

MAKING THE LOOPS AND TYING THE KNOTS IN THE SPIRIT OF UBUNTU

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ABSTRACT:

Design education addresses the improving of systems, products, and processes. More recently interaction with, and contributions to society became more prominent. This work reflects on a project created to embrace the spirit of Ubuntu¹. An emerged viewpoint in higher education affirms that comprehensive understanding of today's real life concerns requires interdisciplinary engagement. Recent studies proved that a singular disciplinary framework is not adequate to resolve multifaceted problems. Therefore, students who frequently engage in interdisciplinary classroom discussions and assignments, with a real-world focus, engage in meaningful learning, realise cognitive benefits, are better positioned to comprehend challenging problems and construct sustainable solutions. This paper identifies the worth of an interdisciplinary project as reported by participating students. The work presents feedback from students after completing an interdisciplinary project. It included syllabus work, learning traditional skills, group work, and addressing social needs. Students' reflective views on their experiences are presented. The results identify the most meaning full interactions and explain why.

Keywords: Reflection, Ubuntu, Interdisciplinary project

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past years the design discipline has endured great change. Design's universality as a strong approach to problem solving and its potential to act as a catalyst for positive social and environmental changes are finally being recognized. Progressively design and the role of designers play a key role in many areas such as business, government, non-profit organizations and grassroots initiatives.

Fashion design education are facing similar problems and have to adapt to deal with this rapidly evolving and highly unpredictable academic landscape. One of the biggest challenges facing design education is preparing students to contribute to a sustainable society. These

¹ An African word meaning 'humanity to others' or 'I am what I am because of who we all are'.

challenges can only be confronted through the collaboration of people from a variety of professions and disciplines. Educators improve and adapt design programmes and curricula in the bid to prepare students with the flexibility, knowledge and skillsets needed to deal with the problems challenging society in a connected and interdependent world. This paper investigates the perceptions of fashion design students after completing an interconnected and multi-disciplined project.

2. BACKGROUND

The world needs better solutions for concerns such as environmental sustainability therefore educators in design are creating opportunities for students to become better change agents (Faern 2012). The motivation was to instill the spirit of Ubuntu into student persona.

Therefore the development of curricula and design projects that interface with social and civic organizations became significant. Wolff and Rhee (2011) stated that a design school's mission is "to foster a new generation of designers-citizens: productive, engaged, inventive businesspeople, policy makers, and community activists, many of whom also make beautiful and useful things". Therefore an attempt to integrate various aspects of life and a variety of disciplines into fashion education was integrated into the syllabus work.

Tom Friedman's book *The World is Flat* (2005) describes how the world is becoming smaller and often referred to as a 'global village'. As such higher education curricula are progressively influenced by ethical concerns, philosophy, innovative technology furthermore developing a growing sensitivity to environmental concerns and different cultures (Marshall 2009). This paper presents the results of a collaborative project involving second year fashion design students, the Red Cross War Memorial Children's hospital, the Cape Wools SA, and 67 minutes for Mandela campaign. Students were briefed by a representative of the Cape Wools SA and asked to create a blanket suitable for a child. The blanket had to be made from wool, which was mostly sponsored by the Cape Wools SA and could be knitted or crocheted. Students were also informed that all blankets would be part of the national drive that culminates on Mandela day 18th July. All the blankets collected would then be donated to the Red Cross War Memorial Children's hospital in Cape Town, South Africa.

3. ROLE PLAYERS

Higher education is expected to follow a required syllabus. The subject matter should be presented and the relevance thereof should be clear. In setting a class project this should be kept in mind at all times seeing that contemporary fashion design education is positioned on building practical skills and creativity through coaching students for entry into practice. As part of the Textile syllabus work the student project was linked to Cape Wools SA.

Cape Wools SA is the official industry representative organisation of the South African Wool Industry. This means that they represent the collective interests of the wool producers, wool buyers and processors, wool brokers and traders, small stock breeders, labour and the wool testing group. They also promote wool communities interests within South Africa and internationally in partnership with the other great wool producing nations of the world. Their vision is to contribute in a meaningful way to sustain a world class South African wool

industry. Their mission is to support the South African wool industry with research, development, promotion and market intelligence through progressive, independent and transparent projects, respecting different role-players. One of their latest projects were a dual engagement with both the 67minute for Mandela campaign and the Red Cross War Memorial Children's hospital in Cape Town.

