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Encountering development in social design education

Critical approaches for global social design education

Lesley-Ann Noel

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Design for social good is an area of design in which designers focus on social problems. One way of teaching this type of content is through classes with an international component that mimics an international development project, where students work as a consulting team for an organization in a developing country. However, this type of class sometimes replicates problematic structures in international development such as neocolonialism, the perception that knowledge comes from the Global North. This paper details a workshop that was created to disrupt the negative narratives in this kind of global social design project, such as the design saviour narrative, by introducing elements from critical pedagogy such as critical reflection, examining bias and positionality, introducing ethnographic techniques, and intentionally flipping the power dynamics of the collaboration. Over a two-weekend workshop, students at an American university collaborated with students at a university in the Caribbean. Instead of going through the entire design process, this short class focused on the tension and unfamiliar roles that the students played when the students from the Global South were tasked with identifying issues of their colleagues and other participants from the Global North. The American students expressed their discomfort at being 'studied' at several points during the two-session design workshop. This paper aims to help other educators create learning experiences where students examine their positionality, privilege, and biases, while also creating a space for them to practice humility and reflect on power dynamics in international design work in a very intentional way.

Keywords: Decolonizing design, social studio, pluriversal design, design ethnography, design for development

Introduction

In a design school somewhere in the Global North, a design educator or design student is excitedly describing a social design class where they have collaborated with someone in the Global South. In another school, another person is excitedly planning for a new exotic experience in Kenya... Uganda... Ethiopia... Bangladesh, Cambodia, Brazil, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guatemala, South Africa, Rwanda, Tanzania, Belize, Ecuador, Haiti. Social design is the use of design to address social problems (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014). The focus of many of these classes is on access to modernity and development for people in the Third World, inner cities, or in rural towns, and they are often built on models of international development with the assumption, as Arturo Escobar wrote in 1995, that Western standards and paradigms are the benchmarks for people in need of development (Escobar, 1995). Many social design classes include fieldwork and cross-cultural collaboration with design students from the Global North creating solutions to problems in the Global South. These classes prepare design students for future work in the social realm where they seek to promote social change rather than merely focusing on the design of artifacts (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014). There is value in global social design classes since they provide a context for designers to learn about and practice cross-cultural collaboration and skills and methods from anthropology, ethnography, and other social science disciplines. International cross-cultural collaborations can give students a broader view of the world, as they expose students to real-world challenges in a complex environment, and give students skills that they need for collaborative work. However, sometimes the design of these classes can perpetuate the narrative that people in the Global South need to be 'saved' by people in the Global North, promoting neo-colonialism and saviourism.



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Social design classes that are inspired by international development are at times presented as best practices in design education, such as in the course Design for Extreme Affordability, which is co-hosted by Stanford's business school, engineering school, and design school. In this class, students design products and services that aim to address the challenges of people in the developing world, while also creating business models to bring these solutions to market (Anzilotti, 2018). This type of class often used development principles and approaches such as a focus on modernisation, need, participation, and rights (Smith & Laurie, 2011). If this approach becomes more popular in future design education, then curricula that promote reflection on power dynamics, hubris and humility, and the harm of saviourism could also be needed to counteract the impact of the approach. More global and cross-cultural collaboration in design education requires a greater understanding by both design students and educators of factors such as cultural biases, cultural differences, and their impacts on cross-cultural teams, as people with different cultural backgrounds, cognitive biases, time orientation, and worldviews work together (Rau, Guo, Qie, Lei & Zhang, 2020).

The 'savior' narrative is derived from "White Savior Industrial Complex", a term coined by Teju Cole in 2012 as a critique of the activism of Westerners to support people in developing countries. His critique is of the superficiality of the approaches used in providing this support, the failure to understand the complexity of local contexts, and the fact that a 'nobody from America or Europe' can get the emotional satisfaction of becoming a 'godlike saviour' while operating under the banner of 'making a difference' (Cole, 2012). This saviorism morphs according to the context and is sometimes white saviourism, creative saviourism (Arenyeka, 2018), digital saviorism (Shringarpure, 2015). Development work that encourages this godlike saviourism of unfortunate 'others' is neocolonial as it replicates colonial structures and messages such as the message that the Global South needs to be saved. The field of development is often neocolonial as it replicates and sustains many of the unbalanced power relations from colonialism, where colonialism there is the unbalanced relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, in development there is relationship is the unbalanced relationship between the donor and the beneficiary (Kothari, 2005).

