Designing a cultural event as an inclusive educational activity

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to illustrate the design process and output of “GIDE Milano 2015”, a yearly international event for BSc design students and instructors held at the Politecnico di Milano Design School. The paper will focus on how design schools are moving towards educational process models based on “teaching-in-the-field” and peer teaching. Adopting the Product Service System Design approach, the design of an international event was the opportunity to experiment educational design strategies from double point of view: by adopting the design of the event as an inclusive educational activity through the PSSD approach, and by setting up a full immersive experience through a teaching-in-the-field approach. The main expected and achieved results were: the chance for students and instructors to attend an interactive, multidisciplinary and locally immersive experience, the creation of collaborative micro-networks for further projects, and the setup of an international design environment for sharing knowledge.

Keywords: Design education, Network, Workshop, Active learning, User experience

1. Introduction: a challenge for the education in the design discipline

This paper focuses on how design schools are moving towards educational process models based on “teaching-in-the-field” and peer teaching by using an event included in the routine actions of an international group of design schools (GiDE). How to innovate the education in the design discipline by trying to connect existing approaches and local opportunities is what the authors tried to answer by using a design opportunity in an international context merging several stakeholders.

Didactics of design have dealt for a long time with multidisciplinary approaches, inductive and abductive, experiential and/or by project (Bertola & Manzini, 2004) (Hoger, 2006) (Penati, 2012). When a project is focused on designing an event, it could become a challenge for the education in
the discipline. Planning a public event, in fact, is a design matter, assuming the design propensity for approaching the processes behind the things. An event is an act that happens in a place often set-up for it and for a defined time: it is the result, when it is a deliberate action, of various elements defining the space, the actors, the actions/services arranged together to tell a common story, in a narrative perspective (Trocchianesi, 2014). Further a design approach to set up an event is an ideal opportunity to apply the PAR (Participatory Action Research) methodology to allow students to have a full immersive, in-the-field design experience. It is well documented that experiential education — in particular, through hands-on, project-based learning — facilitates student success (Gijselaers, 1998), and that conducting research through design (Frayling, 1993) allows a continuous and iterative process of implementation of the results. The prototyping of the solutions is the core of the research since making the ideas immediately tangible, and by having the local people at the centre of them, allows the exploration of many ideas in parallel (Brown, 2009). Cognitive abilities developed by students within the design education refers to problem solving and creativity, to relation and negotiation abilities, to the acceptance of failure, to sharing and to the continuous learning (Arielli, 2003). They are attitudes that could be related to the "philosophy" behind the FabLab and Makers' space. They were born in an academic context, based on some basic principles that are distinctly close to education where the real actors are the people and the communities in which they recognize themselves, even before the technique and technology these spaces have: the empowering; the experiential learning (by trial and mistakes), the open source knowledge; the importance of the community that is around the project.

In the following paragraphs the authors describe how this design challenge has been afforded by using the Product Service System Design approach from a double point of view: by adopting the design of the event as an inclusive educational activity and by setting up a full immersive experience through a teaching-in-the field approach.

2. Framework: when an international group of schools meets a local research project

The framework of the design educational opportunity refers to two main actors: the “GIDE” group and the “campUS” research project.

GIDE, the Group for International Design Education, “is an international consortium of higher education art and design institutions who have, since 2003 collaborated annually in order to enrich the creative and inter cultural design experiences of students’, staff and participating institutions”¹. GIDE consists of seven core partner institutions from Scotland, Slovenia, England, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Switzerland and recently worked closely with guest schools from USA and China². Officially established in 2003, GIDE brings learners, academics, researchers, local commerce and cultural organisations together to explore ethical issues through creative design thinking within a host city and partner schools.

GIDE operates on a February to February cycle: every year, a common topic is proposed by one of the partner to be developed in the following semester in a design studio. The topic is always a wide

¹ https://gidegroup.wordpress.com/
² GIDE members are: Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design [DJCAD]; School of Design, Politecnico di Milano; Leeds College of Art; Faculty of Design, Associated member of University of Primorska; University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI); Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences; Thomas More University College, Mechelen; School of Design at Jiangnan University (JU)
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theme, letting all the schools to conduct it according to each school approach. The workshop, taking place at the end of the semester in one of the partner school with more than 180 participants, is the opportunity to promote the exchange between different approaches to creative thinking and design through an intensive ‘deep-dive’ week including a symposium, a multidisciplinary students workshop and an international exhibition.