The 67 minutes for Mandela campaign is a global call to action that celebrates the idea that each individual has the power to transform the world and has the ability to make an impact. This is commemorated on the birthday of Nelson Mandela and the message is: "Nelson Mandela has fought for social justice for 67 years. We're asking you to start with 67 minutes" (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2015). Considering knitting or crochet as a time consuming activity, it was identified as a fitting and suitable link to the project. The project was apart of a bigger drive and the outcome of this is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Union building terrace, Pretoria South Africa
Aerial photograph courtesy of Peter Morey

At the same time the Red Cross War Memorial Children's hospital was selected considering that it is the largest, stand alone tertiary hospital dedicated entirely to child healthcare in Southern Africa. This iconic children's Hospital is world-famous and is committed to delivering world-class paediatric treatment, care, research and specialist training. This hospital with around 260 000 patient visits each year. The majority are from exceptionally poor and marginalised communities and one third of the little patients are younger than a year. This extraordinary place of healing advocates that no child will be turned away. There are also no visiting hours as parents are encouraged to be a part of their child's healing journey (The Childrens Hospital Trust 2008). Because the hospital places such great value to the nurturing of the children the project was established to make as much wool blankets as possible for these small children to receive when they are admitted to hospital.

Through combining all these roleplayers in the project the students were exposed on multiple levels.

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how selected fashion design participants at a University of Technology (UoT) understand and make meaning of their learning experiences during participating in a multi discipline and collaborative project by means of the lens of reflection. The research applied a mixed method evaluation model with phenomenology as a qualitative approach.

5. DATA SOURCES AND SAMPLING

To gather data in a phenomenology study interviews and questionnaires are used to obtain the data directly from the students who experienced the phenomenon in this case 'the project'. The information therefore comes from their 'lived experience' opposed to secondhand experience (Patton 2015).

The second year undergraduate fashion design students were invited to participate in the study. The second year cohort involved twenty-six students (22 females and 4 males) of which twelve students agreed to participate. The students completed an online questionnaire that was followed up with a semi structures interview. The questionnaire was divided into 4 main sections. The first set of questions focused on general and personal information. The questions presented a picture of who the participants were and showed the ratio to the total second year cohort. The second set of questions related to practical skills, students did not only rate their ability but also indicated their interest in the work. The third set was related to group work. The questions in this set were presented in a Likert scale format. Good design rely on group work and the outcome of these questions build a picture of the perception of the participants on working in groups. The last set of questions related to interaction on a social and interdisciplinary level. Although the majority of these questions were in Likert scale format, two open-ended questions ask for feedback in short paragraphs. After the completion of the questionnaires participants were invited for an interview, which not lasted longer that 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted to triangulate the result of the questionnaire.

6. ANALYSIS

The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed and compiled in the most suitable presentation. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The results from the two collection methods were triangulated to see if there were any discrepancies. The final results were evaluated and the emerging themes and conclusions were extracted.

7. RESULTS

General information showed that there were 10 females and 2 males who participated. The twelve participants represented the following cultural and age profile:

