

CROSS CULTURAL MANAGEMENT IN CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

There is a word in the world of the universities that is becoming very important, internationalization. This word identifies the ability to setup complex research projects with international partnerships, but also the ability to fill the classrooms of international students and teachers. Of course this is a process already set since long time in the USA where it has been one of the key elements of their economic strength in the last decades. In Europe a strong attraction comes from UK universities. All of them are English speaking countries; it's possible to discuss if this is one of the reasons why English language became a sort of standard language, mainly in the scientific fields, or vice versa if they are more attractive because the lessons are taught in English, but probably it's not so interesting. We are involved in the organization and in the teaching of a specializing course, held in an Italian state university based in Milano, focused on industrial design, more precisely on car design, that is one of the fields of excellence of the Italian Design summarized in the so called "made in Italy". The first decision concerned the language to use for teaching this course because it's open to worldwide students, but also because the graduated students should be ready to go everywhere in the world. At the same time, the language is just one of the several problems to manage in a multi cultural environment where the players are groups of creative people. At last it was decided to teach in Italian and to setup a group of strategies able to reduce the problems related with the manage of students that have to learn a lot of information, techniques and methodologies, but also to learn how to work in groups effectively, even in a highly competitive environment. This has been a 5 years process that gives us a strong awareness today about our choices. In this paper the authors describe the preliminary debate about the language to use in the classroom, how they got results and the strategies they set up to increase the chances of success. The process has not been a linear process, because of different students, year by year, coming from different countries and from different cultural backgrounds, and because they have also to learn how to relate each other in a team, even more when involved in a creative work.

Keywords: creative groups, management of intercultural teams, design learning, creative coaching.

1 DESIGN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Courses that involve the disciplines of design have constraints and inherent difficulties that make them clearly most difficult and most fascinating. The most difficult thing is to deal with the design itself, because designing and the teaching of designing, mean to seek, to invent, to define something new, not existing before. At the same time, a project may be wrong, but it is never "right" because it can always be improved. And this is intrinsic to the nature of designing. The case study considered is a specialized training course for car design held at the Politecnico di Milano, a state university where architecture, engineering and industrial design are taught, and all these disciplines have links with designing. The world of transportation design is typically carried out by a group of people with tasks, skills and abilities both different both similar, and they are people from all over the world. It is therefore a crowd of creative people with a multicultural background, that must learn how to work together, interacting at their best and overcoming suspicions related to language and to cultural differences. In the last decades there have been some contributions of particular interest of Shön, Oxman and Cunliffe that outline the boundaries of design knowledge, underlining the need to redefine the educational tasks of designer education, through the shift from an artefact production orientation to a cognitive-constructive approach. The notions of reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action were central in Donald Shön's work [1]. The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice. According to Rivka Oxman [2], the fundamental principles of a design education theory lie in the definition of the cognitive characteristics of design thinking. The only way to describe the cognitive design processes is to identify a representation technique that can model visual and conceptual knowledge as well as its dialectic interaction with the "reflection-in-action" process. The cognitive characteristics of design thinking and its acquisition can be found in the content of the metacognitive, recursive approach to design education that involves

learning to learn. To make this process easier, Oxman suggests the use of concept mapping to translate the cognitive process. In this way, the knowledge acquired can be coded, organised and represented. This outlook implies the concept of learning through the assimilation of new concepts and ideas in a framework supported by the learner [3]. Even if we go from a cognitive approach to a practical one, we can see that the specificity of teaching design is strongly related to the relation between visual and conceptual contents. The interpretation that Leslie Cunliffe applies to art learning [4] seems useful and it can be applied to design learning too. The cultural construction is achieved through the mediation of different learning styles. From this background we started setting up design workshop environments where groups of students learn by doing, but also by looking at what the others do.

2 COLLABORATION CONSTRAINTS IN THE COLLECTIVE DESIGN DOMAIN

In the design domain, as in every other field in which people act, there are dynamics that characterize interactions between people and that define the destiny of the ideation process. The peculiarity of these dynamics, as amply demonstrated by the international bibliography, is to corrupt, even irremediably, interactions between members of a workgroup. It is clear that in an educational context, referring to the aforementioned scenario, it is necessary to re-evaluate the disciplines that address their characteristics, with the purpose of resolving them, as a proper education in this field has a significant impact on the professional effectiveness of involved people.