Some social design classes mimic the design of international development projects and employ a consulting structure where students act as design consultants for a local agency. International development is based on a linear notion of economic evolution, in which some places need to 'catch up' and the people who are already 'developed' have the knowledge and expertise that can be given to others to help them to catch up (Kothari, 2005). Development projects often observe a certain directionality in expertise. British development agencies, for example, would rarely hire an expert from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia as consultants for in the United Kingdom (Kothari, 2005), yet a European or North American consultant in the aforementioned contexts would be familiar and unremarkable. While a design class that borrows from international development and international volunteering can foster an awareness of social justice, equity, and global citizenship issues among students (Smith & Laurie, 2011), it can also mimic the challenges of international development work. One of these challenges is neocolonialism with the centering of the knowledge and expertise within the Global North (Smith and Laurie). Design neocolonialism (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014) occurs when the outsider perspective is privileged over the insider perspective in the creation of solutions to local problems. Another challenge is parachute consultancy. Parachute design practice is when a designer or team creates and proposes a solution from an outsider's perspective (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014). In these projects often the knowledge of the external expert is valued because of the positionality of the expert, making the knowledge legitimate because of who the expert is and where they come from (Kothari, 2005).

The understanding of both power and culture during design education could hopefully produce designers who are more critically aware of how their own cultural biases and the complexity of designing for people from a culture that is not their own (Pargman, 1999), as well as the power that may be derived from their positionality, could impact the design process. This greater awareness would also then be accompanied by mechanisms to remedy bias (Pargman, 1999), so that designers could produce better solutions that are relevant to the contexts in which they are practicing, limiting their own pre-existing social and technical biases (Friedman & Nissenbaum, 1996; Pargman, 1999).

Methodology

For this class, the instructors sought to create a pedagogical experience as a critical response to design classes that mimic development consulting and could be perceived to be rooted in neocolonialism and neoliberalism. The aim of the class was to create and provide alternative models for international collaboration for the students' consideration as they eventually moved into professional practice. We hoped to promote a critical awareness among the students that would lead to more thoughtful cross-cultural collaborations in the longer term, as well as to build an aptitude for cultural sensitivity that students would carry with them into their professional lives. The desired critical awareness was promoted through reflexivity throughout the short experimental class. We sought to address some factors that we considered very problematic in the design of the consultancy-inspired 'design for social good' type classes, such as the lack of attention to power and positionality and the unidirectionality of expertise in classes inspired by international development. We aimed to do this by focusing on dialogue, positionality, relationality, and by flipping the direction of the expertise in the project, so the students from the Global South would have more agency than the students from the Global North.

Introducing critical pedagogy concepts in social design education

We were inspired by critical pedagogy and built the curriculum around critical reflective practice, transformative learning, critical design practice, and critical conscientization. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, is considered one of the founders of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010). One of the aims of this approach is to create environments that support students to make better moral judgments and to become engaged citizens (Giroux, 2010). Conscientization is one of the key theories of Freire, aimed at developing social consciousness through the process of reflection and action, which is generally focused on empowering the poor in a developing country context (Lloyd, 1972), even though the students at this university fit a different demographic profile of the demographic in Freire's focus, we felt this approach, promoting critical reflection and awareness of social incongruencies in the structure of design projects would be appropriate. Critical reflection is the ability to reflect on an event in the midst of the experience (Blount, 2006). It requires the ability to both zoom in and zoom out to understand the details and their impact on the social environment (Blount, 2006). Like Freire's conscientization, transformative learning seeks to expand the student consciousness, so that they will question problematic assumptions, frames, and expectations seeking to make them more inclusive and reflective (Mezirow, 2003).

