

Make the World a Better Place: Design Skills in an Academic Context

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Abstract

This article aims to present a pedagogical practice carried out in an academic context with undergraduate students from the 2nd year of the Communication Design course at Lusófona University (UL) in the second semester of 2021/22. A proposal that provides continuity to a project developed in the 1st semester in partnership with this NGO. A collaborative endeavour to help build a school in Monte Chimoio, Manica, Mozambique, through a collection of design artefacts for fundraising – T-shirts and sweatshirts for different ages and genders, hats, key holders and tote bags. The creative process was done using the Design Thinking methodology (problem definition, project ideation, prototyping and implementation of the chosen proposal). The article is divided into four parts: Introduction, literature review, work methodology and final considerations. The President of the NGO will take part in the last step of the creative process by selecting for print the best propositions. This pedagogical exercise proved to be an opportunity for students to engage in a real-life project with the possibility of applying the tools and methods learned in the course. Design scholars must motivate and prepare design students to work on projects that contribute to society and to recognise the role design plays in social issues — a Design practice through co-working that educates students to use design processes to support positive social change giving them the ability to be part of a project with a cause.

Keywords: Design Skills for a Better World, Pedagogical Practice, Design Educators, Collaborative Project

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Introduction

A collaborative project was developed to help build a school in Monte Chimoio, Manica, Mozambique village. The briefing proposed a collection of design artefacts for sale and fundraising, such as T-shirts and sweatshirts for different ages and genders, caps, key holders and tote bags. A project carried out by *The Big Hand*, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that promotes the well-being of children living under unfavourable environmental conditions, with particular attention to orphan girls, ensuring their access to education, healthcare, nutrition, water and basic sanitation. *The Big Hand* believes that children raised in a healthy environment can change the world. Also, it believes in a world where all children are treated with dignity, in a world that protects its children, guaranteeing them access to nutrition, water, sanitation, health, shelter, information and quality education that allows them to reach their full potential and in that way they contribute to their community and the world. It works in partnership with communities, local organisations and governments.

This design project was a co-creation started from the collaboration between the Academy (ULP) and *The Big Hand*. For this purpose, a partnership protocol was established between both institutions in January 2022.

Design scholars must motivate and prepare design students to work on projects helping those in need of a better world. This proposed briefing offers a concrete opportunity for design students' immersion in a specific context through co-working, building empathy with others, and learning by doing.

Design skills for the common good and the importance of collaborative project

Design scholars must motivate, prepare and challenge design students to work with real projects to help those in need. Today's world faces unprecedented problems: "Phenomena such as terrorism, climate change, immigration, cybercrime, poverty or malnutrition can no longer be truly understood without considering the complex socio-technical systems that support our way of living." (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.1). According to Alice Rawsthorn e Paola Antonelli, "Design is not a miracle cure, but is a powerful tool that can help us to address these issues if applied sensitively and responsibly." (Rawsthorn & Antonelli, 2022, p.12). Design scholars must cultivate an approach to social issues and promote the value of design to inspire and prepare the next design generation as changemakers. Design must be used to impact positive social change. "As methods and tools make developing a business, program, or project more accessible, designers can actively use their amazing talents to educate and inform, fight injustice, build community, and make the world a better place" (Heller & Vienne, 2018, p.76).

According to Rawsthorn & Antonelli, "An essential first step is to ensure that design is seen, both inside and outside the design community, as capable of addressing complex problems, rather than continuing to be confused with styling" (2022, p.13). Additionally, " (...) designers worldwide are committed to working for the greater good of all communities, geographies, and species, and making all our lives fairer, safer, healthier, and more enjoyable, productive, and inclusive" (Rawsthorn & Antonelli, 2022, p.15).

How can a teacher challenge students and stimulate them toward social issues? How can students feel stimulated? My experience of 17 years in teaching has shown me that real projects are the best solution. Working with local Associations or NGOs has always been a

great challenge for students, who commit and dedicate themselves with great enthusiasm to the projects.