In 2015, Milano hosted the GIDE 2015 edition. The topic was “campUS - among+with+for students&citizens”, connected to the ongoing research project “campUS - Incubation and settings for social practices”, which stands for this connection among the campus and the university area, the students and the citizens with a community-centered design (CCD) (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011) approach. CampUS, carried out by Design, Management Engineering and Architecture&Urban Studies Department, started in October 2014 and it is one of the research program winning the Polisocial Award 2014.

The campUS research is organized into two main and parallel areas of intervention: campUS in that are actions taking place inside the university campus by defining and using specific tools aiming at making the university spaces more liveable and usable by citizens, and campUS out, actions taking place outside of the University spaces (in the neighbourhood and in the urban/sub-urban area) with permanent actions which follow the prototyping phase and which have the potential of becoming social enterprises. The two area of intervention help to define strategies and actions for supporting social innovation and cohesion activities in the local urban context with the aim of identifying a scalable model of intervention. These actions are: community urban gardens, the neighbourhood Social TV, a flexible and self-managed pavilion, and the economic sustainability program.

Through the GIDE workshop, the campUS goals were explored trying to set the connection between the university spaces and the city ones through the contribution of international students and lecturers participating to the workshop.

3. Goals: how an event is designed as an inclusive educational activity

The GIDE workshop in 2015 was designed as an event and planned to apply an inclusive educational activity as a participatory action. The main goal was to include as much as possible a wider range of actors in order to create a higher sense of belongings to the event itself and at the same time to let them be acknowledged about how to apply design thinking in a real context. A team managing the whole organization carried the design of the event: a group of academics (professors and researchers of the Design Department at the Politecnico di Milano) with three final year postgraduate students (MSc Product Service System Design - PSSD). The team interacted with several stakeholders within the Design System at the Politecnico di Milano (i.e. the international offices, logistic staff etc.) and worked together sharing knowledge and decisions. This was an interesting opportunity for the students, to deeply know the operating principles of a complex institution, such as a university, even in relation with the practical management of an event too.

The inclusive educational activity was carried out through four different levels including several stakeholders:

3 campUS project website: http://www.progettocampus.polimi.it/progetto/
4 www.polisocial.polimi.it/it/home/
actors (and related roles) of the GIDE network (students and instructors in the partner universities);
actors (and related roles) of the GIDE Milano team (as mentioned before);
actors (and related roles) of the GIDE Milano team within the Design Department context (administration offices, labs, logistic staff, etc.);
external actors involved (other public institutions, clients, supplier, partners, sponsors, etc.).

Each level was strongly influenced - and had influenced too - the timing of the event process, considering the “pre-event phase”, the “event phase” and the “after the event” one. The approach the Milano team used to design this event was related to the PSSD discipline and to PAR, by using and applying user and community centered design.

4. Methodology: Product Service System Design (PSSD) and Participatory Action research (PAR).

A Product Service System (PSS) is a marketable set of products and services capable of jointly fulfilling a user’s need (Goedkoop et al. 1999) where services are conceived and offered as products designed by taking into account a series of economic and technological criteria (Manzini, 1993) and considered as special artefacts co-created and co-experienced with, by and among the users (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). PSSD can be considered as the physical evidence of abstract concepts: designing of “experiences”, “solutions”, “strategies”, “brands”, means to design several different material or immaterial elements (Morelli, 2006) through which these concepts come into reality.

In 2005, the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano established a Master of Science in PSSD aimed at preparing “a highly qualified designer able to take on a design role concerning the product service system (considered as a blend of products, communication strategies, services and spaces used by profit and no-profit entities – enterprises, institutions, associations, etc. – to represent themselves in an integrated form to their reference market) in international contexts in which the individual innovation is no longer sufficient to combat increasing competitiveness. The fundamental educational objective is to offer a wide range of design tools able to provide appropriate skills in creatively managing products, services, events, and communication strategies in an integrated way”.

