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Developing intercultural competencies and new perspectives on graphic design pedagogy through international volunteering.

Abstract.

Within the field of graphic design many contemporary designers and educators seek to challenge global corporate homogenization and the exploitation of developing countries (Rawsthorn 2013; Poynor 1999; McCoy 1994). The 'First Things First 2000' manifesto re-booted the Humanist and socially conscious perspective that was originally set out by Ken Garland's 'First Things First' manifesto (1964), arguing that design was not a neutral process, but one that should be more critical and challenging of the consumer focused output, that forms a great deal of graphic design professional practice .

In an increasingly global economy students must develop an intercultural awareness of themselves and other cultures. Within the field of design education Mendoza & Matyók (2013) argue that design is a transformative and socially engaged practice offering an important platform for student internationalisation. Although there is a growing body of academic literature on the internationalisation of higher education, there is still a lack of research on the students' perspective.

This chapter analyses how UK design students participated and negotiated the implementation of live projects in an African context, specifically Mozambique. The aim was that a cultural learning experience in a very different environment with challenging resources and social conditions would develop student global citizenship and mobility, and would offer alternative approaches to graphic design career development and professional practice.

Keywords - Citizenship, Mobility, Internationalisation, Graphic Design

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Introduction-

Sanga Moses grew up in one of the poorest villages in Uganda, he didn't wear shoes until he was thirteen. He went on to study business administration at University, the first member of his family to do so. When he graduated, he set up ECO FUEL AFRICA with just \$200. The social enterprise produces clean, cheap cooking fuel and organic fertilizer for poverty stricken rural regions, like the one where he was born.

Sanga designed an innovative process where agricultural waste is converted into organic charcoal briquettes, providing a regular supply of fertilizer to farmers, and clean, cheap and safe cooking fuel to local communities. He created jobs, an innovative process, a sustainable business which meets energy needs, and addressed an important health issue – *“Every year more than one and a half million Africans die from indoor air pollution, often having been poisoned from the noxious fumes of makeshift cooking fuel”* (Rawsthorn 2013).

In 2011, he reached out for help to find a way of packaging up the briquettes, so mostly women and children could carry them for long distances.

Supply chain and resources were limited in Uganda, the solution had to be produced easily and cheaply in that part of the world.

Two graphic design students solved the problem, designing a sturdy paper draw string sack to hold the light briquettes, which has now been in production since 2012. The students didn't meet Sanga Moses, they were briefed on the project by a Scottish NGO, and sent him their ideas for consideration by email.

When the design work was completed, by way of thanks he sent a poem -

*“You have touched our lives with your kindness;
We want to tell you ‘Thank you’ but it doesn't seem enough.
Words don't seem sufficient-‘Blah, blah” and all that stuff.
Please know we have deep feelings about your generous act.
We really appreciate you - you guys are special, and that's a fact!
Thank you, thank you so much” From Eco-fuel Africa”*

Alice Rawsthorn, influential design critic of The International Herald Tribune and The New York Times showcased the above work in *Hello World – Where Design meets life* (Rawsthorn 2013), and in our studio, the horizons of graphic

design students were considerably expanded, and a new philosophy was embedded in the programme – one of using design skills in a socially responsible way, in an intercultural context.

The above project, along with others discussed later allowed students to see that *“Rather than sharing our cycles of style, consumption, and chemical addictions, designers can use their professional power, persuasive skills, and wisdom to help distribute ideas that the world really needs: health information, conflict resolution, tolerance, technology, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, human rights, democracy ...”* (Berman 2009).



Context –

The critical contexts influencing the creative work discussed in this chapter are set out in McCoy (1994), Poyner (1999), Mau (2004), Berman (2009), and Rawsthorn (2013). The issue of how graphic designers use their skills in professional practice has been debated, and has influenced design pedagogy for some time.

