

The Role of Design: A Humanitarian Approach and an Opportunity to Prepare Students for the Real Working World

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Abstract

This study aims to contextualise and describe a pedagogical practice developed in the Academic curriculum at Lusófona University of Porto (ULP) in the first semester of 2021/22 with students from the 2nd year of Communication Design bachelor. *A pencil for a school* is a solidarity campaign to help build a school in the village of Matsinho, in the province of Manica, Mozambique. This is 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, ensuring their access to education, healthcare and nutrition. The campaign's briefing includes a pencil, a set of posters, a roll-up, a T-shirt, and a label for a can to collect donations. To complement the project developed in Design classes, a free one-day workshop was held, in which students had the opportunity to talk with the President of the NGO, ask questions and share ideas. This article emphasises the responsibility of educators in preparing young students and future designers to be able to face contemporary challenges, using their skills as an alternative method of intervention in social issues and realising the role of design in promoting positive change. It also offers a solid opportunity to prepare graduates for the real working world and encourage engagement through innovative practice. It also proved to inspire the new generation of designers to have an empathetic mentality and do not work only for commercial purposes but also for social needs.

Keywords: The Role of Design, Pedagogical Practice, Design Educators, Real Working World, A Pencil for a School

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Introduction

At Lusófona University of Porto (ULP), we believe that design students must develop sensitivity to social problems. A way for students to work with real projects helping those most in need.

A pencil for a school is a solidarity campaign to promote and help build a school in the village of Matsinho, province of Manica, in Mozambique. This is an action 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. 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 is a citizens' organisation that aims to transform children's lives through its child-centred pedagogical model. It works in partnership with communities, local organisations and governments. The Big Hand builds "friendly schools" based on UNICEF's best practices. This campaign started from the collaboration between the Academy (ULP) and *The Big Hand*. For this purpose, a partnership protocol was established between both institutions. The campaign's briefing includes a pencil, a set of posters, a roll-up, a T-shirt, and a label (for a can) to collect donations. The sale of a pencil costs €1 and goes towards building the school.

To complement the project developed in Design classes, a free one-day workshop was held, in which students had the opportunity to talk with the President of the NGO, ask questions and share ideas. The workshop was an optional activity. However, all students joined enthusiastically. These proactive initiatives beyond the classroom context are essential to developing a sense of responsibility and commitment to the proposed projects.

A pedagogical practice that proved to be valuable in integrating students into a project of social nature, and this way influenced the new generation of designers to have an empathetic method of think and working towards humanitarian causes. A project that engaged students and generated enthusiasm. Simultaneously, through design, it has contributed to making a positive difference in the future and dreams of these children – a solidarity campaign to build a school in Mozambique.

The role of design in promoting social change and preparing students to work with real projects helping those most in need - literature review

Today's society faces complex challenges for which social design is responsible for mediating, such as migration, climate change, population ageing, chronic diseases, poverty, loss of biodiversity, and reduction of natural resources, that require new solutions where Design should assume an important role. According to Resnick (2009), we live in transitional times, and design has a vital role to play, "Social Design is a recent field of study where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society—initially inspired by the writings of William Morris, Buckminster Fuller, Victor Papanek, and others (...)" (Resnick, 2019, p.3).

Papanek (2004), Margolin (2014), Resnick (2019), Frascara (2019), and other authors argue that the ways of understanding and acting in the reality from which we structure and conduct the world need to be fundamentally restructured to address the critical nature of these challenges.

Papanek held conferences at universities worldwide, inspiring generations of students and promoting social debate and playing a significant role in disseminating social design principles. Victor Papanek and Victor Margolin were pioneers in need to involve students in real-world projects, preparing them as future designers invested in causes that would attempt to solve issues present in society. According to Papanek, "Some of us can, through schools, bring our students into direct and continuous contact with real people's real needs in a real world instead of manufacturing needs for them." (Resnick, 2019, p.61)