Nowadays academic educational contexts consider those kinds of approaches as optional, as attention is deeply focused on the project. This kind of approach is proving to be a losing one, in comparison with the performance of general working system. The globalization trend – probably already beyond the stage of trend – and the tendency towards an increasing work flexibility – also in this regard it is more appropriate to talk about '*professional liquidity*' – demand that new professionals have much more defined and incisive 'social' features, if compared to a job market of few decades ago, which was extremely more clear and legible.

Brain outsourcing, democratisation of industrial dynamics (Google model, Apple model) [5], co-creative patterns [6], the growing tendency to cooperate are just some of the brand-new features of the actual job market. Indeed today education shall focus on activities capable to turn young students aware of the need to share their own resources in a faster and deeper way, thus being capable to face the market as active professionals.

Besides design education, it is crucial to provide students a support to the activity of group dynamic management, capable to supply them efficient tools to effectively work in collective design environments.

2.1 Main features of collective design contexts in relation to educational situation

The *generative creativity* world, i.e. the creativity focused on solving or reaching a specific goal, consists in acting, indeed, through collective design frameworks that gather specific expertise [7]. This peculiarity, traditional by now, has grown with the success of democratic industrial models, going beyond the old-millennium vertical-trended ones, and in which participation and equality are extremely encouraged.

As a consequence nowadays the educational situation acting in this field shall necessary focus on two aspects:

- **Interdisciplinary approach:** the nature of educational experiences must elevate through such an approach that students may understand the need of being capable to begin a strong exchange reaction with the various disciplines they deal with during the project development process. They also have to comprehend the required tools necessary to discover such talents in themselves and in the others, and to connect them in an active and effective way.
- **Intercultural approach:** starting from the above assumptions, today the exchange among cultures has become an extreme priority. Each culture has a priceless baggage and different visions that integrate knowledge. Communication between different cultures in a long-standing problem behind frictions constantly at the centre of international limelight. The train of globalization man in front of the need of going beyond such issues, mainly in collective project

contexts, in which differences are valued if and only if they are capable of matching and acting as a single and unanimous choir.

So here are summarized in two points the features that today students must be capable to manage, in order to be ready for the world of work as soon as possible.

Virtuous educational examples exist in the international context, capable to face these two points in a pretty natural way. Anyway this does not mean that the awareness of having to enhance their awareness about these topics (even if they are natural ones) does not just sit in students and that they autonomously develop the tools required to act in less progressing contexts.

The present survey has the purpose to suggest a feasible tool capable to give the students a conscience and to train them to actively discuss, in project groups, with different trans disciplinary resources and various cultural opportunities. To this end, the suggested model mainly lies on recent theories and tests in the field of *social psychology* [8]. In particular it comes to life from the experience matured in this discipline about the analysis and management of the two main topics that hinder people's development, convey individual behaviour and limit the growth of virtuous social dynamics in social project contexts: stereotypes and preconceptions.

These two elements represent a true constraint that we can find in any group structure that consists of different individuals. This study tries to demonstrate that by identifying the nature of stereotypes and preconceptions and by conceiving activities capable to give individuals a conscience, making the person work in order to reduce them, it is possible to positively affect not only individuals and the group, but also the educational results they have to achieve.

2.2 Stereotypes and preconceptions: masters of behaviours

Social psychology is a recent discipline that studies the interaction between person and group. Among the first subjects on which it focused since its inception there are the two concepts of stereotype and preconception [9]. It is worth taking a step back to emphasise cognitive processes underlying stereotypes and preconceptions.

2.2.1 Categorisation

According to the first cognitive studies in the second half of the past century, stereotypes and prejudices derive from the classification that the brain accomplishes in facing reality. Such process allows individuals to mentally organize the social and physical world around them, reducing the amount of information they deal with. Categorization [10] allows therefore to rationalize the environment in terms of similar categories, objects, people and events. The world complexity does not allow the maintenance of a distinguished attitude about every thing and, at the same time, the limited human ability to process information sets individuals in condition to create cognitive shortcuts and practical rules to try to understand what surrounds us. It is therefore a natural action that our brain implements to survive and through which it can choose how to act as a consequence of interpretations defined on a case-by-case.