“Designers have enormous power to influence how we see our world - change our world and live our lives” (Berman 2009). This statement is true to an extent, but designers cannot do it alone, or without an understanding of the world they are attempting to change. Students are taught that design has an important role to play in our contemporary world - they are members of a subjective practice, located in a larger social field of collaboration, influence, responsibility, participation, creativity and reflection.

Teaching strategies in design disciplines have developed around, and are simultaneously directed towards culturally and socially appropriate, collaborative design pedagogies and artifacts. As design educators, we play the role of social agents, integrating the complexities of society into spaces of reflective learning, nurturing diverse pedagogical approaches, which stimulate the next generation of designers to become agents of change, who, ignited by curiosity and inquiry, *“Understand and are empowered by design beyond its service-based function”* (Mau 2004).

In the autumn of 1999, the newly drafted manifesto, ‘First Things First 2000’, appeared in at least six journals, including Emigre, AIGA Journal of Graphic Design⁵ and Adbusters in North America, Eye and Blueprint in the UK, and, on the European Continent, Items (and, much later, Form).

It carried Ken Garland’s name once more, augmented by those of thirty-two new signatories. In his short article on the history of First Things First, Poyner stated their concern that there was ‘a massive over-emphasis on the commercial sector of society, which consumes most of graphic designers’ time, skills and creativity’

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(Poynor 1999: 56).

He thereby made a vital distinction between this singular, commercial role of graphic design and 'the possibility . . . that design might have broader purposes, potential and meanings'. Katherine McCoy, an American design educator, had earlier expressed the situation thus:

Designers must break out of the obedient, neutral, servant-to-industry mentality, an orientation that was particularly strong in the Reagan/Thatcher 1980s. . . . Design is not a neutral, value-free process. A design has no more integrity than its purpose or subject matter. (McCoy, 1994: 111)

A further shift in thinking took place in 2004, when Canadian graphic designer, Bruce Mau published *Massive Change - A Manifesto for the future of Global Design*. The book and accompanying touring exhibition, explored the changing forces of design in the contemporary world.

"Our idea of design goes beyond the way things look to the way things work. To paraphrase Marcel Duchamp, we set out to liberate design from "the tyranny of the eye." Surveying the world we found hundreds of examples where visionaries were using design to effect positive change in the world - we called this pattern 'Massive Change' (Mau 2004).

This approach is supported by Jonathan Barnbrook, a radical British graphic designer and signatory of the 'First Things First 2000 Manifesto'

"I realised that the critical context of graphic design isn't as simple as 'get a commission, do the job for the client as best you can'. It's a whole lot more complex than that - Design shapes the environment. It helps us interact with and perceive the world. In fact, graphic design has always been a method of social change. Throughout history, leaders have facilitated social change through the distribution of printed word. It really is that simple"
(Interview, The Design Museum, November 2014).

Simultaneously, Mau founded 'The Institute Without Boundaries' in Toronto in collaboration with George Brown College. Here the philosophy of 'Massive Change' was embedded in education at graduate level, fostering collaboration between disciplines to create "innovative local solutions to 21st century global challenges"

Mau (2004) suggests the graphic designer is positioned at the centre of this approach, called upon to visualise complex data and ideas before something

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exists as a product, service or business. The skill of the graphic designer can allow us to see “How things will look, but also create a visual understanding of how things will work” thus allowing other disciplines to understand and provide service to what was an intangible idea.

Design can be an international language, however design students must learn to use the power of visual language in an intercultural context, and to be the conduit for bringing together interdisciplinary communities, who, when working together can effect positive change globally.

The silos of individual design disciplines, and the students/ designers who occupied them was challenged, and the result was the development of a *T shaped designer* (Brown 2009) – deep and rich in subjective knowledge, forming the vertical axis of the T, yet reaching out into new territories, disciplines and cultures, to collaborate and solve complex problems in the uncharted territory between disciplines, and for diverse communities.