When you are a student or professional, and you want to improve the world, how do you do that? You concentrate on a problem that speaks to and motivates you and allow yourself to be inspired and challenged, giving it all you have. You have to offer the abilities you have built up through experience – the skills, knowledge, methods and tools of your profession, strengths, and qualities. (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.xii)

As an academic today, many students and professionals want to make a difference in the world and wish to use design to counteract social issues. It is urgent to motivate students by making them feel valuable in today's society, using design as a social agent of change “ (...) called upon designers to move away from commercial design and instead be responsive to people’s ‘true needs’ ” (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.8).

As Papanek “(...) explicitly called for designers to move away from commercial business, and this may have motivated some designers to work with NGOs rather than support commercial interests.” (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.12). According to him, “(...) integrate ethical considerations and social values into the design discipline, and use design for what Papanek referred to as real needs.” (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.12). It is necessary to teach our students to use the tools that design has at their disposal not only for the creation of services or objects for merely economic purposes but also for the service of the planet and society, in the hope of contributing to a better world; and “From this perspective, design is an instrument of power. It is the art of inventing and shaping two, three, and four-dimensional forms intended to satisfy needs, wants and desires, thereby effecting changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of others” (Buchanan & Margolin, 1995, p.48).

Buckminster Fuller¹ (1895-1983) was recognised for his comprehensive perspective on the world’s problems. He developed pioneering solutions that reflected his commitment to the potential of innovative design to create technology that does “more with less” and thereby improves human lives. During the 1940s, he began to teach and lecture at universities, including Harvard and MIT, and in the late 1950s, he became a professor at Southern Illinois University (SIU). At Black Mountain College, he proposed to the students to help him develop a design formula with which anyone could construct lightweight domed structures of different sizes and for diverse terrains, aiming to create a new type of emergency shelter – a geodesic dome. Since then, “Millions of geodesic domes have since been constructed worldwide. As well as providing emergency housing for people who might otherwise have been homeless.” This home solution was developed after world war II (Rawsthorn & Antonelli, 2022, p.8).

Ezio Manzini has played an essential role in developing a design for social innovation as a scholar and active member of the DESIS network. “Manzini articulates how design can support global transformations towards more sustainable futures” (Tromp & Hekkert, 2021, p.16).

Moholy-Nagy recognised Design as “a powerful force in society by acting as an efficient and ingenious agent of change, free from commercial constraints” (Rawsthorn, 2020, p.9).

¹ <https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller/biography/>

This briefing was an opportunity to design students' immersion in a specific context through a collaborative project, building empathy with others, learning by doing and ensuring the right to education for Manica children. With this project, design played an essential role as a social agent of change, raising community awareness and generating support to build a school in Mozambique. "Empathy, the ability to understand other people, or put simply as being able to 'walk in another's shoes, is a key attribute for all socially-oriented activities (...)" (Scharoun, Hills, Montana-Hoyos, Peng & Sung, 2020 p.3).

Work Methodology

In the second semester of 2021/22, students from the 2nd year of Communication Design Bachelor in the module of Communication Design II were challenged to use creative design artefacts for sale and fundraising, aiming to help a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that promotes the well-being of children living under unfavourable environmental conditions, ensuring their access to education, healthcare and nutrition.

Client: *The Big Hand*, an NGO based in Lisbon, Portugal.