According to Margolin (2014), if the social projects we're involved in the pedagogical objectives, students eventually believe that they would be able to carry out work inside and outside of the classroom, "one of the school's greatest achievements, as it responds to the essential problem of finding a place for Design in a system that satisfies social needs, instead of satisfying the market." (Margolin, 2014, p.65). The author gives the project Design for Democracy as an example. Students of Illinois University redesigned the ballot paper as ballot boxes and brochures with informative material, among other communication methods. As states Margolin (Margolin, 2014, p.141). This project was vital in educating young students to understand how their creations can be a means to change the way we live as citizens positively. The universities should promote more writing, lectures, relationships, and debates to encourage and alert citizens with new methods of social practices. In a conference at OCAD in Toronto, Margolin (Margolin, 2014, p.3). Introduced the concept of "citizen-designer" because the designer plays multiple roles, each with its own political and social dimension. For these roles, he called "Action Matrix", which he gives three levels: the micro-level is the individual action, where he includes issues such as art schools and universities; the intermediate level mediates between the individual; and the macro-level consists of the government, international organisations and big corporations. Resnick states (2019):

Social design is the practice of design where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society. Initially inspired by the writings of William Morris, R. Buckminster Fuller, Victor Papanek, and others, the 'social' in social design's agenda is to encourage designers and creative professionals to adopt a more proactive role to effect tangible change to make life better for others rather than to sell them products and services they neither need nor want, which has been the primary motivation for commercial design practice in the twentieth century. (p.39)

Frascara recognises three areas of design practice for improving our overall quality of life: "design that works to make life possible, a design that works to make life easier, and design that works to make life better." (Resnick, 2019, p.186)

A Pencil for a School is an initiative that offers a concrete opportunity for design students' immersion in a specific context by working with a real project, learning and helping those most in need. According to Krucken & Mouckrek, "(...) understanding sociocultural aspects and figuring out the role (and responsibility) of design in promoting change. By interacting and reflecting on the praxis, this experience promotes a "learning by doing together" approach." (Krucken & Mouckrek, 2008, p.133)

Moholy-Nagy, in his book *Vision in Motion*, argues, “Designing is not a profession but an attitude.” (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, p.42). The author 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)

Design played an essential role as a social agent of change, raising community awareness, generating support to build a school in Mozambique, and impacting children’s education and future. As said Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”¹

A Pencil for a School–Work Methodology

In the first semester of 2021/22, students from the first year of Communication Design Bachelor in the module of Communication Design I were challenged to develop an advertising campaign to raise funds for building a school in the village of Matsinho – *A pencil for a school*. The action is aimed at all people living in Portugal.

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

Briefing: The advertising campaign must include a pencil, three posters in A2 format (420X594 mm), a roll-up (2060x900mm), a T-shirt, and a can design for collecting donations and an Instagram post.

Students had four weeks to work on this project (2 classes a week/3 hours each class). The time available for carrying out the project was too short. To overcome the problem, it was decided to create groups: five teams, each consisting of two students and a free one-day workshop to complement the project developed in the Design classes. The creative process was done through the *Design Thinking* methodology and began in the following order: *problem definition, ideation, prototype and implementation (problem-solution)*.

1. First-term – *Problem definition*: At the beginning, the client delivered the briefing and the essential material to carry out the campaign: a set of photographs from the local (Matsinho village) and from the children; a dossier with all the activities carried out by the Association since the beginning of its foundation (2008); *The Big Hand* logo and the logos from the partners who support the movement. The process began with the briefing. The objectives were taken into account: the target (children from 6-18 years old), available time (four weeks), proposal (advertising campaign to raise funds for the construction of a school), and a schedule with dates for the first-term, mid-term, and final-term assessment.

2. Mid-term – *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 a set of ideas, with several drawings registered in the sketchbook. An exercise that starts with a divergent approach to creating an extensive range of options (Figs.1, 2, 3, 4 and 5).

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

¹ One speech, Madison Park High School, Boston, 23 June 1990, reported in various forms.

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 some 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 are held to 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.

The Workshop

To complement the project developed in the Design classes, on the 17th of December 2021, a free one-day workshop took place at ULP, from 9:30 until 17.30. The workshop took place during the ideation phase. Students had the opportunity to talk with the President of the NGO through a video conference through the Zoom platform and have a chance to ask questions, share ideas and listen to the client's opinion. During this day, teamwork had the opportunity to try different solutions and techniques – analogic, digital or both, always guided by the form teacher (Fig.6).

Positive aspects: Teamwork and the workshop were additional benefits – a creative learning space where students with their peers and the tutor work together to find design solutions. A practice that generated students' engagement with the project.