Intercultural competency requires effective communication with others, the ability to establish relationships and the ability to deal with psychological stress. Communicative competency requires empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, the ability to show respect and sensitivity to posture (Root and Ngampornchai 2013). These competencies are essential if graduates, and especially those in design, are to be prepared for global citizenship and design without borders.

‘Five go to Mozambique’ - The Project.

The activities of most cultures are unfathomable, unless they are viewed from within the culture, for membership of a culture provides a set of cultural eyeglasses that are the key to understanding and carrying out its activities.

(Brown et al 1989: 6).

This project created a series of learning and reflective spaces for students, some of which were unknown at the planning stage. The graphic design programme has a strong international focus. Students are encouraged to engage with design as both a local and international language, which breaks down barriers for

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audiences and themselves as designers.

Since 2011, the programme has collaborated with Challenges Worldwide, an Edinburgh based charity, working globally to support SME's in the developing world.

Challenges Worldwide is a pioneering not-for-profit social enterprise. We believe that by supporting the development of fair and inclusive local economies we can help alleviate poverty and bring a lasting positive impact to communities in low- and middle-income countries.

A live project offering embedded at year three gives students the opportunity to communicate with, and serve communities locally and globally. The work - branding and identity for small business and NGO's sourced by Challenges Worldwide, has benefitted food banks in Scotland, wind farms in Kosovo, craftspeople in Gaza, an energy company in Uganda (Case study, Hello World; Rawsthorn 2013: P218-20, 222), a honey farm in Mozambique, a maker of fruit preserves in Swaziland, a recruitment agency in Malawi and two Scottish University scientific research projects.

Students who undertook these projects have work at an international level in their portfolios. When they reflected on these experiences, they found that their *"Boundaries had expanded considerably"* (Brooks and Waters 2011; Waters, Brooks and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

This working process was a turning point for the programme, by developing an international, collaborative approach, which effected positive change and progress for the participating SME's, we found a new way of engaging with the subject of branding at home, and in the developing world, where lack of supply chain and infrastructure are debilitating to small business.

Through this approach, students see how their work can create new possibilities and positive change - by creating identity for business, they can make that business come to life.

Branding is often seen and experienced by students as an activity supporting high levels of commercial/ consumer activity, as challenged by the *'First Things First Manifesto', 1964 & 2000*. In this case, their skills helped small business off the MacLeod M. & Macdonald I. 2016 in *Innovations in Learning and Teaching*, edited by Penman and Foster. Merchiston Publishing, 2016. ISBN 978-0-9576882-8-5

ground, on the other side of the world, in a different culture – they came to see that the skills they were learning on the course were an international language and erased boundaries for them as designers, as well as broadened their horizons in terms of where they could work in the future.

A valuable new space of learning and reflection was created which has since informed the programme in a much deeper way.

In November 2013, Graphic Design students, from the same year and programme began working with a German/Mozambican NGO, on a live studio project to design soap packaging and publicity material for SHINE - a women's co-operative, and their other supporting initiative – LIFE, a new annual film festival.

In Mossuril, a poor coastal town in northern Mozambique, a soap co-op has been established to deliver employment for vulnerable women, and improve the hygiene in an area where diarrhea kills more people than HIV/AIDS, malaria and measles combined.

The work was aligned to learning outcomes, and completed within a timeframe for assessment. It was also shared with all stakeholders in Berlin, Holland and Mozambique via the internet, where they were able to select the most appropriate identity for the two initiatives. One of the main points fed back to us was that a visual identity had been created that allowed all involved to see the soap product, and the festival experience – it wasn't just an idea anymore. This was a valuable space of learning for the students – graphic design was not something that was applied to existing forms and experiences – it could make them exist in the first place.

