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'Designing an educational experience of relevance to real world situations'

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Keywords

Multidisciplinary design education, sustainable development, creative and ethical craft practice, product innovation, brand identity, market positioning, capital investment.

Abstract

There's nothing like a hands-on, real life experience to bring excitement to learning...and to teaching. Experiential education is authentic, which is something that's true to life often paradoxical, multifaceted with an ethical, aesthetic, physical social and psychological dimension. Problem solving, analyzing, and understanding are products of the experience, not learned through books or lectures (John C. Huie). Real life experiential learning is not an alternative approach, but the most fundamental method of human learning. There is a lot of emphasis on experiential learning in HE today and practicing academicians constructively align this into their students' learning. But what of the learning of the academic staff?

The paper explores the engagement in experiential learning by teachers to inform and ensure the relevance of the curriculum for a Masters in Ethical Design and Sustainable Development. In order to gain this real life experience they embarked on a project to assist a craft cluster, which aimed to support their understanding of the processes involved in the development of indigenous, localized, networked and structured women's crafts enterprises. Within the project they undertook initiatives to assist economic advancement of the cluster and facilitate the process of marketability, social equity and eco-efficient innovation.

Through the exploration of the issues raised in planning, negotiating with the community and implementing the project, staff gained a firsthand experience of the struggles involved in craft as a sector and the development issues therein. The project promoted interdisciplinary collaboration between design and business staff, creating synergies, which informed and enhanced the holistic nature of the curriculum and gave staff an in-depth understanding of the broader social context and complexities of establishing sustainable craft enterprise. The lessons learnt provide a guideline for further intervention. Apart from actually helping the cluster, the knowledge and understanding of the context within which these enterprises operate, provided invaluable insights in developing the aims, content and approach to learning necessary to fulfill the objectives of the Masters' programme.

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The paper provides an of analyses the key issues, lessons learnt and how they were affected by the experience in the craft cluster project, proposing a methodology which maybe be adopted by other colleagues in the HE sector.

Introduction & Review of Sustainability Theories

As the world and society changes “sustainable development” has gained strategic importance. In the context of this paper, sustainable development is defined as balanced economic, social and environmental progress that meets the needs of present and future generations through the creation of lasting jobs, increased efficiencies in business, and greater cross-cultural understanding.

In 2008, a collaboration funded by the UK Government Department for International Development (DfID) under the DeLPHE scheme, focused on 'Sustainability and equitable development in India's Rural Craft Industry' was established between the School of Design, Northumbria University, UK and the Pearl Academy, India and Dastkar, a society that supports craft and craftspeople across India. This trans-national partnership sought to clarify perceptions of the role that design thinking and design education can contribute in a practical way to the development of sustainable craft enterprise.

This paper explores the experiences of multidisciplinary team of academics drawn from the two institutions, who in partnership with Dastkar, collaborated with the aim of developing the creative practice and potential earning power of an emergent cluster of craftspeople. The objective of this experiential learning was to develop an understanding of the key issues that confront artisans and needs to be addressed in creating viable and ethical craft enterprise, to inform curriculum development and later delivery in the areas of ethical design and sustainability.

A large part of our task was to understand the complexities of what is presently going on in the craft sector, the cultural influences from the outside world that have infiltrated the craft aesthetic; how designs and products have responded to changing markets and lifestyles; the conflict between individual creativity and market forces, and how to effectively adapt traditional crafts in the creation contemporary products that tap into the demand for decorative products.

The handicrafts of India represent a rich cultural tradition – forms of creative expression, functional objects of daily use in the home or linked to ritual and celebration. Arguably today's commercial exploitation represents a threat to the authenticity of this cultural heritage because it inevitably changes the form and function of the resultant artifacts. Craft is poised between the rich legacy of traditional practice and the demands of evolving fashions, village *haats* (bazaars) are being supplanted by shopping malls full of ubiquitous international brands.

Despite the wealth of talent and rich material culture to be found across the Indian Sub-Continent, the uniqueness and value of traditions and products is in danger of being lost or distorted through a process of cultural homogenization. Preserving traditional handicrafts raises one set of problems, transforming them into viable commercial enterprises raises another and the unalloyed preservation of past traditions is not necessarily the best way to sustain cultural identity and improve livelihoods.

The craft sector is often seen as an effective means of creating sustainable livelihoods and nurturing small and micro-enterprises but much craft production in rural and marginalized communities arises out of desperate economic conditions. There are an estimated 20 million artisans in India who typically live on less than two dollars a day and depend on craft as a main source of livelihood. Few have a business strategy or knowledge of the wider marketplace and many resort to 'doing what they can do' in the hope that they will be able to sell their products.