In designing the class, the professors identified several challenges of global social design courses where students from the Global North work in Global South contexts, such as:

- the over-problematization of the lives of people from 'exotic' places, without the reflection on the problems that exist in one's home country.
- the promotion of 'parachute' design practice and 'design neocolonialism' (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014) as best practices. In these types of projects, student designers receive messages that it is acceptable to drop into a community that is not one's own, propose ideal solutions, and then leave. practice, presenting an illusion that fast design where designers swoop in and whip out a solution works.
- the perpetuation of narratives about poverty or lack of expertise in the Global South. These classes seem to imply that problems in the Global South are easier to solve and are waiting to be solved by people from the developed world, perpetuating common stereotypes and promoting white saviorism.
- the lack of critical interrogation of who else is doing work in the communities that enter, who else do outsiders need to partner with, and what gives the outsider the 'right' to be doing this work.
- the lack of acknowledgment of the power dynamics and tensions in cross-cultural collaboration, with a lack of acknowledgment of the outsider privilege that might allow greater access to outsiders than a local team.

Description of the class

The two instructors, who were based at a university in Northern California, partnered with an art and design professor and the business school at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago to co-design and teach the joint class with students from California. Over two Saturdays in April 2019, the teaching team based both in California Bay Area and in Trinidad and Tobago, students through a series of activities/exercises with the aim of helping students understand themselves and to be able to better understand others. The course began with about thirty students but ended with eighteen. Nine students from California and nine students from Trinidad and Tobago completed the two-day workshop. Both groups were composed of students from diverse academic backgrounds including undergraduate and postgraduate students with backgrounds in the humanities, social sciences, art and design, and business. Students applied to be part of the experimental workshop.

The class was originally called “Solving First World Problems”, and was designed as a possible alternative to more neocolonial approaches that are sometimes seen in design classes that involve international collaboration between stakeholders in the Global North and the Global South. The exercises focused on positionality, reflection, self-awareness, understanding the local context, and empathizing with others. Given the brevity of the class, approximately sixteen hours of in-person instruction, the content stopped at the formation of the problem statements and did not move into ideation or prototyping, since this would not be feasible in such a short class if ample time were to be given to reflection and discussion.

The instructors opted to focus on the start of the design process examining building relationships, practicing ethnographic skills, and understanding positionality as an insider or outsider. The work in the class, therefore, did not reach the solution phase. The class was pitched to students as an ‘anthropology’-based class where students would understand how to build relationships and the tension between insider and outsider statuses in community work. Insider and outsider statuses are described as **emic** and **etic** perspectives in anthropology. **Emic** and **etic** are two different approaches when trying to explain social realities observed while conducting fieldwork in anthropology and other social sciences. An *etic* perspective is the perspective of the observer, while an *Emic* perspective is the inside perspective or that of the studied social group (Morris, Leung, Ames & Lickel, 1999).

In creating the short class, the professors intentionally flipped the direction of the collaboration by designing a class where students in the Global South had more ‘power’ to make decisions than the students in the Global North. They were the ones who would lead the discussion, ‘diagnoses’, and determine the preliminary design direction.

The students were placed in cross-cultural teams with at least one team member from each location. They communicated via Zoom and WhatsApp over two weeks. Though this was a design class, they focused on the process of collaboration and their self-awareness growth. Reflection on positionality and relationships was the main focus of the class.

Miner’s (1956) popular, satirical anthropology text, ‘Body Rituals of the Nacirema’, in which he writes about suburban life with language that an ethnographer uses to describe an ‘exotic’ tribe, created a starting scenario for discussion in the class.

The students were asked to reflect on several questions individually and in their small groups throughout the workshop. These questions aimed to make the students reflect on how they would understand a local context, culture, and to see how their own biases might impact these perceptions. The questions were:

- How would you go about trying to understand the local context?
- Describe the other person’s culture (based on their preconceived assumptions)?
- How would you try to increase your understanding of the local culture of the other place?
- If you were talking with someone from [the other place] what would you do to understand the culture better...
- How might my positionality affect how I see the user’s point of view?
- I used to think Now, I think... (This was a final reflection to document any change in their point of view)

The responses were recorded by the students in a shared slide presentation and discussed within their small

groups and the whole group.
Some of the key activities are described in the below (Table 1).

Table 1. Key activities from the class.