2.2.2 From categorisation to stereotypes

What we previously saw shows that categorisation is a natural process, devoid of any tendency, and an average operation that necessarily has to take place to face reality. Stereotypes, we could say, represent a first step in the development of such categories. As a categorisation becomes less flexible and causes deeper correspondences due to personal or external influences, we move to a further level: step stereotype¹.

2.2.3 Prejudice

As the emotional factor and a generalization process take over in managing a category or a stereotype, a prejudice is generated [11]. In particular, a prejudice exists as an individual generally judges another individual, an object, a context and something else, without taking into account its real peculiarities – even when these are clearly visible – and without a direct and careful examination. Such emotional process, mainly negative and generalizing, is inflexible, unlikely what happens for

¹ From the cognitive point of view a human female is categorized by the brain as a woman. Referring to any woman, automatically thinking that she loves children is a stereotyping action.

categorization and, at least in part, for the stereotyping. Such inflexibility is one of the fundamental reasons why preconception is hard to fight.

2.2.4 Behaviours

However, the most relevant things for this survey are not essentially the features of stereotypes or prejudices, but their consequences upon individuals' behaviours [10]. In both cases influences are crucial and range from the simple negative memory to the evident violence, passing through the most inflexible rejection. If we observe the context subject of this study, through the filter of what has just been defined, it is possible to perceive all the problems deriving from a missing analysis and modelling of social dynamics that characterize a trans disciplinary and intercultural social group that professionally works on the project. We can therefore determine that the negative consequences on an unformed group performances deriving from stereotypes and prejudices, mainly deal with the perception and interaction among different cultures, disciplines, ideas and competences, reaching sexual discriminations. An educational tool dedicated to a virtuous management of social dynamics, combined and communicating with the professional training, is a real requirement for the examined contexts. It is fundamental to think about a solution aiming at facing stereotypes and preconceptions with the intent to reduce them, generating at the same time a growing level of confidence among individuals, which is a primary condition for the exchange of knowledge, for the celebration of differences and for an healthy growth of a working group. Trust becomes therefore the result to aim for, even if it is firstly necessary to define how to act in order to slightly decrease stereotypes and, above all, prejudice. In this sense, *social psychology*, that essentially works in extremely more complex contexts, like religious and racial integrations – just to name the main ones – has developed some incisive solutions to reduce stereotypes and preconceptions. It is mainly because of this wide and deep experience, that social psychology is the natural basin from which this survey generously draws.

2.3 Reducing prejudice: the contact theory

One of the most important contribution in reducing prejudice and stereotypes is the contact theory. According to this approach, the contact between individuals or groups of individuals, in the appropriate conditions, can reduce stereotypes and preconceptions and may change, also thanks to the contribution of a third-party facilitation, their own conduct. Obviously, the simple contact is not sufficient at all. Social psychology in this sense has committed itself about this topic, to lay out more precise rules and clearer conditions, thus making the contact theory truly effective.

It is possible to summarize such principles in few keypoints [12]. In order to make the contact produce appreciable results, it is necessary that:

- Interactions between individuals are cooperative ones. Contact shall not look like it is of pleasure only, since otherwise there will be no benefit. Furthermore the contact shall intervene for a long period of time, thus allowing participants to get to know each other in depth. It shall not be perceived as a sporadic or casual event.
- Interaction must have a common goal. An overall purpose will entail a distinct improvement of relationships between individuals.
- Interactions must relate to people that have a similar status within the scenario (laboratory). In particular, involved people shall be linked somehow with the objective to be attained and with the scenario in which they act, so that interactions may take place in an easier way and in a shorter time.
- The institutional presence must be participant and solid [13]. A normative, or simply an institutional support, that guides individuals towards meeting, allows overcoming the initial resistance and constraints coming from the most cautious subjects.
- The involved individuals are invited to speak the same language, so that the information exchange has the same language requirements. This may increase subjects' equality awareness.
- Meeting must be mediated or better, assisted, by a third person capable to go along the stereotype and prejudice reduction course, using the appropriate tools. His role must be that of supporting positive results obtained in relieving preconceptions and stereotypes and that of leading the group to face what gradually creates new obstacles. In fact, as emerges in the next paragraph, contact activities are a continual negotiation between favourable and unfavourable

conditions about resolving stereotypes and prejudices. This is why a facilitator is required, as stated before, to constantly minimize potentially polluting conditions during the whole duration of the process.