The NGO's were so impressed with the selected design work, they felt that the student designers could gain valuable experience by participating in their implementation in Mozambique. The NGO in Berlin proceeded to crowd fund the soap initiative, and raised \$6000. A significant part of this success was due to the sophisticated graphics produced for the campaign, and the strong identity of the

soap product - *The skill of the graphic designer can allow us to see 'how things will look, but also create a visual understanding of how things will work'* (Mau 2004). When the students saw their work being used to raise money globally, another space of learning was created, one where current forms of entrepreneurship, the internet, and graphic design skills became a powerful enabling force in an international context.

What began as an international and inter-cultural live design brief was now a proposed study of overseas community engagement with design as an enhanced student learning experience.

Five students and two tutors travelled to Mozambique, and the month long project was set as a credit-bearing module, formalising it into the assessed programme of study.

A number of cross pollinating spaces of learning were created - in the studio, in Mozambique, in a crowd funding campaign and in a live blog - a global landscape of interconnecting learning spaces, real and virtual were created for students to engage with, all pulled together by design.

The designer is a 'connectivist' with an inherent capacity to establish and foster links between disciplines and cultures. These skills inform how we identify and act upon situations where design can improve the wellbeing of a community, and provide solutions to economic, ecological and cultural sustainability—locally and globally - Cahalan 2007.

Methodology -

The research methodology was to record the learning experiences of the students using student blogs written in the field, and from video interviews recorded before, during and after the 4-week long trip to Mozambique. In the analysis their understanding of Mozambican nationalism as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) and post-colonial identity (Said 1994; Chomsky 2000) was questioned.

Many academics are critical of the impact that such studies abroad claim to have on the student. There is an assumption that immersion in a different culture will automatically lead to intercultural competency. Instead students must first reflect on their own culture and behaviour (Chomsky 2000). Post-colonial theory

can challenge 'cultural essentialism' (Crouch 2000) that might otherwise inhibit a culturally informed encounter between European and African students as they actively try to shape the world around them.

It is invaluable experience for design students to see their work in production and being implemented, but this was an extraordinary opportunity to participate in international community engagement abroad in Africa. It was hoped that the cultural learning experience in a very different environment with challenging resources and social conditions would develop student global citizenship and mobility. The NGO saw potential for graphic design and its transformative power to change perceptions and attitudes in a country that is poorly served by the media.

'Education plays a vital role in preparing design students to move beyond a purely reactive state to one in which they are actively engaged in shaping the world around them' (Mendoza and Matyók 2013: 215). *International study abroad provides a potentially richer holistic approach to education at a time when higher education has moved towards discipline specific training and job preparation* (Mendoza and Matyók 2013).

The aim of this project in the field, was to develop student global citizenship and mobility through a cultural learning experience in a very different environment with challenging resources and social conditions. Using student interviews and evidence from reflective journals, we were able to analyse the experience of implementing live design work in an African context, specifically Mozambique. We were also able to examine the wider impact on the cohort of students and friends who did not travel to Africa but followed the experience online on the blog, which began on day one, but to which all participants contributed. In the month of the project the blog received three thousand hits, and many messages of support. The University Principal engaged with the blog, as did colleagues, industry partners, friends, students and parents – it created an inclusive space of learning for all who read it.

During the four weeks in rural Mozambique the students worked alongside local students and in the process developed shared working practices to create branding materials and publicity for the SHINE soap cooperative and the LIFE

Film Festival. *The First Things First Manifesto*; (Garland 1964) provides an approach that can culturally inform the European and African students in this study as they actively shape the world around them. Here, a vital distinction was made between the '*singular, commercial role of graphic design and 'the possibility . . . that design might have broader purposes, potential and meanings'*'.

Many UK universities are following the Higher Education Academy (HEA) with strategic plans to make themselves international '*to enhance the student learning experience*' (HEA 2008: 6). As economies become globally connected there is pressure for higher education to develop student intercultural awareness and global citizenship (*Brooks and Waters 2011; Waters, Brooks and Pimlott-Wilson 2011*).