In addition, they are allowing for a close relationship between the teacher, students and the client. A collaborative learning environment similar to a design studio where students and lecturers are engaged in learning and teaching through a real-life problem. During this activity, teams tested ideas in an exploratory process to increase the number of solutions and find the best one. Also, the fact that the proposed work is intended for a real client and, in particular, with a humanitarian purpose increased the dedication and commitment of the students and encouraged them to work closely together to create the best design proposed.

These proactive initiatives beyond the classroom context are essential to developing a sense of responsibility and commitment to the proposed projects.

The workshop was an optional activity. However, all students joined enthusiastically.

Papanek wrote in an article for *Iconographic* n° 9, "Let me close by quoting a proverb from China that sums up why design and design education must be directly tied to meaningful work and participatory life: I hear, and I forget, I see, and I remember, I do, and I understand." (Resnick, 2019, p.62)

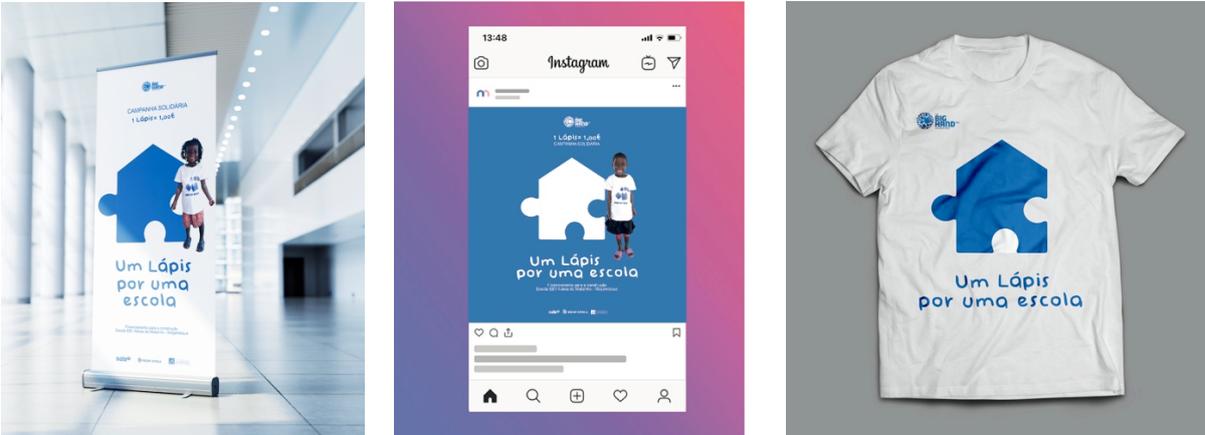
3. *Prototype*: Testing ideas through an exploratory process. In this term, after testing their ideas, students presented the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution in a convergent approach. According to Brown, "If the convergent phase of problem-solving is what drives us toward solutions, the objective of divergent thinking is to multiply options to create choices." (Brown, 2009, p.67)



Figs. 9 and 10 – Posters and roll-up mockup, work from Sarah Nogueira and Danielly Correa



Figs. 11 and 12 – Can design for collecting donations and roll-up mockup, work from Catarina Mendes and Inês Ferreira



Figs. 13, 14 and 15 – Roll-up, Instagram post and T-Shirt mockup, work from Gustavo Santos and Luís Gois

Final Considerations

At Lusófona University of Porto (ULP), we believe that design students must develop sensitivity to social problems. A way for students to work with real projects helping those most in need, and allows them, among other things, to find good use of their skills in praxis.

These proactive initiatives beyond the classroom context are essential to developing a sense of responsibility and commitment to the proposed projects. Also, for *The Big Hand*, the possibility of obtaining a range of proposals for free.

With this project, students and lecturers create interactive knowledge and learn through reflection in action by working together and sharing ideas, testing solutions, and displaying the results. In addition, design played an important role as a social agent of change, raising community awareness, helping to generate support for building a school and making a positive difference in the future and dreams of these children. Also, this pedagogical practice proved to be valuable in integrating students into a project of social nature, and this way influenced the new generation of designers to have an empathetic mentality and not work only for commercial purposes but also towards humanitarian causes in their future careers. Collaborative work and an excellent opportunity for students to see their work printed and disseminated and to provide support for a social program – a campaign to raise funds for building a school in Mozambique.

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