2.4 Laboratory activities: sharing a common purpose

These are indeed the effective requirements, according to social psychology [14], capable to face the stereotype and prejudice topics. Starting from their analysis, it is conceivable that the scenario of this survey – an educational context by collectively design in which workshop is at the heart of activities – is the ideal situation for the contact.

In fact:

- Cooperation takes place in relation to the fact that the laboratory is an environment in which a group of students work together for the research, the definition and the design of a common idea.
- Such common purpose is developed as an answer to a specific project brief, to which the group shall provide a coherent and plausible answer.
- A workshop involves, even at a formative level, expertises and peculiarities related to various design aspects. To name but a few: research, creativity, engineering, etc. Participants' status has indeed some connections both with the desired objective and with the contact situation.
- Laboratory activities often involve different cultures which are however bound to the use of a unique common language.

The theoretical framework behind this survey assumes therefore a definite shape and suggests empirical solutions. In the following chapter a model is described, in its development and in its main features, according to which it has been possible to start an effective educational process for the management of group dynamics in collective creative design contexts.

3 THE MODEL OF INTERVENTION

The model presented here is not only inspired by the psychosocial assumptions so far analysed. It takes the experience of theoretical and empirical link to the development of the working groups, to teambuilding and team working [15]. These theoretical assumptions remain the basic system on which is built the model presented here but have suffered natural changes over the time due to the ever-depth knowledge of the context and the different dynamics that exists within it between individuals. The model presented below is the result of almost ten years of theoretical development and empirical analysis. In its many variations are identified three key moments of the remarkable in the development that have also coincided with a significant increase in the results.

- **First phase.** The applied model focused primarily on the management of group dynamics with the sole objective to empower students on the main themes of group dynamics [16]. The experiential activities were minimal and were prevalent lectures. The time of meeting, to borrow the language of the previous section, it was very small.
- **Second phase.** Are introduced specific vocabularies more related to the world of design. Unlike the first phase was taken into account the particularities of the structures of the groups that make up for working on a project. In these hierarchies and dynamics are special, we could say that they are democratic. Develop languages for ad hoc for project contexts (creative) social status has been an important step. The perception of the proposed route has assumed a much greater significance to the participants. This process of improvement was also enriched by other key issues. The supply of the contents has been structured mainly through experiential training. This has allowed us to greatly improve the attention span and increase the depth of engagement of the students, and achieve deeper into the process of awareness and management of group dynamics by individual. Finally, the role of the facilitator, who with coaching group and individual, has initiated a process of active support for change in the path of the students. This allowed us to multiply the value of assets no longer on the group but also in the individual.
- **Third phase.** The entire system, with its own characteristics and peculiarities has been revised and supplemented by a massive intervention, in fact, the results of studies on stereotype and prejudice on the part of social psychology, and on recent discoveries related to the functioning

of the brain in creative and social environment. This choice has allowed us to identify a structure considerably richer and more effective, located mostly at the beginning of the training course. This aspect is among the most important. Students put straight to work on these issues are put in a position to develop fundamental knowledge to be used subsequently in the educational development of the project. This has led to further results in terms of performance from the first steps of the project activity. The reviewed model has generated a very high level of awareness in the students who were able to use it in the final design.

