‘Sketching’ the new designers - going wide, going deep and doing it together

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Abstract: This paper presents the work developed in a ‘social’ service design course from the 3rd year of an undergraduate course in Design (a generalist one including product design as well as communication design). The course appears in the last semester of the course and students see it as a very thought-provoking one. That occurs since it enrolls students in a transformation process that implies a philosophical conscience and activation, an ethical commitment to sum up with the need to display and make use of several critical abilities such as personal skills, interpersonal skills. The demand for the stimulation and use of student’s emotional intelligence and for their critical view regarding their behavior and attitudes as human beings towards the others disclose a kind of ‘revelation moment’. The critical presentation of the structure of the course, the work developed and its results as well as the assessment made by students to it in our view do contribute to the enrichment of knowledge in the design education field. This type of courses allow us to participate as teachers in “sketching” of new designers, ones that act in broader and deeper ways in a collaborative manner.

Keywords: Design Education, Social Design, Collaborative work

1. Introduction

Fuad-Luke (2009) defends that design has both a contribution to the development of human capital and of the social capital1 being the medium through which these capitals are converted into materialized and symbolic languages. The formation of future design practitioners thus implies the ability to make students socially engaged and prepared to have ethical interventions. This means that students must become aware of their dimension of “citizen designers”, approaching critically

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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)

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community and collective issues in order to be able to scrutinize and design solutions that will benefit in meaningful ways society.

Important to consider in this context is also the thought of Thackara (2005) that defends that there are issues that are fundamental in social design namely the consciousness and acknowledgment of the systemic and holistic implications of each design decision and action.

In addition, to have a design ethical approach to nowadays society’s problems is highly demanding due to the complexity of the problems thus requiring the use of multiple skills coming from a myriad of different scientific areas such as: psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, politics, law etc.

Moreover, it is relevant to ponder that western societies have a prevailing individualized modus operandi that empowers single users, being the design for the “social creature” (Findeli, 2001) a rather new focus on the role and potential of products and services. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve success since through this effort of social involvement (as the first step towards social design) one aims to transform and change, i.e. 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

A threefold approach supported the social design learning teaching process: a) knowledge about social design constructs, aims, b) social design skills development; c) social design methods. These three issues had dedicated theoretical and practical classes (being the work done focused on the area of intervention - Ajuda - proposed in the briefing).

Regarding the context of intervention of social design and its aims, it is vital 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 several typologies of work, processes and aims under different names were explained to students. Among them we include: 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 (2014) 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). Thus, it is important to unfold knowledge about this large band of interventions.

In terms of social design skills development one should make students aware that social design is severely reliant on human interaction and strongly depends on communication and interpersonal aptitudes. Being so it becomes crucial 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 supports a series of iterative actions that repetitively allow interrogation of the purpose in order to reach the goal it is of decisive importance to incentivize the 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 (Fuad- Luke, 2009).

Lastly, 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 though 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. In fact, the choice of each method implies that students determine the goal to be achieved with that use and the way information to be gathered, generated, or evaluated will subsidise the solution.

This paper presents the work developed in a ‘social’ service design course with 40 students (2 classes (A-19 students); (B-21 students)) from the 3rd year of an undergraduate course in Design (a generalist one that includes product design as well as communication design). The course is given in the last semester of the under graduation course and since it exists (5 years) it is generally seen by students as being very challenging. That is because it enrolls a transformation process implying a philosophical conscience and activation, an ethical commitment and a mass of critical abilities such as personal skills, interpersonal skills as well as the ability to manage networking and articulate several knowledge areas and interests/needs.

The students (class A – 2 groups of 6; 1 of 7; class B – 3 groups of 5 and 1 of 6) had to engage with a real situation, with multiple stakeholders – from social agents to population in general. A process was introduced in which the problem(s) to be tackled is (are) to be found and bounded by them having as a starting point the territory of intervention and the work being done by Project D’Ajuda in a parish that has 3 neighborhoods – 2 de Maio; Casalinho and Rio Seco. For that, students have to manage how to activate and make effective use of a set of tools and methods (mainly participatory and collaborative ones) completely new to them.

The complexity of ‘the real world’ with its large ‘scale of gray’ shakes their accustomed ‘black and white’ secure approach to given problems that are habitually ‘filtered’ by teacher’s guidance and monitoring.

The demand for the stimulation and use of their emotional intelligence and for their critical view regarding their behavior and attitudes as human beings towards the others disclose a kind of ‘revelation moment’. This key moment makes most of them aware of themselves (almost as a new self) causing a turbulent and often confusing reaction on the part of students that find themselves ‘lost’ (in their words). After a frequently long initial adaptation period to this ‘new world’ students engage in the process of connecting with each other and with other stakeholders. From that instant on a complex, very rich and unrolled process develops being change and transformation the ultimate goal of their creation.