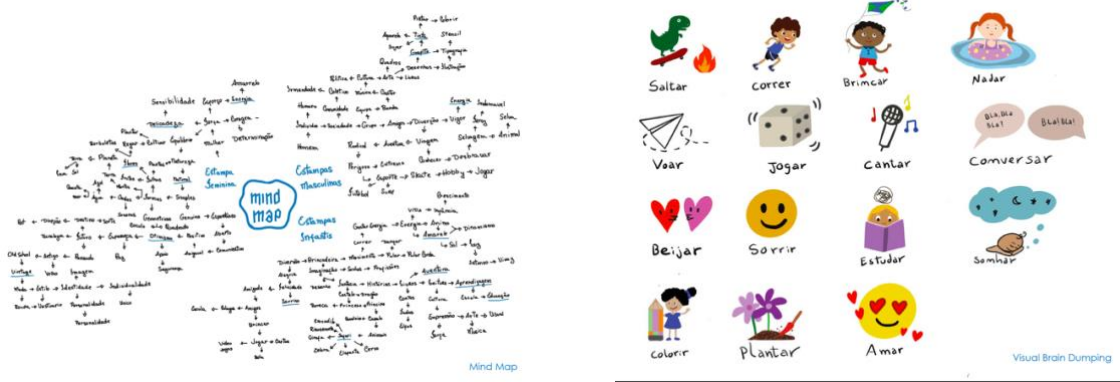
Briefing: A collection of design artefacts for sale and fundraising – T-shirts and sweatshirts for different ages and genders, caps, key holders and tote bags for sale and fundraising to build a school in Monte Chimoio, Manica, Mozambique. Students had five weeks to work on this project (2 classes a week/3, hours each). The creative process was done through the Design Thinking methodology in the following order: *problem definition, ideation, prototype and implementation (problem-solution)* (Lupton & Philipps, 2011).

1. *Problem definition*: In the beginning, President David Fernandes presented the NGO and the briefing through videoconference. The objectives and the target were taken into account (T-shirts for all ages from babies to adults, sweatshirts for teenagers and tote bags, caps, backpacks, critical holders for all), available time (five weeks), proposal (Creative design artefacts for sale and fundraising to build a school in Mozambique), and a schedule with dates for the first-term, mid-term, and final-term assessment.

2. *Ideation and Prototype*: ideas were generated with tools such as words, images, colours and shapes through brainstorming, keywords, action verbs, brain dumping, a mind map and a mood board. Students presented the creative process and ideas with several drawings in the sketchbook. A practice that generates more ideas. Brainstorming is an exercise that starts with a divergent approach to creating an extensive range of options. According to Brown, "When I use drawing to express an idea, I get different results than if I try to express it with words, and I usually get to them more quickly" (Brown, 2009, p.81), (Figs.1 and 2).

Each proposal's strengths and weaknesses were analysed to find the most effective way of fulfilling the initial goal. Design tools, such as colour, contrast, balance, typography, legibility, composition, scales and materials, were considered considering that the campaign will contain a message that needs to be strong but easily understood. This phase was vital to guide students' work and advise them accordingly, as practice-oriented initiatives are crucial in Design teaching. This phase requires exceptional guidance from the teacher, as the teacher's experience allows them to draw attention to certain aspects that often go unnoticed by younger students. Students had difficulty composing the graphic elements in the roll-up because it is extended support in height but narrow in width. This is why, at this stage, an interim presentation and evaluation were carried out, where these factors are highlighted and

usually surpassed. During the creative process, meeting groups facilitate dialogue and share ideas rather than issuing instructions. Creating a collaborative class is a way to learn through engaging students, sharing insights, and gathering feedback from the group. A collaborative process where everyone involved benefits from a positive discussion where solutions are found and sometimes lost ideas are rescued.



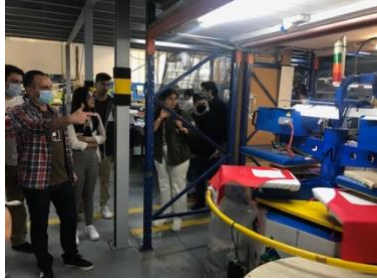
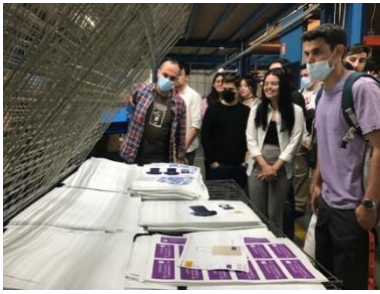
Figs. 1 and 2 – Ideation phase: mind map and visual brain dumping from Sarah Nogueira and Danielly Correia.

The trip

To complement the project developed in the Design classes, on May 25th, 2022, a trip was prepared to a graphic company that produces and prints graphic material for fully customised merchandising – *Nobrinde*. In terms of merchandising production, the company can work with several quantities and materials available in the market: glass, ceramics, textiles, acrylics, paper, wood and metal technology, and also several types of merchandising products/gifts to order, such as T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, handbags, backpacks, pencils, pens, USBs, agendas, flags, and others.