3.1 The model: assumptions of the scenario

The model presented here, which in the training program it acts is called the Empowerment of creative groups, is divided into different phases formed in relation to the context and the type of individuals. To understand the features and to better analyze the results it is good to briefly describe the contact situation, the goals of the entire route and the general status of the students:

- The design objective. Leaving aside the specific nature of the topic of the project, students attend a course of specialization in which learning is divided into two phases. The first is largely theoretical and is preliminary, in content and exercises wing second phase. This, however, is almost exclusively workshop. In it, students develop their work in relation to the resolution of a specific brief, supported by the teaching and closely with partners and customers from the market active and productive.
- The teaching body, both from experience that training has a very operational approach that constantly active students.
- The collective environment design, has a strong creative component [16]. This causes aspects very influential on the model in question. First, the project requires the designer to be the bearer of a style, that is, a capacity for choice and risk management very high. In addition, the project itself is not an exact science, so the results are not predictable, the comparison is based on ideas and experiences strongly personal. These aspects, which are just the main ones on which to focus, in a direct way affects on the dynamics between individuals because in the comparison of the different styles and different ideas leave about stereotypes and prejudices.
- Students come from all over the world resulting in large differences in culture, educational background, professional experience, design styles (from different schools), behaviors, lifestyles. Of these different professional experiences represent an aspect that the model has held strongly considered in its evolution. The scarcity or complete absence of professional experience is a lack crucial for the student. Without it you cannot assimilate the knowledge learned in depth. Become fundamental here the structure and content of each experiential activities planned by the model.
- The program has a structure and dynamics of very close to the professional world of design. This choice allows individuals to develop in a more rational awareness of their skills and a wealth of experience very close to the world of work which they will soon join.

Each of these aspects was fundamental for the development of the final model and its growth hand in hand, which was activated on students.

3.2 The structure of the model: the stages of the training

The proposed model is placed timely before the start of the training course and is divided into five stages: Introduction, me and others, Meetings, Identity, coaching activity. Each of them has different approaches based on the objectives of the process that arises. The route intends to empower them to become effective professionals in the management of various professional dynamics that are created in the collective project contexts.

3.2.1 Introduction

The objective of this first phase is to set the students' awareness of the importance of becoming professionals able to manage the dynamics of group work. Here you must first create interest on a topic that is commonly far from the experiences of students. In fact, even the protagonists of often negative experiences of cooperation between individuals, their knowledge on the subject are, in fact, very small or non-existent. In this phase of the alternating activity in the lectures. The first are structured in order to dip students in situations that meet the professional reality of the collective project contexts. In dealing with them are left completely free to manage themselves better while the

teacher observes their behavior. Lectures are used to provide students with a basic knowledge of group dynamics, through the deepening of the main aspects. Each task is completed by a moment of thorough debriefing². At this stage, the analysis of the behavior of individuals and the group during the experience allows everyone to see each other and criticize in order to summarize the areas for improvement in which to pour what was learned in lectures later.

3.2.2 *Me and others*

In this second phase is completed a further study on the issue of awareness. As suggested by the title of this second moment, the goal here is to guide each component to the discovery of their colleagues, their characteristics, peculiarities and cultures. In the same activities the individual is also driven to be discovered by the other in a reciprocal manner. The activities of this phase address the issue of prejudices related to the different cultures represented. Each student is called upon not only to describe their culture through stereotypes which it is subject, but also to describe those of others through their own prejudices. The comparison between the different perceptions allows students to dispel many beliefs but, more importantly, get to know their peers at a deeper level. Referring once again to social psychology, describe their own culture and compare it with those of others enables individuals to activate a process of awareness very deep that brings them closer to the other, in full respect of the theory of the contact, and generates a strong principle of mutual trust. Its own history, its roots, its own flag and its own traditions topics are emotionally engaging and deeply rooted in the identity of all individuals. It follows that the exercises in this sense have always great results in approaching individuals to others. The debriefing of this second step aims to facilitate those that are more resistant to share their personal and cultural characteristics. It is also crucial in guiding the participants in the focus of the most significant aspects, positive or negative, which variously affect the process of knowledge and the establishment of a group identity.

3.2.3 *Encounter*

The purpose of this third phase is living the initial group working-experience. Here a first real encounter effectively takes place. At this stage all the prerequisite examined in the previous chapters are organised, while students are involved and organised in small groups, to do small tasks. Such activities recall for everything and in everything the group dynamics that can be found in a collective project activity. Each activity focuses on different key points:

- Generation of a working method and definition of the respective roles;
- Time and resource management;
- Decision-making and management of unforeseen difficulties.