This master considered the project as a flexible frame of factors throughout all the phases of a design process; social and anthropological factors meet trends and economic analysis, managing tools intersects materials, shapes and digital knowledge, composing a complex system of competencies.

Thus, applying the PSS discipline to the organization of an international design event means that its management is composed by a complex system of tangible elements driven by an overall and clear vision of the conducting strategy, which represents the immaterial and fundamental core of the process. Product Service System Design has been used in this educational format together with the PAR methodology. PAR is a qualitative research method, employed in various fields and settings with a variety of approaches and interpretations. It has its origins in social sciences and has been theorized since then as a “social action and research leading to social action” (Lewin, 1946). The main aim is to act for a planned organizational change (Avison, Baskerville & Myers, 2007) and to solve real problems, and is applied to real and specific contexts. Rapoport (Rapoport, 1970) defines action research as an approach that “aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an

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5 From the PSSD master programme, http://www.pssd.polimi.it/
immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework”.

The application of such a qualitative methodology in design education, research and practice is relevant since all the actors involved collaborate in an inclusive way for a transformative process and for (systemic) change. The “double challenge” of combining both practical action and research potentially leads to conflict where the roles of the collaborative members of the research team are different (Avison et al., 2007). Researchers and participants influence each other in a mutual exchange. This is an important point to underline, since most of the criticism around the use of this methodology is aimed at the level of engagement adopted by the researcher towards the context of analysis and at the apparent similarity of the actually different but complementary roles of the actors involved.

This approach has been applied, as described above, with a design thinking process, applying “classroom working to real-world community needs” (Cantor, 1997), which demands that the ability explores different possibilities through an iterative process and that it is ethically committed to real world issues. It is fundamentally iterative: PAR as a methodology and, more specifically, IDEO and DSchool as tool strategies, are cyclical and not linear process. Thus, the students were encouraged to develop the project by giving participants an equal access to information providing tools, information and capacities to understand what can be done, and involving them without any preconditions, so as to ensure that decisions and outcomes would be shared. In this way, the people involved took responsibilities for the process by contributing their life experiences, and acting as agents in an instructive way. A key point is that “the participant change itself is the sine qua non of social change” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), thus giving rise to subjective empowerment.

5. Development part 1: roles and rules

The GIDE Milano team composed by three PSSD postgraduate students, two instructors and a PhD candidate started to work on the Milan event trying to enrich the workshop format (part of the event) and to work up the creative engagement of the participants. Students used this in-the field experience to develop their final master thesis: setting up the GIDE event, from the concept elaboration to the final executive steps, following an established format, showing that an experiential learning is a necessary component of formal instruction (Cantor, 1997).

To the three students involved specific roles were assigned by the instructors and according to their own interests and skills, in order to cover all the event aspects and the related activities:

- operational coordinator: responsible for the coordination of the event suppliers (spaces and services providers, sponsors, materials) and of the tasks schedule;
- the creative director: responsible for the creation of the brand identity and the development of a strategic and effective social and online campaign, aimed at increasing the awareness of GIDE group among the partner schools’ students and professors;
- the setup design and coordinator: responsible for the design and realization of the event’s general setup and wayfinding among all the locations. (Fig.1)
These three specific figures were complementary in their well-acquainted fields and they were able to make the event come true. The high quality reached in the event organization resulted from the personal skills of each figure and from the wise and functional approach used to make their work coherent and coordinated. Thanks to this systematic coordination of the process and synergic organization of the teamwork, the PSS-oriented methodology was successfully applied to the workshop design, defining and planning it as a complex and multidisciplinary event-system (Fig.2). All the elements were structured composing a detailed framework - the “container” - characterized by a defined goal and a unique identity within the temporariness of an event life cycle.
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The GIDE process lead to several outputs connected with both the event itself and the educational realm. As stated above, each PSS design team position has been filled by one person in charge of a specific aspect of the process. The design process follows four main steps (Fig.3):

- **the concept design and its "implementation"**: research and analysis of the state of the art, the ideation of the workshop, the wayfinding and the exhibition concept through analysis of the feasibility, the guidelines’ definition of the brand identity, social media strategy, set-up and of the wayfinding, the exhibition project definition, the volunteers’ recruitment, the sponsors' research, the social networking and the organization city-tours (concept, selection of locations, services and supplier involved, scheduling).