3. Designing social design services for Projecto D’Ajuda

3.1 Context of Intervention

The students had to work with the winner of the municipality’s program BIP/ZIP 2015 Lisbon named Projecto D’Ajuda. This Projecto da Ajuda was born from the will and work of some member of the community of Ajuda (that accounts for three neighborhoods) together with some local associations (LOCALS AND AASPS) and government local structures committed with the promotion and requalification of the territory as a way of improving Ajuda community’s quality of life. The project integrates an extended net of partners coming from different sectors of Portuguese civil society.
3.2 Goals

There are two types of goals to consider: the ones related with Projecto D’Ajuda (A) and the ones that give respect to the work to be developed by the students of the services design course (B).

Goals of type (A) were assumed by the students in their work and the goals from type (B) were specific to the course and linked with the learning process. Concerning the first ones (A):

“Projecto D’Ajuda” aims to promote local development, to stimulate public participation and the improvement of the quality of life of communities endorsing the migration among the three neighborhoods thus fomenting social-spatial inclusion. It intents to mitigate the unemployment rate of the parish, boosting knowledge, products and valences of the community in order to stimulate the local economy by encouraging entrepreneurial activities that help to revitalize local commerce.

3.3 Activities of Projecto D’Ajuda

There are five activities integrating the Projecto D’Ajuda used to promote the valorization of local people and local resources aiming to reinforce the territory’s sense of belonging. They are:

1. Local Ambulatory Team: proximity work team to interact with population; the team stimulates the local participation through daily contact based on auscultation; recognition diagnosis and intervention as well as by stimulating self-organization processes.

2. Creation of the Social Brand D’Ajuda: Definition of a collective image to be recognized and accepted by the population; a social brand that reinforces the sense of belonging to a culturally rich territory. A social brand that will mirror the local dynamics valuing the existing resources.

3. Public spaces dynamics: public spaces’ revitalization foments social encounter and cohesion, generates attractiveness thus promoting local commerce. It is a way of improving economically, socially and environmentally the neighborhoods.

4. Community spaces and formation – Facilitate the access to debate spaces and collective work to all that are interested in it. Incentivize the association and cooperation promoting the formation based in local development general thematic.

5. Local Observatory: Create a platform to gather and maintain a database of updated information accessible to all population. The information includes the dynamics and evolutionary logics of the territory. This tool will allow people to know the territory in real time crossing both quantitative and qualitative data being also possible to action micro actions of space improvement. 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.

4. Ajuda Social Design Services - going wide, going deep and doing it together

As supporting methods, students had the ones developed by Lucy Campbell and Joe Julier (2012) named “The social design Methods Menu”. This kit proposes developing the work in four stages:

- Exploration (finding problems; its contours; development potential, potential partners, surrounding’s framework);
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- Comprehension (translating previous work into something useful and concrete; structuring the solutions in its foundational issues);
- Proposal (effective design of the solution – definition of activities, processes, systems contact points etcetera);
- Refining (testing the proposal, adjustment of issues that can be improved, design review modes and system adaptive manners)

Students had to define along their work the methodology to be used and the pool of methods that were better adequate to pursue their projects’ goals and effective implementation. Nevertheless the idea of going wide (open their horizons to the real world and its humanized complexity), going deep (into the problems and themselves); and doing it together (collaborative work, participatory processes) ruled the overall processes of all students.

As previously said there were 7 groups and in table 1 a short synthesis of the work done is presented.

| Group | Title | Summary | Aims/ Stakeholders |
|-------|-------|---------|--------------------|
| 1 A   | Music in Ajuda | Based on Generation Orchestra the project uses music teaching learning processes as vehicles of civic values, relationship and collaboration | To promote socio-spatial inclusion of children; main stakeholders: merchants; children, parents; schools; music associations; |
| 2 A   | Community herb tea garden in Ajuda | This project proposes the abandoned land to be cultivated by community members that will profit with it and that will engage in a net of services and activities related with agriculture and food supply. | Develop joint work and benefits to the community members working in the agriculture land of the parish (mostly abandoned); Main stakeholders: tools shops, community members; faculty of design; school of agriculture; merchants; parish association |
| 3 A   | Community composting center | A Community composting centre to produce compost to the community gardens engaging participants in an exchange system of vegetables and other agriculture products. | Union of 3 neighbourhoods around environmental issues; Main stakeholders: Universities; parish associations; recycling companies; residents |
| 1 B   | JU – the Owl of Ajuda | JU is an owl that symbolizes the citizenship and a program that works on the rules and ways of engaging in creative and affective social engagement | Value the children as change agents of the communities; main stakeholders: schools; local associations; parents/ grandparents from the 3 neighbourhoods; commerce; municipality |
| 2 B   | AEC – Ajuda’s Educational Center | AEC is a centre located in the ‘House for all’ in the 2 de Maio neighbourhood. It provides workshops related with sports and with different skills residents have and are willing to share with the3 community. | Improvement of instruction level of the 3 neighbourhoods promoting the interaction among residents, search of new knowledge, dreams and goals, increase of self-esteem; main stakeholders: schools; residents; merchants; sports associations |
This project makes use of the existing knowledge especially with elderly and the one of youngster proposing joint activities that will allow more intergenerational cohesion and a sense of belonging and togetherness.

