (in the role of client - Hear) and finally developing (Create) a potential commercial outcome for the client which developed out of a human-centred, participatory process (Deliver). Here the students approached a wide variety of community members and engaged in diverse projects that ranged from developing identities for various small businesses in the area to contributing to the development of innovative packaging and transportation systems for local informal traders. Additionally, although it was not one of the objectives of the project, the student’s outcomes contributed to the development of new knowledge and a working understanding of the role of Ubuntu in the context of human-centred design projects.

Upon reflection on this Intervention, most participating students emphasised the positive community engagement created by the participant interaction. However, it soon became evident that the documentation and self-reflection aspect of the project varied vastly in terms of engagement from participant to participant. The expectation of the students was that the self-reporting aspect of the intervention would assist in providing rich visual data from the participating community members. This was often not the case as the community members would cite a lack of ability or knowledge when asked to contribute to visual representations. To help solve this problem, improve communication but still benefit from the community members’ expertise, students relied on self-generated moodboards as supplementary visual aids during meetings with community members rather than on visual representations generated by the community members themselves. This Intervention exposed the students to a real-life situation where it was necessary to apply the accumulated knowledge that they had acquired regarding graphic and human-centred design, interview techniques, community engagement, Ubuntu and design ethics among others. The success of the design outcomes was influenced by the students’ understanding and application of rhetoric, Ubuntu, empathy and social and cultural values. Ultimately, the majority of students reflected positively on the Intervention often citing the fact that participating in this type of project made them more aware of community needs and made them feel good for making a difference in people’s lives (eudaimonic reflection).

The activities employed by the students as part of the Interventions involved conversations and dialogue with stakeholders, the development and co-creation of mock-ups and prototypes, and the keeping of visual and process diaries to aid reflection. The students employed self-reporting/documentation methods as well as brainstorming techniques utilising basic tools such as post-it notes, markers and paper to inspire collaboration and ideation with the community participants. These rudimentary tools are common to human-centred design practice and stimulate roleplaying and playful participation that encourages collaboration and ideation (Brown 2009, p.87). Participating students were encouraged to utilise creative material generated by the community members to make them feel valued and to generate a ‘shared design language’ (Sanders, 2006) that
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could be utilised as a starting point for the development of design solutions. Most importantly, the students and community participants engaged in co-designing, where knowledge was shared and solutions were generated collectively. Akama (2014, p.7) points out that co-creation projects are complex and messy by nature as they involve diverse viewpoints and opinions of the many stakeholders involved, however designers may assist in becoming “enablers of others” through “facilitation, listening, questioning and reflecting”. *Ubuntu* supports co-creation from a more holistic view; whereby the application of *Ubuntu* philosophies empowers designers to reflect on the notion of the “common good” and this may enable them to consider co-creation as a natural projection of the interdisciplinary prevalent in design projects. Hence, ethical behaviour, such as *Ubuntu*, assumes an impartial consideration of the interests of others and human-centred design is associated with empathic practice and altruism.

The emphasis of the outcome of the process of the Interventions was not on the commercial potential of the individual projects but on the social interaction and learning benefits for all stakeholders that took place. The participating students were made aware of the value of *Ubuntu* during an introductory lecture prior to the community engagement taking place. Key aspects related to *Ubuntu* philosophy such as: trust and credibility; sharing and caring between participants; human dignity and mutual respect as well as continuous improvement, were highlighted and a discussion of how these characteristics relate to human-centred processes and how they could be incorporated into the upcoming Interventions followed. To document the interactions between participating students and community members, students were encouraged to utilise self-reporting methods such as photographic documentation as well as reflecting on the process in a project diary or a digital blog.

Intervention 3 required students to develop design solutions for the VUT’s Library. The students collectively developed the wayfinding brief following consultation with the Library Director and a series of short questionnaires/interviews with other Library users. This Intervention proved to be an interesting challenge as it was necessary for the students to consider themselves (as well as others) in the role of the users and audience of the solutions that they were creating. Here the students experienced a new set of complications when developing the design solutions as many members of the Library staff and fellow Library users were unwilling to participate in the required brainstorming and co-creation sessions after initially agreeing to do it, citing a lack of time or other commitments. Eventually three brainstorming sessions were organised in order to accommodate as large a group of stakeholders as possible. The participants agreed that a colour coded wayfinding system – linked to the existing Faculty Colours of the University – be developed as a means of organising the space and content of the Library. The students developed several iterations of the proposed system before one was presented to the Library Director for approval and (eventual) implementation. On reflection, the developed system met with much enthusiasm from the Library stakeholders but was not formally adopted due to budgetary constraints.

The fourth and final Intervention was the most successful example of both *Ubuntu* and *eudaimonic* reflection in action. This Intervention offered the students an opportunity to engage in *eudaimonia* as a “way of behaving” (Huta 2013, p.10) by specifically challenging them to adapt a way of thinking that was garnered towards achieving personal happiness and meaning through the pursuit of unselfish, virtuous goals posed by the challenges of developing a design solution for an essential
service to the community. According to Huta (2013, p.10) the notion of *eudaimonia* relies on the question: “What choices can a person make to increase their fulfilment in life?” The Intervention setting was a privately funded Community Centre that provides skills training for mentally challenged patients from the local community. Here, the design challenge was to deliver advice on how to improve on the design of the wooden toys that the patients of the Community Centre construct and decorate for sale to generate much-needed funds for the Centre. According to Akama (2012, p.5) “[T]ransformation of oneself evolves through reflective practice, which in turn enables self-awareness though an immersive, affective, situated experience”. The participating students consulted with the managers of the Centre and identified a wooden toy manufactured by the Centre residents as suitable for re-design. As obtaining ethical clearance for working directly with the patients at the Centre was prohibitively difficult the students opted to work on developing the design solution solely with the caregivers and managers of the Centre. When given the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes, all participants commented on the way the participation made them feel, citing the community benefits that they were happy to provide, before commenting on the technical aspects of the design solution that was developed. Students universally agreed that participating in this Intervention made them feel good because they were doing ‘good’ work. A number observed that they enjoyed ‘sharing’ their skills as part of co-creation and that they considered the outcome a success due to the joy it gave the patients at the Centre. An analysis of the findings indicated that through meaningful human-centred practice student designers reflected on their outcomes through the lens of *Ubuntu*, *eudaimonia* and empathy.

## 6. Conclusion

Taking part in the Interventions taught students valuable lessons in knowledge-sharing, compassion and reflection. It was observed that the utilisation of *Ubuntu* philosophies together with human-centred methods generates a novel discourse between community participants and student designers. In terms of a progressive view of education, the combination of *Ubuntu* philosophies within an educational context is student-centred as the development of the student’s well-being is fundamental to this approach. The Interventions demonstrated that incorporation of *Ubuntu* philosophies and a consideration of *eudaimonic* principles in human-centred projects may develop graphic design students’ aptitudes for empathy, civic engagement and democratic action. Through the consideration of a new type of curriculum, with a foundation in human-centredness and *Ubuntu*, an ideal methodology that addresses deficiencies in the existing Graphic Design curriculum at VUT, may be developed.

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