Pre-class	No Words Conversation icebreaker on WhatsApp, Send pre-class design brief + optional readings
Day 1 – Morning	Warm-up activity Framing + design brief review Logistical matters How to conduct an interview (understanding the natives of Silicon Valley / Humans of Silicon Valley) Interview preparation Conduct Interview 1 Quick Debrief of Interview 1 Conduct Interview 2
Day 1 – Afternoon	Understanding + communicating local context exercises (as an insider or outsider) Develop a point of view statement Reflection and debrief Wrap-up Day 1 + Preview Day 2
Day 2 – Morning	Warm-up stoke Overview of Day 2 Positionality Exercise Revisiting POV statements
Day 2 – Afternoon	Formulate “How Might We” statements Rounds of Brainstorming Create and record presentations Reflections and closing

Pre-class activity:

Collecting life stories through images and video

Students were instructed to shoot photos and videos from their regular daily lives on Thursday, April 11, 2019. They were asked to capture at least 20 images or videos from different times of the day. These images would then be used to have a wordless conversation with one of their classmates from another culture. They were asked to capture images that would show their emotions, surroundings. Environment, people, and objects they interact with, and the activities that they engaged in throughout that day. They were encouraged to take casual photos and not overthink the process, but rather to just document that specific day.

No Words conversation

Students were assigned a partner before the class. They were given an activity aimed at getting them to know each other before the first class. This activity was called a “No Words conversation. They had to complete the No Words activity, using their phone and WhatsApp. Students could not call each other. On WhatsApp, student A would send a photo or short video from their collection of images. Student B would then be required to respond to that photo with an image or video from their collection that they felt was related to Student A’s image or video. Student A would then respond with another image or video. For example, one student might send an image of eggs that they had for breakfast, and the student who received it would respond with a photo of another image that included the colour yellow, e.g. their child’s toys, making a connection between the colour in the two images. They would have to keep this visual conversation going as long as possible and use the conversation to understand more about their partner’s life and culture. They were also encouraged to use a form of active looking and listening while looking at the photos even though they were not allowed to use words or emojis.

Class Day 1

A scenario was created where the students from Trinidad and Tobago were consultants with Decol Consulting. They had been hired by a development agency called Emergea https://doi.org/10.21606/drs_lxd2021. Emerga had to understand an imaginary foreign country called Acirema, that was at risk. There were problems of increasing inequality, rising authoritarianism, a complete breakdown in civility. Decol Consulting and its consultants had to study the Nacirema, an ethnic group in the Vale del Siliconio (Silicon Valley). They hired local collaborators at a University in the Bay Area to help them to understand the local context better. The students at the Californian University were the local consultants who served as a bridge between the foreign consultants and local culture.

Understanding positionality

The students were reflected on their positionality using The Positionality Wheel (Figure 1), which was created by the author in 2019. This is an activity created to help designers and researchers reflect on their identities and their teams' composition before starting their work. The wheel was developed around elements that could help a researcher write a positionality statement. This activity encourages all participants to reflect on their identity from more visible factors such as race, gender, age, and other less visible facets, such as ability status, class, education, and even their languages.

To use the tool, participants reflect on the 12 elements of their identities. They then reflected on the worksheet individually. The students were introduced to the concept of positionality to understand how their positions as insiders or outsiders to the context affected their understanding of the context as well as the types of solutions they would propose.

Positionality Worksheet

12 things about me that help me see the water that I swim in!

A positionality or reflexivity statement can help you understand who you are. These characteristics can be both strengths and weaknesses as they offer insights that others cannot see, or they can cause you to make assumptions that are not true.

Greater self-awareness can help you to maximise strengths and minimize weaknesses.

Research is not objective, because researchers are not objective. Your background frames how you conduct research.