Black	3	25%
Coloured	5	41,7%
White	4	33,3%

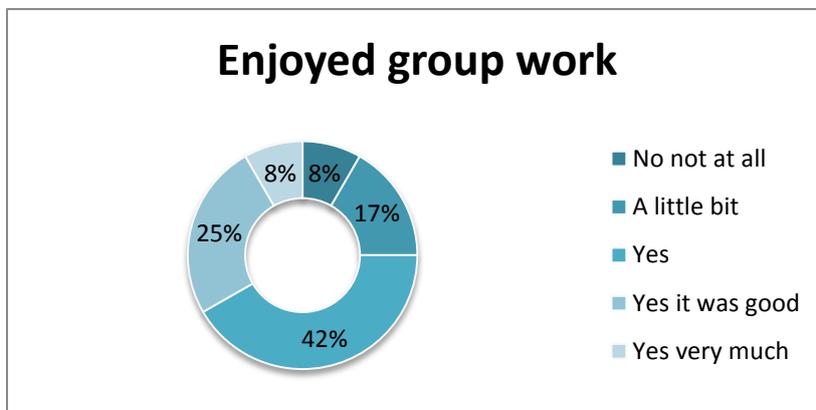
Table 1: Cultural profile

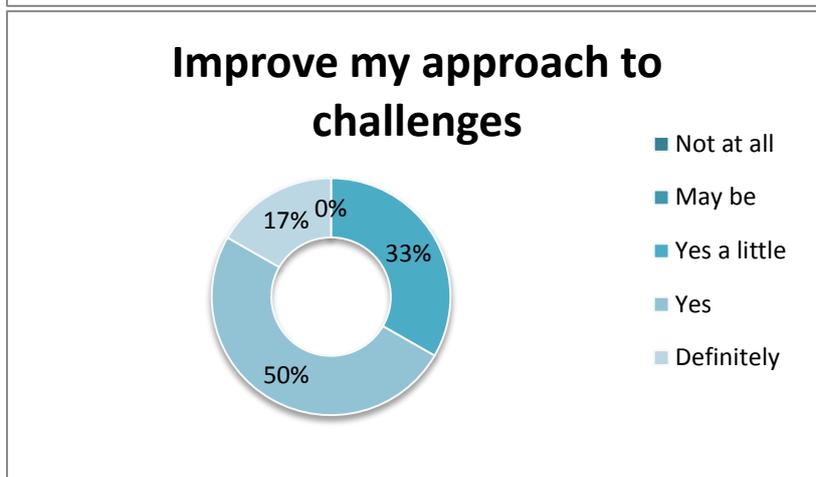
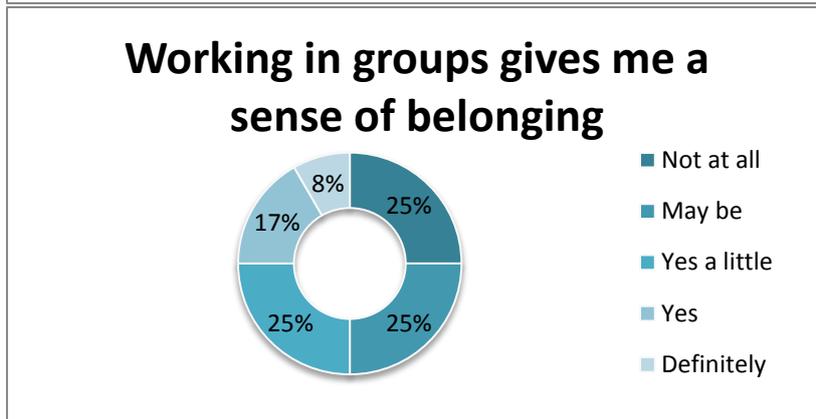
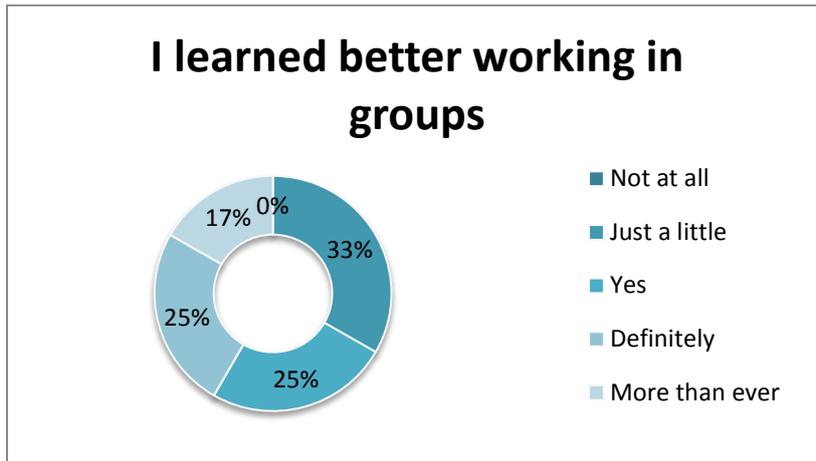
18-20	5	41,7%
21-23	5	41,7%
24 and older	2	16,6%

Table 2: Age profile

The second set of questions indicated the skills acquired or the skills all ready in possession of the participants. The answers revealed that ten of the twelve participants enjoyed the project and found it interesting. As for the skills, only four never knitted before while none of the participants crochet before. In reference to skills gained, eight participants said yes for knitting, one for crochet and three for gaining both knitting and crochet skills. Noteworthy was the fact that all twelve participants believed that the project benefited their syllabus work.

The following results reflect the responses to group work:





The relevance of the results presented will be discussed in the next section.