The students documented their experience in Mozambique using video interviews, reflective journals and their own drawings, photography and film. Reflective learning journals are widely used to reflect on the '*encounters*' or '*moments*' or '*experiences*', by briefly recording learning events, which allow reflection on the meaning of the experience for their own development and learning (Loo & Thorpe, 2002; Wagner, 2006). They provide up to date reflections on events as they happen rather than retrospectively such as in interviews or questionnaires and give strength to other evidence of experience. (quantitative or qualitative).

At the end of their study abroad students were asked to review themselves and what they had recorded in their journals and write and design a book that encompassed a reflection of their learning experience. Through this activity students use their own 'filter' to select the key moments, so a student perspective in selecting key points to reflect on is maintained.

Reflective accounts alone cannot capture the effectiveness of intercultural communication, they can fail to '*connect surface-level cultural norms with deeper values and cultural assumptions*' (Root and Ngampornchai 2013: 524). Design students have the opportunity to communicate visually and creatively in their

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process and through physical tactile interaction with materials.

Observing and repeating techniques, whether with paint and brush or keypad and computer, allows for tacit knowledge and cultural behaviour to be transferred and made explicit.

The prevailing educational culture encourages learning through activity, reflection and conversation (Scottish Funding Council, 2006: 4). *These changes also reflect the requirements of commerce and industry, who are demanding graduates with communication, team working and analytical skills* (Leckey and McGuigan, 1997: 366). (Bryant et al 2009: 8).

The students participating in this project were able to engage in meaningful design work with local youths and so out of necessity had to develop communication skills and cultural awareness in order to successfully complete the design tasks in the field. The methodology of documenting this process as it happened was by using video and photography.

When interviewed before they were about to depart

There was a shared mix of emotions: apprehension, nervousness but also excitement. For one it felt 'surreal' to be on their way after months of anticipation and preparation. They were all looking forward to spending time in a completely different environment, experiencing a different culture, climate and meeting the people of Mozambique - 'a life changing experience'.

In the context of their studies they were looking forward to 're-evaluating what design could be', working with craft materials and being resourceful, and witnessing the impact of their work in action in the community.

Their concerns were mainly associated with the inevitable health risks of visiting a tropical African country: water hygiene and mosquitos, but also the food for some. One student was only concerned about how the group dynamic would work – would they manage to work and live together under challenging conditions?

There was a significant impact on the personal development of every student, having survived the challenge there was certainly a sense of greater self-esteem

and self-confidence. They all appreciated the slower pace and relaxed attitude they found amongst the Mozambique people. Despite the poverty and the health risks associated with a tropical country, the students were 'humbled' by the positive and friendly attitude they found in the people of Mossuril. It made them question their priorities and attitudes associated with modern living in a first world country. One student wanted to be more 'authentic...more honest about who you are'. Another 'learnt the art of diplomacy' and being flexible, responsive to change, it 'challenged my thinking of preconceived ideas'. One student changed her eating habits and became more relaxed and willing to eat whatever was put in front of her. 'It's matured me, I've overcome things that you don't get a chance to tackle in the UK'. The experience made them all appreciate what they had that little bit more.

The interviews after the students returned to the UK clearly showed that they had enjoyed a transformative experience . .

"It was eye-opening to see that the locals, most of whom had so little in terms of material possessions, were in many ways happier than ourselves in the West...I am able to take more moments to pause and simply appreciate what I have...For me the grass is greener than ever where I stand right now, and it's thanks to our Mozambique journey that I'm changing my way of thinking. Therefore I think it's only appropriate to say that the experience has been life changing".

"Allow events to change you. You have to be willing to grow. Growth is different from something that happens to you. You produce it. You live it. The prerequisites for growth: the openness to experience events and the willingness to be changed by them" An incomplete Manifesto for Growth, Point 1; Mau 1998.

Impact on students back home.

Students were interviewed five months later, just before an exhibition of the project was mounted in the University. The aim was to understand the impact of the project on the students that remained in the UK - four volunteered to be interviewed.