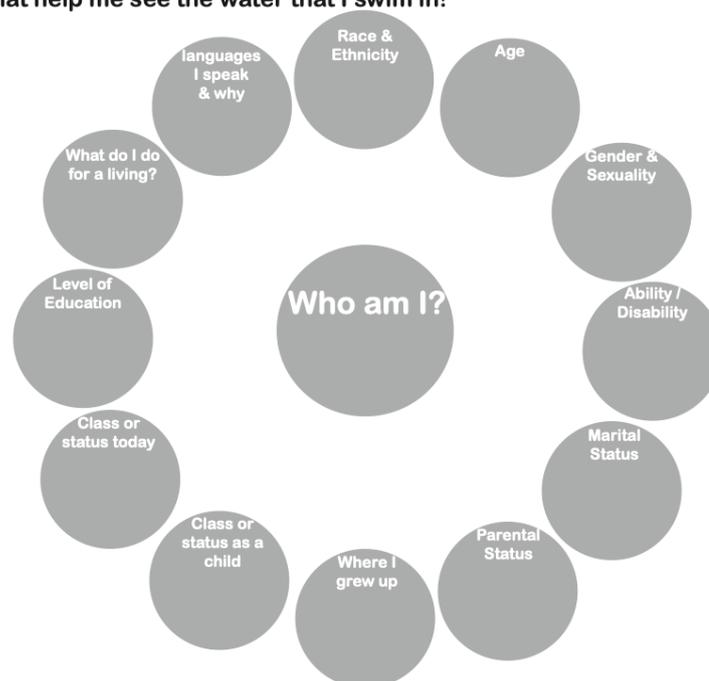


Figure 1. An example of the Positionality Wheel worksheet, that the students received to facilitate reflection on their identity and positionality. Source © Lesley-Ann Noel 2019

Interviews with Locals

Local people from the California Bay Area were drafted for interviews. Interviewees were given some preliminary instructions on how to use the remote platform and who would be interviewing them via email. One whole group interview was conducted with a resident of the San Francisco Bay Area. The students from Trinidad and Tobago were encouraged to lead the questioning. In their teams, Californian students were interviewed about their experience of living in the Bay Area by the Trinidadian students. Groups conducted 2 - 3 interviews and then examined the themes they heard across interviews. Prior to this activity groups were briefed on how to build rapport during an interview and on ethnographic research skills. The local interviewee was asked about identity, home, and day-to-day life, how did they connect with people, passions, and future goals.

Learning to understand each other by revealing preliminary biases

Students were asked to reflect on their impressions of their own culture and the other culture at the end of the first day after listening to interviews with people from Silicon Valley, but before they started working together in their groups. Students were asked how they would go about understanding a local context. They were asked to describe the culture of Silicon Valley in particular since that was the context of the design challenge. They were asked to reflect on what had informed their impression of the place. They were asked

how they would increase their understanding of the context. They were then asked the same questions about understanding Trinidad. They completed a reflection in an online document where they could read everyone's responses.

Here are some student reflections on each place:

Silicon Valley:

1. The culture seems to be entrenched in tech, innovation, and starting companies and businesses. Money and wealth are of extreme importance. A lot of focus on success.
2. My description is largely based on how Silicon Valley is portrayed in the media, specifically the tv show Silicon Valley. Both interviews also validated my perception.
3. To increase my understanding of Silicon Valley I would need to conduct more interviews or have more conversations with people that are from different sectors in Silicon Valley so that I can learn from different perspectives. Immersion in Silicon Valley could also provide a better understanding.

Trinidad:

1. The culture of Trinidad is based on fusion and diversity in people, language, foods, and festivals. People seem easy-going and fun-loving.
2. My description is based on living in Trinidad. When I lived outside Trinidad it was often very important to differentiate ourselves from other Caribbean countries.
3. Sharing stories and experiences of people from Trinidad. Documenting and sharing more of my own day-to-day experiences that allow a better view of life in Trinidad not attached to local rituals, festivals, or a tourist experience. Encourage people to visit and immerse themselves in the Trinidadian experience.

Point of View Statements

After the group interviews, students analyzed what they heard and used the insights to create problem or opportunity statements. The groups were instructed to use an *etic* perspective or the perspective of the observer. Therefore, the students from Trinidad and Tobago led the 'diagnosis' of the problem. Here is an example of an insight from the conversation:

G needs to expand his connections to people outside of his professional community because he wants connections for when he possibly moves away from Silicon Valley, he values cultural affinity, this might also improve his personal and professional life.