The fourth set of questions related to social and interdisciplinary interaction. Students were given four themes to choose from as to indicate what was most influential for rendering the project worth doing. Students were allowed to choose only one answer as motivating factor. The four themes were 1) the children’s hospital, 2) the Mandela campaign, 3) Cape Wool SA and 4) syllabus work. With the exception of one all other participants singled out the Childrens hospital as the moptivating factor. It is note worthy to mention that during the interviews the 67 minutes for Mandela campaign were ranked second.

More than 75% of the participants indicated that they found the project meaning full and enjoyed doing a project that related to real life and societal problems. Participants (75%) also indicated that engaging in a project that linked to industry or society contributes to improved engagement and understanding of the syllabus work and definitely see value in such projects. A total of 80% also reasoned that their thinking and reasoning skills were enhanced during this project.

8. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Student interaction in and out of the class situation can fluctuate a great deal and several research has been done to try and understand the impact of such interface. The objective of this study was to contemplate the perceptions of fashion students on their experiences whilst engaging in the multi-disciplined project. In the planning of the project various role players were consulted and the final outcome was designed to engage students on several level of society.

While the acquiring of the various skills was met with different sentiments all the participants realized the benefit of the project relative to their studies as a fashion designer. The fact that more than 60% of the participants did not enjoy working in groups confirms the fact that the youth of today do not function comfortably in bigger groups. While 65% of the participants agree that they learned more whilst working in groups 75% of them did not share a feeling of belonging with other while doing the project.

PROJECT CENTRED LEARNING

The study did however showed that all the participant agreed that in an individual way group work helped finding new ways of approaching challenges. The extracts below illustrate, the students frequently mentioned the project based nature of their learning when during the interview one participant said: "The better part of the project my group and I spent more time closely learning a lot about each other". Furthermore another student stated: "this project needs time so I learned that time management is very important to make sure the project is done on time. It also made some of us socialize with others and have a heart of making something this small out of love for someone else". Participants came from a diverse background and do not always mingle in every day class situations. Sharing the same goal and purpose gave them an opportunity to 'create' together.

The students stated that the project given to them was the "vehicle for their learning". Students explained that the blanket that they needed to hand in was only the artifact, and that the real learning was open and diverse. Individual students engaged in their own distinct and diverse way. The extracts below show the different awareness experienced by the students.

"Although I though enjoyed the knitting project, I (shamefully) have to admit that I'm always skeptical about the 'realness' of the case. I often feel desensitize with similar social matters and the thought makes me feel a little guilty. Is this perhaps because I feel overexposed to poverty, which I see all around me? If, for instance, I met these particular

children in need or know exactly whose life I'm about to effect in a positive way, I will most definitely feel more emotionally involved".

Although another said:

"I enjoyed the project because I find knitting enjoyable and consider it to be a good stress reliever"

Both these students reflect on personal emotion and while the one related to negative feeling the other experienced it as relaxing.

Two other responses show how different students understood the project in relation to their syllabus work. One stated:

"I loved the project. Knitting in traffic and theory classed passed time and was enjoyable. I am fortunate enough to have a reliable group so group work was a breeze. I would also like to mention that this project helped me discover incorporating knitting into my clothing designs. As a result, I did so for the Live Eco competition and came in second place"

The other stated;

"Takes forever to knit in a short time while having other assignments to do as well"

Reflecting on the feedback of the participants it is clear that all of them experienced the project in their own individual way. Whilst some placed the emphasis on the skills other focused on teamwork. The majority of the participants emphasized the social responsibility and the feeling that they encountered while doing the project. It became evident that they embraced the role of being socially responsible.

9. CONCLUSION

The students offer a convincing portrayal of their experience during a syllabus driven but industry and socially driven project. The discussion above shows that the students view themselves as the 'active agents' in their construction of their learning. In their responses they disclosed that each experience different content that is depending upon individual direction of their studies and person. This view confirms the importance of responsible teaching. Dineen and Collins (2005) emphasis the importance of responsive assessment rather than prescriptive assessment when they stated:

"The teaching styles (which are) most conducive to the fulfillment of creative potential are those which encourage student responsibility through ownership, trust and low levels of authoritarianism, providing opportunities for individual attention and opportunities for independent learning."

The results indicate that the students are ready to embrace the ownership of their studies and in a varied degree take ownership of the social responsibility of our society today.

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