Craft enterprise often occupies the lower ends of the value chain, standing at the crossroads between a subsidy-dependent sector and an economic sector. Across India and elsewhere, many crafts enterprises exhibit a reliance on external interventions to identify and open up new market opportunities, providing the incentive to continuously develop new styles. All too often producers are passive recipients of the external intervention and cease to be participants in the creative process. This strategy disenfranchises the producer, perpetuating the belief that 'experts' hold the answers and often results in products that provide limited, if any, economic benefit to the producers.

No one school of thought and no one institution is in a position to claim superiority when it comes to developmental 'know-how'. This is a time for modesty and pragmatic ambitions for results on the ground. However there is one certainty, in a continuously evolving environment effective partnerships need

to place a premium on the value of local knowledge and the freedom to act flexibly in a manner that is responsive to local conditions.

Research Process & Methods

The Dastkar Kendra centre in Ranthambore, Rajasthan was selected for the experiential learning, as the region offers potential for growth and its' proximity to Delhi provided easy access for monitoring and training purposes. The centre in Ranthambore was founded in 1981, with the objective of improving and promoting traditional craft, thereby enhancing the economic status of craftspeople, and ensuring the survival of traditional craft-skills. It aims to help craftspeople of villages to develop and employ their indigenous skills as a means to providing a decent livelihood. The centre has achieved many milestones and their merchandise is on display in various bazaars throughout India. But if the centre is to achieve long-term sustainability it needs to gear up its operating structure, expand production and increase turnover and give further attention to its brand identity and marketing strategy in order to better position itself to exploit local and national opportunities.



Dastkar Kendra – women making quilts & cushion designs.

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However, the era of sustainability, eco efficient change and social responsibility has engendered awareness that there is more than the bottom line at stake in a business. The exploration and development of a Masters Curriculum in Ethical Design and Sustainability brought design and business academics round the table in agreement to form an interdisciplinary team. Using the vehicle of the DeLPHE project, employing action research, they set about analysing and documenting the issues experienced within and impacting on sustainability of a craft enterprise.

In developing the project plan, the first task was to recognise the needs of all the partners (acceptance, sharing information, setting goals, organizing for action),

building up the unity and commitment of the group. Through a process of participatory consultation with all the stakeholders (HEIs, NGO and cluster participants) the following objectives were prioritized:

- To develop the creative capability of the surrounding communities to provide employment to more villages in the region,
- To evaluate the centre's existing product line and undertake research to identify market needs and opportunities to inform the development of a strategic business plan
- To identify and deliver 'added-value' through design to innovate, diversify and promote the product range

The villages of Kundera and Khilchepur, situated close to Ranthambore, were identified for capacity building and exploratory visits were made in order to understand and evaluate the existing conditions. The problems faced are many and complex, having their origins in both the social and cultural structure of the community and the individual aspirations of the producers. A whole web of interrelated factors combine and interlock into a series of vicious circles, from which it is difficult to break out.

Findings & Discussions

The villagers have not seen the world outside their small village, never having traveled beyond their village. They survive by doing small jobs in the village like of making roads, digging ditches or if there is a demand from agricultural side on harvesting season they help farmers. Their earnings barely meet their basic necessities and in times of crises they have little alternative but to borrow money from moneylenders. The spiral of poverty is exacerbated further by social obligations, such as dowry and weddings, or when they are not able to work due to illnesses or when natural disasters strike. In the absence of any external social support system, they get indebted to these moneylenders and struggle the whole of their lives to pay off debt

The misallocation of resources from the government and urban-biased strategy of development intensifies the poverty in these rural communities. The powerlessness of the poor is clearly evident in their inability to obtain even those benefits intended for them from the government, without the local elites and administrators siphoning off resources.

Poor women are worst hit, especially from backward communities and lower castes. They are mostly illiterate, untrained, and have very little social and economic status. Without the meaningful skills, social status, and economic power, they are unable to do any business on their own even with financial

assistance. All that they understand is that they get money after each day's hard work as daily wager.

When external agencies approach these regional communities offering skills training programmes under different schemes they are often apprehensive and do not want to spend time learning something new or different which may not necessarily improve their economic condition. It is very difficult for them to prioritize between the conflicting demands of learning and earning. They expect money in return for the time they have invested in learning, but providing incentive in terms of money for the skill development workshops does not solve their income related problems permanently. It may dilute their commitment and unwittingly promote a situation fraught by financial dependency. Alleviating poverty is only possible by providing opportunities within an enabling environment, where collectively and individually, they can make choices and determine the path for their betterment.

Exploring the potential

The team spent time interacting with the villagers, to understand their requirements, their daily needs, and how and where do they use skill in their day-to-day needs. For example, bringing water from outside is a daily chore and they create a beautifully ornamental ring to stabilize the round-bottomed pitchers on their head.