Debriefings are crucial in this phase to analyse, in key moments for the development of the activities, what is going on, with the intent to learn a clear lesson from each positive result and to rationally and clearly face every single negative aspect that could temporally get worse. At the end of activities, the last debriefing allows to make a general synthesis of what happened in the various activities, finally focusing on the definition of a personal and group improvement plan, in anticipation of the composition of the groups, called to work within the project experience that will take place during the laboratory activities.

3.2.4 *Identity*

At the end of the previous phase, the model considers a break, during which the workshop activities start. This allows first of all to settle what students have learned. Moreover, it allows them to live the first group experiences in which they can undergo those dynamics only artificially exercised until then. This moment is contemporary to the creation of the final groups that will have to meet the objectives of the laboratory course. Down the creation of the groups, activities focus exclusively on the definition of one identity for each group. Subsequently we proceed with exercises that specify each one's peculiarities, according to the roles that will have to be covered and finally they are called to design and create a logo for each group. This last activity is essential and deeply stimulating for the students.

² The debriefing in fact, extracts from the lived experience what is necessary to assume an improvement plan to be implemented in the following activities. This type of approach retains its structure even in later stages, as we shall see. Even when lectures are reduced, the alternation between experience and debriefing allows the student to fix at best a memory, the brain can then recover when he finds himself in a similar situation (see the principle of categorization), to review and meet again), within the experience in a constructive and rational and, with the aid of the support of the facilitator (teacher) finally, you can define an action plan to improve profit of each, to be applied to subsequent situations.

The process of synthesizing a logo allows them to get their potentials in order, to define style principles and to define a sort of common foreword through which overcome the single differences, repository of preconceptions. The debriefing value in this phase lies in guiding students, in considering each aspect of the framework as interiorised in the previous phases and in effectively and consistently summarizing it in the last activity about creating the group and defining a representing logo.

3.2.5 Coaching Activity

In the whole period following the group building, the model envisages monthly meetings with different groups, in which facing, through sessions of collective and individual coaching, all the possible criticisms created inside the groups themselves. Laboratory activities necessarily put students in situations similar, when not identical, to those of the professional life. It has been observed that in several cases, despite the job done before the laboratory course by the model analysed here, students don't rely on what they learned. The emotional component plays here a crucial role and strongly mislead students in the most awkward moments, making harmful dynamics to the group cohesion emerge. These focused coaching interventions are therefore very effective to reduce the emotional impact and to bring critical situations back to a more rational and simplified level, resulting therefore easier to solve. Each session ends with a short improvement plan coming from each group.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The present model has reached several results over time. The most relevant of which are the following three:

- **Students awareness:** The opportunity to work with students for a long time and combining different tools according to specific learning steps, allows to let them deeply understand the importance of the capability to be aware and capable to manage different dynamics taking place within a working group. Furthermore, always thanks to the extension of the educational contribution, students tend to rely on the facilitator figure (lecturer) about managing not only group criticalities, but also personal ones;
- **Teaching staff involvement:** during the model generation process, possible interactions among members of the teaching staff have more and more emerged. Above all, the awareness of the chance to refer to a facilitator, specifically dedicated to the group dynamics, allows them to relieve themselves of the daily management of criticalities that may emerge about these topics. Such relief returns time for their own educational and design activities and teach students on the one hand how to manage occupational criticalities (usual in every working environment) in a professional manner, and on the other hand how to do it referring to an approved and official figure.
- **Professional output development:** from the model generation process several outputs came out and they are currently an useful tool for the accomplishment of the student-evaluation process and considerable supporting materials to outline students for a placement purpose. There are two very useful documents that have been created:
 - **A document for evaluating** the group-dynamics management, that every involved lecturer completes during the design period in order to fulfil the evaluation of each student;
 - **A document for profiling** the student that outlines his/her capabilities, not only from a professional point of view, but also regarding the management of self and others within social design contexts. During student placement, such document represents an efficient tool of knowledge, drafted by a professional and heterogeneous teaching staff that companies or productive businesses might use to be informed about potential candidates much more in depth than using a standard resume.

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