This work is an approach to traditional knowledge and skill origins and it shares the service of social inclusion and autonomy. Not only the retrieval of dormant techniques, but mainly about the essence of human's life.

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The new school collaborates: teaching and learning design and social responsibility in immersive international field programs

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Abstract

More than ever, universities need to create opportunities for our students to learn about, and practice social responsibility and particularly, to create change for the real world (in which 90% of the population has a critical need.)

This paper focuses on the first two years of an ongoing project between The New School's divisions of Parsons (design), Milano (management and urban development) and General Studies (international affairs), in New York, several external partners, and groups of Mayan artisan women in Guatemala, as an ongoing project in social entrepreneurship and humanitarian design. Of particular interest is how students, through an interdisciplinary spring curriculum and an intensive experience in Guatemala are learning skills that would never be possible in a standard on-campus classroom setting, and how interdisciplinary groups of students can holistically approach development work with artisan groups with the long-term goals of culture preservation and income generation.

Keywords

Social design, social responsibility, interdisciplinariety, cultural diversity

Context

The Design for the Other 90% exhibition website states that

"Of the world's total population of 6.5 billion…90%, have little or no access to most of the products and services many of us take for granted."

This statistic offers a responsibility and an opportunity for educational institutions to specifically engage students in collaborations that will ameliorate this statistic. There has been much engagement from the disciplines in the Social Sciences, particularly around economic development, but art and design institutions have not, until very recently, started to understand the positive impact design can have in underserved communities. Case studies, such as those documented by UNESCO, have also demonstrated that design can play "an important role in encouraging environmentally sustainable and economically viable models…of marginalized groups." (Craft Revival Trust et al., 2005, p. 6)

This opportunity has led to the creation of a cross-divisional and interdisciplinary faculty research group at The New School interested in socio-economic and urban development through design.

Universities are not always immediately able to engage with communities in need since they are in the "business" of teaching and learning, with a principle focus of face-to-face on-campus semester-long courses. The role of a partner can help break the boundaries of the physical campus by connecting faculty and students to their constituents. It becomes critical to adopt a model for partnerships such as this one adapted by the Collective Leadership Institute (see Figure 1). (Collective Leadership Institute, 2007).
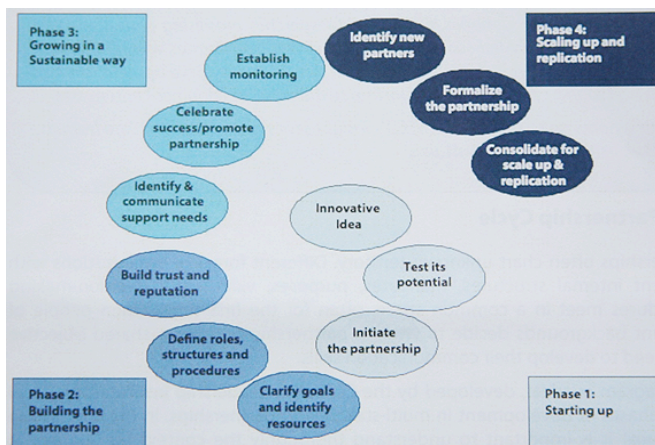

Figure 1: The Partnership Cycle

In 2007 the global humanitarian organization CARE and The New School (TNS) embarked on a long term collaborative project to empower a group of Mayan women in Guatemala—Ajkem'a Loy'a (AL)—by helping them develop a business model to export their handcrafted products to the United States. However, the partnership was not established using the above model and has since been dissolved. Observed challenges that should be addressed

in future collaborations include that the project started off with a very large grant by a private donor, without planning to raise money for a continuing engagement, the contacts in the partnership were in the marketing and PR office, not in the offices which offer the core skill of CARE (ie. development), and there was no upfront agreement on how the two organizations would work together, and how this work would be financially sustained. In late 2008 CARE Guatemala lost all of their funding related to AL and worldwide staffing cuts compromised the ability for CARE USA staff to be able to provide further engagement in the partnership.

In 2009, TNS has now partnered with the municipality of San Antonio de Aguas Calientes to connect with their community tourism program, specifically working with a variety of artisan women groups. Following the diagram above, we are in the first circle – testing two "innovative ideas": first, that students can aid the artisan women in their goal of generating a sustainable income from the sale of their artisan goods and second, that San Antonio can be positioned as a destination for community tourism.

Pedagogy

The pedagogical emphasis has been to establish an equal exchange between all participants (between faculty and students, as well as between university affiliates and community partners and individuals). With this value as a priority, and with the assumption that students need to prepare on campus before being immersed in hands-on fieldwork, faculty from several programs at Parsons The New School for Design and from TNS's Graduate Program in International Affairs (GPIA) structured a spring course as a prerequisite for the month-long immersive summer program in Guatemala.

The spring course runs as a lecture series and seminar and ends with an intensive prototyping phase in which teams of students apply what has been read and discussed to the real world context within which they will be working in the summer. The lectures (which are offered by the core faculty as well as experts from a variety of areas within and outside the university) include teaching and learning in informal settings; digital media to communicate, represent and activate; microcredit and financing; marketing; fundraising; and urban development.