Decorative potholders - Kundera village, Rajasthan

© Jackie Guille

To keep freshly made bread (Roti) warm by lunchtime, they weave a beautiful basket with naturally available grass. To sleep in the warm weather of Rajasthan they create a thin kind of a mat made of recycled cotton fabric, which having softened after multiple washes, gave comfort to the user. In addition to these

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utilitarian products, traditional techniques and stylized motifs were employed to decorate their humble dwellings at festival times.



Woman designing & traditional floor motif, Kundera village

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The team discussed the project objectives with the village communities and through a process of self-selection, villagers signed up to attend a planned series of workshops, which were to be held in-situ within the village. It was agreed that targeting the areas of leather-work and embroidery, honing their existing skills and improving practice through attention to quality control offered the best way of affirming their creative talents and instilling confidence in the community without requiring any major training or intervention.

Concurrent with the process of consultation, a working group of business staff undertook an extensive survey of the retail sector, visiting a range of outlets in Delhi, Jaipur and Bangalore that promote and sell traditional and contemporary crafts.

Following the visits to the villages and market research, a one-day seminar with craft entrepreneurs invited from all over India was held at the Pearl Academy, Delhi. Dastkar spoke of the history and evolution of the centre in Ranthambore, and the project team gave an account of the process of interaction with the village communities and presented the findings of the retail market research together with their business analysis and recommendations. The issues that emerged within the subsequent debate highlighted common concerns and inhibitors to the success and viability the handicraft sector:

- Capital investment and cash-flow
- Business understanding
- Market access and lack of market intelligence
- Isolation - is a primary concern for rural producers, for they are not able to adequately promote their products
- Product development and innovation - to successfully adapt designs, conceiving and evolving new products in response to changing tastes and preferences

- Brand identity and product presentation – the narrative behind the product may be an equal selling point
- Costing and pricing - labour costs not realistically valued
- Productivity, production planning and quality control in the transition from individual to volume production
- Environmental protection and the management of natural resources must be integrated within creative programmes

Crossing Academic Boundaries

The inter-departmental sharing, analyzing and brainstorming the issues identified by the project provided a holistic learning experience for all the team members. Customarily, academics on the business side of fashion taught the importance of efficiencies productivity, and increasing the bottom line as key drivers to their students. From the sidelines they watched design students go on craft documentation trips or apprenticeships with craftsmen. Business staff did not perceive the relevance of craft or its importance within the Indian economy, despite the fact that the Indian textile and craft sector contributes to 14% of industrial production, 4% of GDP and 17% of the country's export earnings. They believed that there must be some esoteric importance to the whole concept of craft, but were unclear about its' real value or contribution to the nation. Likewise design teachers saw business as something mundane, complex and sometimes undesirable as it put constraints on creativity.

For business faculty embarking on a project focused within a craft cluster was a foray into the unknown. It was assumed that design and product development would lead all development and that business would be at best a bystander. They believed that craft had all to do with sustainable design and embroidery workers. A stay at the cluster and pilot discussions within the same highlighted more and more the development required in understanding the business of craft, the requirements for strengthening internal organizational structure, business planning and a more clearly defined strategy for the marketing of craft. Looking at Kolbs learning cycle one can see how concrete experience and reflection can help the teacher experiment and re-conceptualize.

Discussions with the design staff at the Pearl Academy exposed that they too did not anticipate the attention that needed to be given to evaluating the market, identifying market opportunities and developing a strategic business plan. Designers experienced in the areas of craft presumed that all issues would relate to the product and its innovation. However, craft is no different to any other commodity in that without gathering market intelligence, knowledge consumer preferences and trends, one is developing product in a vacuum.

After understanding the business variables in the craft cluster, staff went with product and pricing into various markets across India and explored retail opportunities through actual meetings and negotiations. To further enhance her market understanding, the manager of the craft cluster accompanied the staff to

two regions. These visits really gave the staff a first hand experience of the problems involved in craft retail and the product mix demands. Additionally it also exposed the staff to a retailer and a consumer who was more sensitive and compassionate towards the environment and the cause of craft and who looked for meaning in their retail offering as opposed to pure bottom line and price point. Most often the retailers were women who had some experience of craft production themselves.

Another re-conceptualization was in the area of pricing where the market was found to be differently sensitive. The consumer and the informed retailer were more interested in a product with a story behind it, which is different to the notions of product promotion that staff were more accustomed to.

Real life experience and exposure to the struggles to match lead times, deal with minimums and managing cash flow were an awakening to all staff involved. The Northumbria staff and the business staff from the Pearl were more adept at picking up on the cash flow problems and product planning issues. The market research enabled the team to make strategic connections between stakeholders and identify possibilities for the seasonal market that the cluster serviced. Informed by this research, strong recommendations emerged regarding business re-engineering, visual display, design possibilities and packaging.