The insights from the interviews highlighted themes such as the need for opportunities for social interaction, lack of identification with the dominant culture of Silicon Valley, the competitive nature of Silicon Valley, and the need for greater personal connections.

Post-workshop Student Reflections

In their reflections, students emphasized the need to create a space for differing perspectives in cross-cultural collaborations. Even though they recognized the similarities, several students highlighted the importance of creating space for different perspectives to get a more complex vision of a possible solution. Another student noted that international collaboration is possible but different. She recommended that to have a meaningful collaborative experience, collaboration must be approached with respect for the culture of others and an open mind. The humility to recognize that they did not know everything was a repeated theme in several reflections. Several student teams pointed out the importance of having a sense of humour throughout cross-cultural work to make collaboration easier. Despite technical difficulties, miscommunication, and other eventualities, keeping a lightness about the class made the collaboration smoother.

My biggest takeaway from the insider-outsider class was just how important empathy is at every stage of the process, especially when you are uncertain as to what you're heading into and how important humor is in connecting. ... in our group humor turned out to be a way in which we connected most easily. ... What surprised me the most was that it isn't essential that you know a great deal about another culture in order to learn about and connect with the people in that culture. It also provided me with a new way of seeing my new role as an insider from the perspective of an outsider, and I think the continual swapping of that role is what breaks down the boundaries.

Student X from California.

It's difficult to have outsiders coming in and scrutinising your culture, while they come with the best of intentions and they're there to solve the problem. Sometimes I wanted to hide the problem because I

only wanted to show them the best side of California culture. ... Throughout the course of the two weekends, my perspective on international collaborations changed because I thought it was going to be really different to connect across cultures... Once we hit our stride as a team, it didn't make a big difference who was an insider and who was an outsider.

Student Y from California

Discussion

This class aimed to create some tension around power by shifting more of the decision-making power to the students who would typically have less power in this type of engagement. The impact of this was seen where the students in California expressed some discomfort in being studied. The aim in creating this tension was to encourage plurality of thought, to promote an understanding of the value of diverse perspectives in the same problem, and to challenge the often-unstated assumption that knowledge comes from one direction. The class was grounded in decoloniality and pluriversality and the works of theorists like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2013) and Arturo Escobar (2017).

In shifting the power in the class, the aim was to begin a departure from the typical 'Western-centric' design of international collaborations. Trinidad and Tobago, however, is still a Western country, so this is just a small departure. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2013) posits that the understanding of the world far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. One aim then of educators seeking to create classes around international collaboration could be to foster a type of slow collaboration that deliberately challenges students' Western-centric worldviews, and encourages them to be curious about other people, their thoughts, and their ways of being. According to Santos, the Global South is often considered a 'metaphor for human suffering' and not a source of theory'. Therefore, the class is an example of the type of cognitive justice that Santos advocates for that is needed for social justice, and this cognitive justice is reached through the 'ecology of knowledges' and 'intercultural translation' (Santos, 2013).

The class structure included many reflective pauses where students reflected on their assumptions and what they felt in the interactions about the various processes of the design research process. These moments of reflection lead to the transformative learning process articulated by Mezirow (2003), where students challenge their own problematic frames, assumptions, and expectations. In student reflections, it was evident that they were able to see how both emic and etic perspectives could be leveraged to create more complex understanding of problems. The 'local' students from California also shared how uncomfortable they felt when only an *etic* perspective was used since they felt that the outsiders did not fully understand or appreciate the intricacies of the local context. This was the type of reflective thought that the professors had hoped would be achieved, and that this type of reflection would make students reflect critically on current and future design practice.

Though this pilot was very short, it is possible that the balance between the insider and outsider perspectives of students from the Global North and the Global South could in the future lead to deeper insights and innovative solutions.

Conclusion

Social design education has the potential to produce transformative learning and social change. Social design also includes closer collaboration with people across difference, and brings with it challenges related to positionality, power and neocolonialism, and other problems that may be associated with the field of international development. Therefore, this potential can only be achieved with the intentional crafting of pedagogical experiences that shift dominant narratives and promote a critical awareness of social issues and the development of a critically reflective practice leading to critical design practice.

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