- **the planning**: general organizational plan and backstage calendar definition, the printing service management, the volunteers schedule definition, training and management, the setup and wayfinding assembly instructions definition and montage, the social strategy continuation, the materials purchase and services management, the catering management, the budget management, the realization of welcome and personal booklet and toolkits, the definition of identification elements for participants and staff such as pins, t-shirts, flags and cards orienteering in the campus and outside.

- **the realization** as the possibility to immediately prototype the project, dealing with a real context, including the definition of a budget, the research of the sponsorship, the managing of the suppliers, the logistic of the event, the plan of the activities etc.

*Figure 2. System map (diagram developed by the PSSD postgraduate students for their final master thesis).*
the conclusion and its evaluation: the set-up and wayfinding dismantle, the materials recycle, the participants’ and volunteers’ survey creation and its analysis and the creation of the format for future GiDE’s event.

Figure 3. Diagram of the overall process: Work Breakdown Structure (diagram developed by the PSSD postgraduate students for their final master thesis).

6. Development part 2: learning-in-the-field

As mentioned before, the topic of the GiDE event has been “campUS - among+with+for student&citizen” as a scaled experimentation of the ongoing research project “campUS - Incubation and settings for social practices”, dealing with enhancing the connection between the university campus spaces, service and users with its neighbourhood (inhabitants, associations, institutions).

With “among+with+for students&citizens” as main topic, the event wanted to offer to international participants the opportunity to investigate renewed and dynamic relationships between the city of Milan and its inhabitants and undergraduate students of local universities.

Furthermore, 2015 was special year of change for the city of Milan. Expo Milan 2015 fostered an urban regeneration throughout the whole town due to the regeneration of some districts, the public transport development, the realisation of new spaces for culture and tourism, increasing demand and offering for hospitality facilities. Meanwhile, a city is also shaped by the everyday life of its inhabitants. People live in it, love, eat, study, work, have free time, run, buy, tackle, meet each other (Fassi, 2012). Lots of “little acts” happen in places that became part of our life, some rituals of ours

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6 According to the official data given by EXPO 2015, more than 21 million visited the event in 184 opening days 20000 workers were employed, 2.3 billions of euros spent by the visitors (travel, entrance fee, food etc.) and the City of Milan was appointed in the top 3 touristic destination from Lonely planet guides in 2015.
are repeated in the same places and we grow close to them. The city becomes the set of citizens’ daily gestures, of their little and great stories. Milan is above all property of its residents, who shape the city’s attitude reflecting in it their personalities. Citizens have the big power to shape and modify urban environment according to their habits and their attitude. Starting from this point, during the workshop the students has been divided into 12 groups to work on 12 stories related to 12 moments of a regular day of a student in Milan. Each moment was connected to one of 12 significant places in Milan.

The main goals of the workshop were to deeply understand the features of a city hosting both great transformations due to a big temporary event and the daily life of its inhabitants and to design some temporary settings about the 12 stories and places the students were put in touch with. The micro-settings and digital tools designed by students would have represented their interpretation of the meaningful connections between the city users and the urban spaces and would have been the context of a final theatrical performance.

The workshop participants were compared to “citizen-students” and led through some ritual-experiences in the city: participants became immediately active and direct protagonists of the city and the way it is lived. “Ritual-experiences” were planned so to connect a typical daily-routine of inhabitants’ actions to meaningful places in the city: i.e. three morning actions (having breakfast, going to university by bike and having an outdoor class) were associated to three places where these rituals take place (a typical Milanese bar, a bike tour of the new Porta Nuova district and a visit to Triennale Museum and exhibitions).