There was a keen sense of involvement from all students from the early live projects. They were sceptical at first – were the projects actually live? Were the partners really in Mozambique?

Seeing the winning design work used in a crowd funding campaign accompanied by the stories and films about the local community changed this. From this point forward they were all very keen to follow progress.

All participants read the live blog several times a week for the duration of the trip, and commented on the amount of writing each student produced, more familiar with short form messaging by text and tweet, it was the most writing they had ever seen from their fellow students. Their responses also clearly show their understanding of graphic design changed, as they saw how it was being used.

“They all had a lot to talk about, so we felt we should read it as often as possible. I learned a lot from it, seeing the way graphics were being used – it changed my mind about graphics and what it could do completely. The day you posted the picture of the boat sail with the butterfly, I nearly started to cry”.

“ It brought tears to my eyes on occasion, I felt very proud of my peers”

“It really made we want to have an opportunity like that, every time I read the blog I felt that a bit more. I thought it was a really good thing that you did – it just grew and grew, it was good to see how things can be made to happen, you told us - you can make anything happen, and you were right”.

“Even if it was just for a short time when I finish University, I would like to see if I could use my skills in this way – make a difference with graphics, I didn’t really consider this before now”.

“I have been focused on getting a job in a big branding agency – I’m re-evaluating that now”.

Conclusion

It is clear that the month that the UK students spent in Mossuril has had a dramatic impact on the visibility of the NGO’s work, but also on the lives of the students. It remains to be seen how long-term the affect will be on the students, and what legacy they have left on the local Mossuril students. The UK students have now graduated, and we will watch to see how fearless and experimental they are in practice, after having spoken with such conviction about the inspiration they have taken from the Mossuril students.

We have watched them grow as designers for four years, We know this has changed them, and the philosophy embedded in the graphic design programme is now deeply embedded in them – it will resurface when they need to use it.

This project shows that design education can develop intercultural competencies through creative practice that engages live briefs for international charities and organisations working in the third sector. It can work by embedding students in a foreign country where they can work alongside and familiarise themselves with local people – young and old. Live projects offer an opportunity for highly motivated learning and sharing of ideas and practices with people from different cultures.

The wider impact is also positive on those students remaining in the home country, as they can see the value of design in a different context where it is not purely corporately driven or trivialised, but radicalised to provide economic, ecological or cultural empowerment on a local and global stage.

Students and teaching staff across all disciplines can begin to open their eyes to wider opportunities for social change and global citizenship through communities of interdisciplinary practice – “Groups of people informally bound together by shared experiences, and a passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger 2000; p139), working on real projects, where language differences have deepened the sense of individuals working in unity.

Rawsthorn argues that ‘design has been trivialised, misunderstood and misused because even before the word ‘design’ was invented, human beings had sought to change their surroundings instinctively. It was only because of the industrial age that design was redefined as a commercial tool, and is now seen as an indulgence for spoilt consumers in developed economies, rather than as a means of helping the disadvantaged out of poverty’ (Rawsthorn 2013).

Design can make a difference.

Myrna MacLeod & Iain Macdonald 2016

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Myrna Macleod is a Senior lecturer in the School of Arts & Creative Industries, and Founding Programme Leader of the multi award winning BDes(Hons) Graphic Design Programme.

Dr Iain Macdonald is an Associate Professor in the School of Arts & Creative Industries, and Programme Leader of the multi award winning Msc Creative Advertising Programme.

Five Go To Mozambique Blog - <http://fivegotomozambique.blogspot.co.uk/>

Project Film - <https://vimeo.com/133320372>

Teran Foundation - <http://www.teranfoundation.org/>

Breaking The Ice, Berlin - <http://www.breakingtheice.org/>

Crowd funding Campaign - <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/shine-a-soap-cooperative-in-mozambique#/>

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