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Experiential Learning, Preparing Students to Lead Social Innovation through Craft and Design

Educating the next generation of impact designers requires leadership, experiences in the field, reflective pedagogy and creating assessment plans as nuanced as the community partners involved. Design Matters is an experiential, interdisciplinary design program that brings together students from a university in Brazil with students from a tier-one research institute in the United States to address real-world problems facing the urban poor. This presentation highlights the rationale, socio-cultural opportunities and ethical challenges of developing, implementing, and assessing an internationally based community-engaged design course focused on co-design and crafting with “others” to be leaders for tomorrow.

“Design for Social Impact” is an emerging field in higher education and design pedagogy. Yet, many multinational companies have been developing impact arms and investing in social innovation within their organizations for some time now. The Impact Hub at the AutoDesk Foundation is just one example. This cohort of not-for-profit organizations aims primarily to address the “wicked problems” we face today through combined efforts of leadership and design. While these projects effectively address socio-cultural equity, economic prosperity, and environmental stewardship, questions remain: how to best prepare students for these types of professional practices, to be leaders, and agents for change once they graduate? The author of this paper has studied and researched how interdisciplinary, culturally diverse teams working cooperatively in an exchange of knowledge, creativity, and strategic implementation can affect social change and prepare students to join, facilitate, and even lead multi-disciplined teams toward integrated solutions of the wicked problems we face through experiential learning and collaborative craft.

Design Matters is a Service-Learning course with three primary goals, including: 1) engaging X (American) University design students and Y (Brazilian) University students with a non-profit community partner in hands-on, team-based projects to collaboratively and creatively address the needs of “street situation” (homeless) people, 2) providing a marginalized community design services and collaborative craft experiences that contribute to positive ‘social impact’, and 3) expanding University students design thinking to design doing through practical place-based learning and making. During spring semester 2017, teams of students worked side-by-side with the National Movement for the Street Situation Population (Movimento Nacional de População da Rua) in São Paulo, Brazil to transform their facility and architectural space through design and craft.

The underlying philosophy of Design Matters is to teach students how to design “with” non-designers and community members; in short, how to be impact designers. This presentation offers a roadmap to develop curricula that aims to foster social justice design and cultivate design action as a means to “social equity” by empowering community members to contribute directly to the rethinking and rebuilding of their physical environment through hands-on craft. In the process, students learn socially responsible design and how to exchange ideas in interdisciplinary environments to address issues of social change and environmental stewardship. The “parallel content” for student learning includes: developing empathy for others, becoming culturally competent, and globally engaged stewards of the environment and ambassadors for social change through creativity, design action and cooperative efforts.