The scenario participants met with was made by a set of elements that let them be able to deeply use and kno a specific place and related service and users’ actions: the physical elements (welcome kits, maps, customized notebook etc.), the actors (mixed group of students, tutors, one trained volunteer, stakeholders involved) and the spaces (actions and interactions, physical characters).

The international students get an in-the-field experience, designed to let them immerse in a new context, to feel themselves as temporarily part of the city community. Participants were asked to design two different outputs from their experiences. The first output was the realization of the so-called “micro-set”, namely a “space-prototype” (almost 4mq plan), a sort of setting representing the visited places and the activities done, communicating formal, service and emotional experienced contents.

The second one was the telling of “digital stories”: students were required to collect data from the exploration activity, in order to create characters for personal narrations, through “a process for the design of fictional stories on social media, where the plot can guide the narrative and interactive experience” (Piredda et al., 2015). The digital stories had been published online on the GIDE website through a dedicated Tumblr page during the event, as micro-stories belonging to the greater collective event story. The micro-settings have been “activated” and given life during the final presentation in the Bovisa campus with professional performers. Based their acting on the art of improvisation, the actors played a conversation with places and rituals. Participants sat in the middle, surrounded by the twelve sets while performers “gave them life”. The art of improvisational theatre has thus interpreted the set and the plot written by the participants of the event students, who themselves have interpreted a city of daily rituals, as well as big events. Undergraduate students thus become capable of interpreting the urban reality that surrounds them, and to reflect on the form it takes.

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7 Digital stories were coordinated by ImagisLab, a research team of the Design Dept. Politecnico di Milano.
7. Conclusions and future steps

The use of this double strategy implicated the achievement of two educational goals. The first one is about the postgraduate students who were involved in the event design. They got a professional experience by living a real work commitment. The monitoring and evaluation assessments always imply a “get out into the world”, making students become designers as “project experts” able to be “process facilitators” (Manzini & Bertola, 2006) in a complex framework of actors (institutions, ventures, no-profit associations, users) and to offer relevant experiences to facilitate people’s expressions of creativity at all levels (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The workshop participants used and were themselves part of a designed scenario which service, communication and spatial components were settled to let them overwrite other stories (through digital and set-design tools).

As for the main event concept, a transversal “storytelling approach” was chosen as leading element of GIDEmilano2015: a tangible and intangible narrative perspective within the overall idea of opening the campus to the city: a coherent way to tell the story of a “journey” inside the “among+with+for students&citizens” theme. This identification was useful to understand the logical steps that are behind a learning workshop activity and to define the GIDEmilano2015 outputs’ idea.

The workshop activities and design outputs started from taking into account and integrating the initial constraints and the citizen-student concept definition on one side, and the past experiences of GIDE events, on the other. The success of the past workshops were analysed in order to make some considerations about the feasible elements that made the activity successful, to learn from failure or to strengthen solutions with other approaches and methods in order to find new strategic directions (Edmondson, 2011).

This phase was really significant for the development of GIDEmilano2015 experience because it gave a great help in the implementation and innovation of the workshop concept and definition.

The same analysis process has been replicated at the end of the event through self-critical evaluations and final user’s surveys. These two led to the creation and development of a specific guidelines (a toolkit) dedicated to the design and the realization of future GIDE’s events.

This toolkit, as a set of guidelines and tips, has been designed for all the people that will be involved in the organization of future GIDE’s events. Its aim is, first of all, to help in the event design process. The PSS designer’s team extrapolated and abstracted from the concrete involvement a series of empirical but all-purposed ground rules. This know-how should be considered as the starting background where to start the design process and could be implemented by the following organizers. Therefore, this format is not a static and closed reality but a means to improve and enrich the knowledge and the expertise regarding a topic that is still not well analysed and debated also by the academic world. The toolkit aims to be a short, immediate and easy manual to consult before, during and after the event organization in order to get suggestions, guidelines and general information about how to proceed in a specific situation. Finally, it underlines what is suggested to do and to organize, as a direct consequence of what GIDE Milano 2015 had and/or lacked in some peculiar tasks.

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