It has been critical to demystify the notion of a single expert, and be able to create an equal field of questions, skills, and knowledge to which all participants (students and faculty) can contribute and learn from. This approach has been visibly successful while in the field when students can actively position themselves as consultants with a wide

variety of skills and life experiences (which often extend far beyond their declared "major".)

The course is by application only, to ensure a high quality of students, and a balanced variety of skills and interests. This process has resulted in a mix of approximately 14 students – from Design and Management, Design and Technology, Fashion Design, Fashion Marketing, Graphic Design, Integrated Design, International Affairs, and Organizational Change.

This mix of students and the nature of the project lend itself for an integrative learning environment. "Integrative learning is an umbrella term for structures, strategies, and activities that bridge numerous divides, such as … general education and the major, introductory and advanced levels, experiences inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice, and disciplines and fields." (Klein, 2005, p. 1).

This positioning of students as active agents of the knowledge they have, prepares them to be the leaders, facilitators and teachers of the capacity-building aspect of the summer work. Some workshops that students have prepared and conducted span from ice-breaker activities to promote leadership and teamwork, to specific skill-based workshops in product pricing, sewing, patternmaking and computers, as well as discussion based activities such as how to run an organization and what to do about inventory and quality control.

Additionally, the faculty facilitate students in leading the project on the ground in Guatemala. This hands-on intensive approach requires that students quickly be able to translate theory (from the spring class and previous training) into practice, and always results in a shift for students where they no longer feel that this is a "class," but it is a situation in the real world in which they are playing a critical role.

Design

Given that the professional world that our students enter is increasingly changeable and unpredictable the dynamics and context that shape our educational models are also increasingly complex. The impact of globalization requires that art and design institutions prepare students to address, respond to, and work in a multi-national economy, and multi-cultural social and political contexts. As educators we are increasingly obliged to provide engage with issues of ecological sustainability that arguably require dramatic changes to pedagogical strategies to effectively introduce students to systems, networks, scale, time, relational thinking, and an ethical understanding of their impacts.

As Thackara states in his book In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World, "In today's ultra-networked world, it makes more sense to think of design as a process that continuously defines a system's rules rather than its outcomes." (2005). Arida in Quantum City follows a similar logic by stating that urban designers need to be understanding of time and change in the built environment in relation to use and shifts in cultural and political perspectives. (2002). There is a growing consensus among design critics professionals and educators, that designers today need to be 'mindful' and be able to evaluate the consequence of design decisions and potential impact on people, place, cultures and our futures. (Thackara, 2005).

Subscribing to this expansive notion of design allows participating students (and not just those "majoring" in design) to think about their work as active skills and knowledges to activate change. Students in the projects have engaged with graphic design (logo redesigns, promotional materials, branding), product design (expanding the product offerings of artisans), curriculum design (in preparing the workshops they deliver as well as teaching artisans how to teach), and design process (as a methodology through which to solve problems resourcefully.)

Outcomes

It is very simple to accumulate a series of deliverables at the end of an immersive fieldwork program. Both the community collaborators and partners (and potentially also funders) are very willing and interested in seeing tangible results and it is natural that everyone involved, in dealing with challenging issues such as poverty, is interested in seeing immediate results in the hope to make a difference.

Less simple is to produce deliverables that "stick" with the community, that truly activate change, and that make a long-term difference. This was a huge lesson learned from the first program in 2008. The artisan's store which was redesigned and fully painted inside and on the façade, is no longer occupied by the group. The workshops for tourists program that students spent so many hours preparing the artisans, and for which a bilingual brochure was designed has not remained a priority for Ajkem'a Loy'a. A micro loan which was adopted by a small portion of the group has been paid off on time, but has also created tremendous tension within the women, and has closed off participation to others in the community.

On the other hand, the women of AL continue to refer to how they learned to price their products in one of the student-led workshops. Several of the members are now comfortable emailing and checking web sites. Most importantly, the core group continues to be extremely motivated to move their association and their product development

forward, and this is in big part thanks to the collaborations with which they have been engaged.

The above mentioned experiences are guiding the work that is just starting in San Antonio de Aguas Calientes. Students and faculty continue to emphasize the value in establishing long-term networks, relationships, and collaborations, and are designing the summer project with activities that will strengthen the various groups involved (via conversations with the municipality as well as with the artisan women, and less skills-focused and more discussion-based activities) and will more likely lead to a multi-year collaboration which will increase the possibility for success in the project.

Conclusions

These types of projects are ideal for a university such as The New School. They require the participation of experts from a variety of fields and therefore facilitates a natural cross-divisional collaboration even in a large university. The intensive and team-based nature of the collaboration also naturally lends itself to bringing together groups of students from a variety of programs and year-levels.

The research group's next steps include
- Continue to monitor the work of Ajkem'a Loy'a and every new artisan group with whom the group works.
- Expand the partnerships so that there is not an over reliance on one partner which can compromise the quality of the work on the ground.
- Continue to refine the proposed model and dissemina-te it so that it can start to be replicated and adopted by other universities, aid organizations, or artisan groups.
- Further position the group within the university, via internal and external grants and public programs, and continue to challenge the standard 15-week on-campus courses.

One of the biggest challenge TNS will continue to face in this project relates to avoiding scenarios of dependency in which the artisan women cannot succeed without the input or support of external groups. This is a critical priority for the university and yet one of the hardest goals to reach.

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