To effectively relate different generations and to promote the value of traditions and life knowledge from different ethnical groups and different generations; residents; local associations; schools; faculties

This project makes use of the stall that exist in one of the neighbourhood and connects it with the skills of the horse gendarmerie that has its headquarters in a second neighbourhood creating services of leisure and therapy with horses.

To promote social inclusion through horse activities related with leisure and health; handicapped associations; parish association; gendarmerie; faculty of veterinary; ergonomics faculty; residents

As it can be seen in Table 1 the projects developed are based on community activities mostly benefiting residents that do not have a regular job and on children – the ones that can ensure a better future since they are more open to change.

Next a short overview of the work done is given based on photographs taken on different phases of some of the projects.

As it can be seen in Figure 1 the first step was to understand the territory, its limits, activities hosted by the neighbourhoods, population characteristics etcetera. Moreover positive and negative aspects observed, and collected through conversations with the population, surveys undertaken with the communities, interviews with local authorities and institutes, merchants, schools and the teams of Projecto D’Ajuda working in the field made possible to define the problems and to engage in the phase of comprehension (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

The approach to the territory allowed students to have a broad understanding of the complexity underlying the problems people claimed to have. Being poor and depressed neighbourhoods, almost everything is critical and there are no simple or immediate solutions. The problems are endemic depending on long-term interventions – especially in terms of education- but local residents feel and experience a daily abandonment, that they do not know how to overcome thus surrendering themselves to a perspective of no future.

The hardness of this reality made the students to work hard trying to characterize the roots of the problems and its contours in accurate and rigorous ways. That can be appreciated in Figure 2 an example of the way groups synthesized the definition of problems they identified as well as in Figure 3 where we can find a map of networking activities that can configure a possible solution.

Following the phase of comprehension it was time to design a proposal meaning that all activities should be designed making explicit the features and benefits, the beneficiaries, the stakeholders and partners, the qualities and limitations taking into account the assumptions, the unknowns etcetera (Figure 4). This phase of proposition is further developed by groups that used several methods such as the personas, the storyboard and story world as well as conceptual/activities/stakeholders mapping (see figures 5 to 8).
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Figure 1. Mapping the territory of intervention – Ajuda with its 3 neighbourhoods: 2 de Maio, Casalinho and Rio Seco.
**Problem definition**

**Use this to find and define the issue**

**Figure 2. Phase of Exploration - Problem Definition (using Campbell and Julier’s matrix) – Group 2B**

**Figure 3. Phase of Comprehension (Group 2B) – Educational Centre – concept map**
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Figure 4. Phase of Comprehension (Group 3A) – Positive and negative aspects in each of the Neighbourhoods – 2 Maio; Casalinho; Rio Seco. Yellow post-its (residents’ answers to direct questions; orange post-its – info collected with questionnaires; blue post-its – observations in-situ.

Figure 4. Phase of Proposal (Group 2B) – making use of Campbell and Jolie’s matrix
Figure 5. Phase of Proposal (Group 4B) – Personas – All Galloping

Figure 6. Phase of Proposal (Group 4B) – Storyboard youngster with reduced mobility – All Galloping
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Figure 7. Phase of Proposal (Group 2B) – StoryBoard of AEC solution

Figure 8. Phase of Proposal (Group 4B) – the network of partners and activities – short-medium/long-term – All Galloping
5. Discussion

Mostly the challenge proposed to the teams in service design course 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 a concrete project 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’ (Thackara, 2005) which means that students become aware of what social design is in terms of the collaborative and collective commitment. Additionally, 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 to service design especially in the social design area.

It was also 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 issues have an emotional charge and impact that young students (average of 21 years) have a hard time dealing with it. This is probably 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 they sketched the proposed solution.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of working with this existing project it was visible that students preferred interventions related with the universe of themes related with education (the territory in which students feel more comfortable to intervene) and the ones being already worked out by people integrating Projecto D’Ajuda (community garden; music project).

6. Conclusions

To work in social design is to work focused on processes instead of on products doing 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 really aware that design work has always social, cultural, economic, political, environmental implications and consequences.

Some authors (McCoy, 2003) 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”. However, what we can conclude with this experiment with graduation students is that it is not only the neutrality that affects their performance being also the lack of 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) (Tonkinwise, 2014) it is fundamental to activate and to develop social thinking and commitment in design in design curricula.

This perspective on design education is what we define as “sketching the new designer” and to do it we propose an alignment with the reflections of world experts that joined the “Social Impact Design Summit” (2013, p.43). This means we endorse a few actions that would improve students’ performance in this field such as:
6. to broaden their knowledge base by taking courses related with public health, international development, sociology, anthropology, history, economics, politics and finance;
7. to promote the involvement of students with social design firms and to incentivize them to volunteer with organizations to engage underserved communities so they will experience cultural immersion and international humanitarian aid;
8. 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.

In conclusion the ‘new designer’ is after all one that must dedicate part of his/her education process to become a better citizen, a comprehensive active human being one with a conscientious and consistent ethical approach to community’s problems.

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