Positive aspects: The trip took place during the ideation phase, a decision that allowed students to have an opportunity to understand all the manufacturing and printing process—a chance to ask questions and become enlightened to decide based on costs and production time. Also, the fact that the proposed work is intended for a real client and, in particular, with a humanitarian purpose increased the students' commitment and encouraged them to work closely together to create the best design proposed. During this activity, teams tested ideas in an exploratory process to increase the number of solutions and find the best one (Figs. 3,4 and 5).

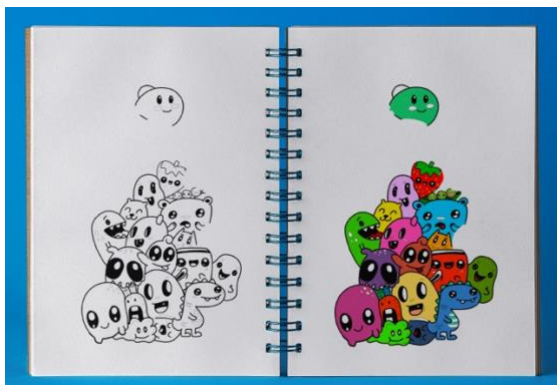
3. *Prototype*: Testing ideas through an exploratory process. Different materials and techniques were tested to find the best proposals. In this term, students presented the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution in a convergent approach after testing their ideas (Figs. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13).



Figs. 3, 4 and 5 – Trip to *Nobrinde*, producing and printing graphic material for fully customised merchandising.



Figs. 6, 7 and 8 – Sarah Nogueira and Danielly Correa.



Figs. 9, 10 and 11 – Luis Góis and Gustavo Santos.



Figs. 12 and 13 – Hugo Carvalho and Pedro Herbstrith Saboya created *The Big Dreamers* alphabet.

4. *Implementation (problem-solution)*: The final solution was developed, finished, and presented with the creative process, and all the steps were justified accordingly. The final assessment considered creativity, relevance, impact, and legibility (Figs. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30).

After the teacher conducted this evaluation in the classroom through an oral presentation, a session was scheduled with the NGO President where students presented their proposals via videoconference. One will be selected to be implemented (Figs.31 and 32).



Figs. 14, 15, 16 and 17 – Luis Góis and Gustavo Santos.



Figs. 18 and 19 – Luis Góis and Gustavo Santos.



Figs. 20 and 21 – Luis Góis and Gustavo Santos.



Figs. 22, 23 and 24 – Hugo Carvalho and Pedro Herbstrith Saboya.



Figs. 25, 26 and 27 – Hugo Carvalho and Pedro Herbstrith Saboya.



Figs. 28, 29 and 30 – Sarah Nogueira and Danielly Correa.



Figs. 31 and 32 – Luis Góis and Gustavo Santos presented their work via videoconference to the NGO President.

Conclusion and Final Considerations

This briefing offers a concrete opportunity for design students' immersion in a specific context through co-working, building empathy with others, learning by doing and helping those in need. In Communication Design bachelor's at Lusófona University, we believe design students must develop sensitivity to social issues. This pedagogical practice proved to be an opportunity for design students to have an immersive design project that focuses on a specific social situation and the possibility of applying the tools and methods learned in the curriculum course. Design scholars must motivate and prepare students to work on projects helping those in need for a better world. Students must believe that design should play a role in social issues, such as equity and social justice. Also, an opportunity to prepare students for the real working world by engaging through innovative practices for real problems and preparing them for the challenges they will face. This academic project that goes beyond traditional university practices was an opportunity to develop core skills for the workplace. A chance to visit a factory that produces and prints merchandising objects, to ask questions, and become enlightened to decide based on costs and production time. This collaborative work allowed students to see their work published and sold to support a social project. It proved to be an opportunity for students to engage in real-life work with the possibility of applying the tools and methods learned in the course.

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