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Empowering through Making: What are the long term effects of co-creation workshops in Nairobi slums?

Rote education is outdated as it only serves the purpose of turning us into obedient task rabbits. As a holistic approach to learning it is fundamental to activate self-efficacy and responsibility in addition to creative and social skills. This project questions the general hype around digitalization, exploring the theory of embodied cognition which emphasizes the importance of our physicality in the process of learning. The project also implies that shared experiences based on relationships support a healthy learning environment including fun and playfulness, concentration and focus, as well as long term (muscle) memory.

The setting for this co-creation project was the cultural and creative exchange between design students from UdK Berlin and pupils from Love School in Nairobi's slum Kawangware focusing on craft-based designs. We started by collaborating online during the semester project to eventually meet face to face in a hands-on workshop at Love School (which was on a voluntary basis without support by the University). The interaction with the children, which happened through Skype and WhatsApp, of course set in motion a communication and thinking process that concerns itself with the cultural and social backgrounds of the children and the students, questioning luxury, standards, needs and access by setting these very different environments in contrast.

By exposing the design students to an open cooperation setting they were forced to experiment, question themselves and iterate their approach. By passing on and explaining their ideas, processes and findings to the Love School pupils in a child-appropriate way, they had to reflect on their work and thinking, abstract and simplify it, thus being able to quickly discover flaws and adjust their process. These tasks were embedded in a craft-based design process where students and pupils shared and applied different artisanal techniques emerging from both cultures.

A challenge was the material supply. As a student in an arts university it is rather easy to work with any material the design idea requires. As a child in a slum with no financial possibilities, yet being surrounded by waste material, thinking about upcycling seemed obvious. The playful way of the children to tinker, craft and create decorative art objects on the one hand and the more reflected, systemic, strategic process of the design students lead to new hacks and hybrid approaches of making.

On a meta-level, the methods applied in the project aim at re-designing development aid by pushing it towards "empowerment through making". The participants integrate new knowledge on a physical level through co-creating makeable and sellable design objects, which support the school's endeavour of buying their own grounds to sustain a proper learning environment. The goal for The Love School Project is to perfect the objects the pupils develop and to sell them through the Love School Brand that is currently being set up. The vision on a bigger scale is to create methods and settings of creative learning that can be applied in short, mid or long term workshops and classes all around the world.