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A business plan was developed, giving attention to cash flow needs, market requirements and business conditions, targeting bazaars and lifestyle stores that support traditional and contemporary crafts and actively promote the value of the handmade. The market intelligence gathered has also informed the implementation of series of workshops within the village, focused on skills enhancement and production planning. The goal of these workshops, facilitated by staff drawn from both partner institutions and students from the Pearl Academy, is to develop prototypes and product ranges to be displayed and market tested at the Dastkar Mela (fair) in March 2010.



Sampler, drawings and embroidered motif, workshop 2

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Results & Reconceptualization

It was amazing to see staff who previously held an impersonal and distant view towards craft, discuss and argue the benefits of cooperatives and assess the actual benefits accrued by the craftsmen in the cluster. A fresh perspective and increased interest in the craft sector emerged in discussions with both staff and students, flagging the potential for further research into the sector. More than one business staff selected areas of craft and sustainability as areas to develop knowledge in.

A curriculum development team must have adequate knowledge and experience in the area of the curriculum. A new subject area like Ethical Design and Sustainability may have few if any experts. Teaching sustainability differs from other subjects. For example, unlike biology, which creates biologists, or planning which creates planners, there is not profession of 'sustainer.' Individual case studies will reveal context specific issues in relation to the cultural, social, geographic and economic circumstances and experiences that prevail in each the particular situation.

Outcomes like sustainability and sustainable design will only be achieved through multi-disciplinary teams of learners, educators and activists working together, developing their knowledge in real-world situations. Curriculum development and delivery should reflect and support such collaboration. However, expertise in

sustainability and the transformation of survivalist enterprises to long-term sustainable businesses is limited and this territory is largely unexplored by researchers. Only teachers who have gained an adequate understanding through their own experiential learning will truly be in a position to inform and guide communities to think the same way. Empowerment cannot be only a theoretical concept described in the class, but must be also experienced by the students.

Because sustainability is very complex, students need a pedagogical approach, which helps them acknowledge the insufficiency of their knowledge, the challenge of understanding the complexity of all the intersecting issues and strategically planning for a future that cannot altogether be known. The techniques for brainstorming and ideation that our students bring to the studio are similar—design students draw sketches in the ideation phases and management students draw business plans. When they engage in these activities together, two things happen. First, they learn that the underlying learning processes are similar, even if the vehicle is different. Second, they see how incomplete their learning is if enacted in isolation and can appreciate the benefits to be derived from collaborative learning. Students and staff need to collaborate across disciplines to form groups of inquirers who can research multiple aspects a question, and together have a chance of seeing the broader picture of the complex, multi-layered issues confronting our world and identify strategies for sustainability.

The benefits of interdisciplinary and trans-national collaboration were clearly demonstrated within the DeLPHE project. The project has nurtured a group of individuals at the Pearl Academy, who can be further developed into a robust course team, each of whom have had first hand experience in working with, analyzing, marketing and evaluating a craft cluster. No amount of theory or reading would have given this group of academics the conviction and passion towards craft that this project did. No faculty development initiative could match this experiential learning. Learning was not preconceived or constructed, but informed by experiencing the actual problems in the cluster. All market visits and sales pitches were made to sell real products and clinch actual deals. Learning was deep, full of contradictions and surprises but immensely rewarding!

The learning was not only about craft, sustainability and their markets. Valuable outputs came from the collaboration between design and business staff. Both sets of staff started off speaking a different languages and looking for different outputs. Both sets of staff became much more aware of their similarities and began to value their differences. They became sensitive to each other's aims and ideas as only one who understands and respects diversity can. The experience of trying to service the cluster provided them with insights, knowledge and skills that could not have been gained in the classroom. The project challenged staff, placing them outside their normal comfort zone but provided a real-world experiential context that enabled them to move beyond a discipline specific

context and employ the firsthand knowledge gained to propose appropriate solutions to the problems faced by the cluster.

The positive benefits of the DeLPHE project were a high degree of openness in the process of collaboration, full availability of information, trust and mutual respect and the active participation of all the partners. It is interesting to note that these factors are also evidenced in productive learning processes, one where the learning culture is based on and supported by the partnership between the teacher and the learner.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The importance of participating in research on the familiar local situations is to identify what the social situations are that affect the lives of people in the smallest and most remote villages. Much work needs to be done to develop a whole series of models, which help groups draw out clear patterns and trends from the complexity. This is very important if the actions they plan are to be part of a liberating and transformative process, empowering people and building up their capacity to decide and take active responsibility for their own lives.

Development is not growth. While growth entails a quantitative increase, and may promote development, development implies a qualitative change in structure.

This change in structure arises from the realization that even *the least educated*,

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the poorest and most marginalized of the people have the capacity to collectively change the forces that oppress them, and to transform their reality in a way which suits them best.

'Go with the people: Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. When the job is done, the task accomplished, the people will all say: We have done this ourselves.' (Lao Tsu, China, 700 B.C)

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